

# Self-help app for anxiety goes global

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Anxiety is one of the most common problems in health centres and counselling services. The chances are that in a group of 10 people, up to two will suffer from moderate to severe anxiety.

Now sufferers from around the world are learning how to manage their anxiety through a free, self-help smartphone app developed by a team of psychologists and computer scientists at UWE Bristol.

Since its launch in July 2013, SAM: Self-help for Anxiety Management,

has received over 110,000 downloads in 94 countries worldwide and has been ranked in the top 100 health and fitness apps in 43 countries.

SAM is believed to be one of the first apps of its kind developed by a university for use by students. It is a psycho-educational tool that runs on smartphones and tablets to help users understand and manage their anxiety. It incorporates a range of established self-help activities that are available 24/7 on the users' device.

The development of the app builds on research in social anxiety in learning by UWE Bristol and the University of Plymouth and the evaluation of a prototype app.

Visiting Research Fellow and Independent Counselling Psychologist, Phil Topham, who carried out the original research and who has coordinated the app development project, says, "The therapeutic structure and usability characteristics of SAM were guided by research on common factors in face-to-face therapy. Thus we wanted users to experience SAM as engaging, credible, optimistic, adult in tone and adaptable to individual needs. The number of downloads and the positive reviews indicate that this is a workable model for mobile self-help."

A unique feature of the SAM technology is the ability for users to personalise their own 'Anxiety Toolkit' of [anxiety management](#) resources. There are 37 self-help options including a variety of long and short relaxation exercises, meditation, calming images and interactive games.

Social Cloud, a community forum where users can support each other anonymously is another popular aspect.

The project team consulted student advisors and counsellors within the University and with independent and NHS practitioners in counselling,

clinical psychology and psychiatry, as part of developing the content.

Significant feedback and user ratings of the app highlight SAM's popularity. Anonymous comments include:

Jan 2014 - "Life Changing- This app is truly the best app I've ever downloaded. Its techniques are very helpful and work very well. You could even save them in case you want to try them. What I like best about this app is the "Social Cloud". The other users on the Social Cloud are very sympathetic and understanding. They got me through so much. Get this app. Now."

Feb 2014 – "I love it!!! – Up until now I've literally had no idea where to start with my anxiety. This app has saved me during two panic attacks already and during several situations in which I was beginning to get too stressed out and revved up. Thank you."

Following a stringent review by a panel of clinicians, SAM has also been endorsed by the NHS Health Apps Library and is available to download from the website.

Dr Praminda Caleb-Solly, Senior Lecturer in Computer Science and Creative Technologies, said, "We're delighted by the success of the SAM and from the feedback it's clear to see what a life changing difference it's making to those who suffer from anxiety.

"We're grateful to Phil Topham for leading on this scheme and to UWE Bristol Deputy Vice-Chancellor, John Rushforth for his support and belief in the project. We're now looking to develop the app further. Applications constantly need to evolve to adapt to the needs of the user, to stay fresh and respond to the pace of rapidly changing technology. We will be trialing SAM with student advisors at UWE Bristol to see how it integrates with their practice, and what additional features could support

other user groups. We are looking for investors and research and development partners to help us take SAM to the next level. "

The core UWE Bristol project team for SAM are a counselling psychologist and ex-practitioner from the Department of Psychology (Phil Topham) and two academic staff members from the Department of Computer Science and Creative Technologies (CSCT) (Praminda Caleb-Solly and Paul Matthews). The CSCT team members have expertise in interaction design, assistive technology, web design and social media. The UWE Bristol team worked with MyOxygen, a Bristol-based application developer.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor John Rushforth concludes, "Congratulations to the project team on the success of SAM, I'm thrilled to hear how much it has helped both the student community at UWE Bristol and users around the world. This is an excellent example of cross disciplinary working across the University and demonstrates UWE Bristol's commitment to transforming lives through real world research."

The SAM app is free to download from the NHS Health [app](#) store for [Android](#) and [iPhone](#).

Provided by University of the West of England

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