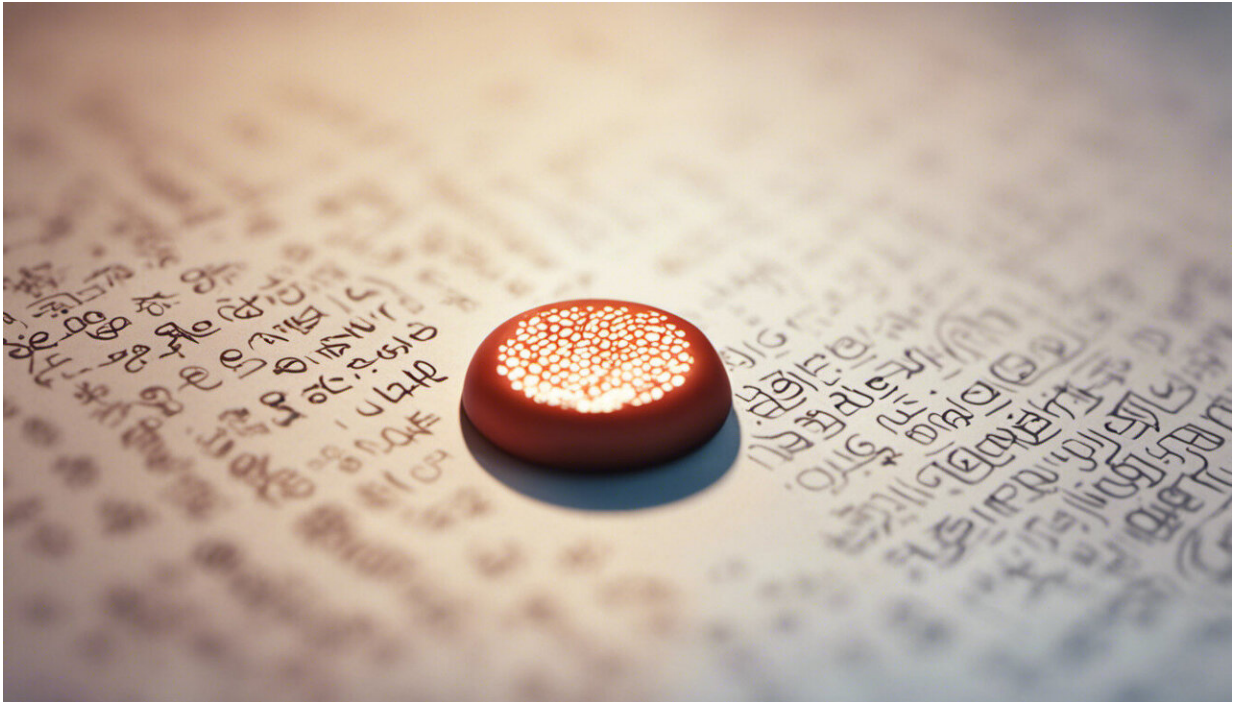


Texting to improve mental health

October 7 2014



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Many Australians send and receive dozens of text messages each week – but what if one of those texts had the power to help transform your life?

Cheap to use and widely accessible, SMS (Short Message Service) technologies are now being explored by Flinders University researchers as an adjunct therapy to improve the health and wellbeing of people with [mental health problems](#).

It comes as thousands of communities around the world prepare to celebrate Mental Health Week, which runs from Sunday, October 5, to Saturday, October 11, with World Mental Health Day marked every year on October 10.

"The good thing about the SMS is that it's affordable and readily available to the majority of the population, yet it hasn't really been studied for its potential benefits in [mental health care](#)," Flinders Associate Professor of e-Health Research, Niranjan Bidargaddi, said.

"Mobile phones and text messages are something that people already use, so if we can integrate them into existing health care we could potentially engage with and support people with [mental health issues](#) more effectively," he said.

As part of his ongoing research into consumer centric e-health applications, Associate Professor Bidargaddi has just finished a study on the use of SMS technology to enhance support and improve outcomes for [mental health](#) patients who presented to the Emergency Department at Flinders Medical Centre in 2013.

The study, funded by SA Health, looked at using text messages to support FMC's tele-health psychotherapy service, which involves a series of phone-based counselling sessions once a week for up to six weeks.

The researchers scheduled personalised text messages to be sent to clients after each phone therapy session, with a total of 432 messages sent to 45 participants throughout the trial.

"The therapist and client negotiated the types of messages that were sent; for example it might have been a basic tip to prevent worrying thoughts or a reminder to exercise if this was one of the client's goals," Associate Professor Bidargaddi, based in the School of Medicine, said.

"The timing of the texts was scheduled but the content was tailored to each individual so they didn't sound like automated messages, they were actually coming from the client's therapist."

Associate Professor Bidargaddi said both the control and SMS groups showed improvements but the SMS group seemed to have fewer sessions, although further trials are needed to verify whether this was a direct result of the text messages.

"Overall the service was well received by both clinicians and participants, some of whom felt a sense of being supported even when they weren't in therapy.

"This indicates that it's definitely feasible to deliver SMS support to such a complex group of consumers, whose engagement in therapy is otherwise quite low.

"Once consumers finish a session they don't necessarily engage in the day-to-day activities and behaviours recommended by their therapist but our results show that something as simple as sending a [text message](#) could keep them on track between sessions."

The study, which involved several Flinders researchers, will be published in the international *Journal of Medical Internet Research* in the coming weeks.

Provided by Flinders University

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