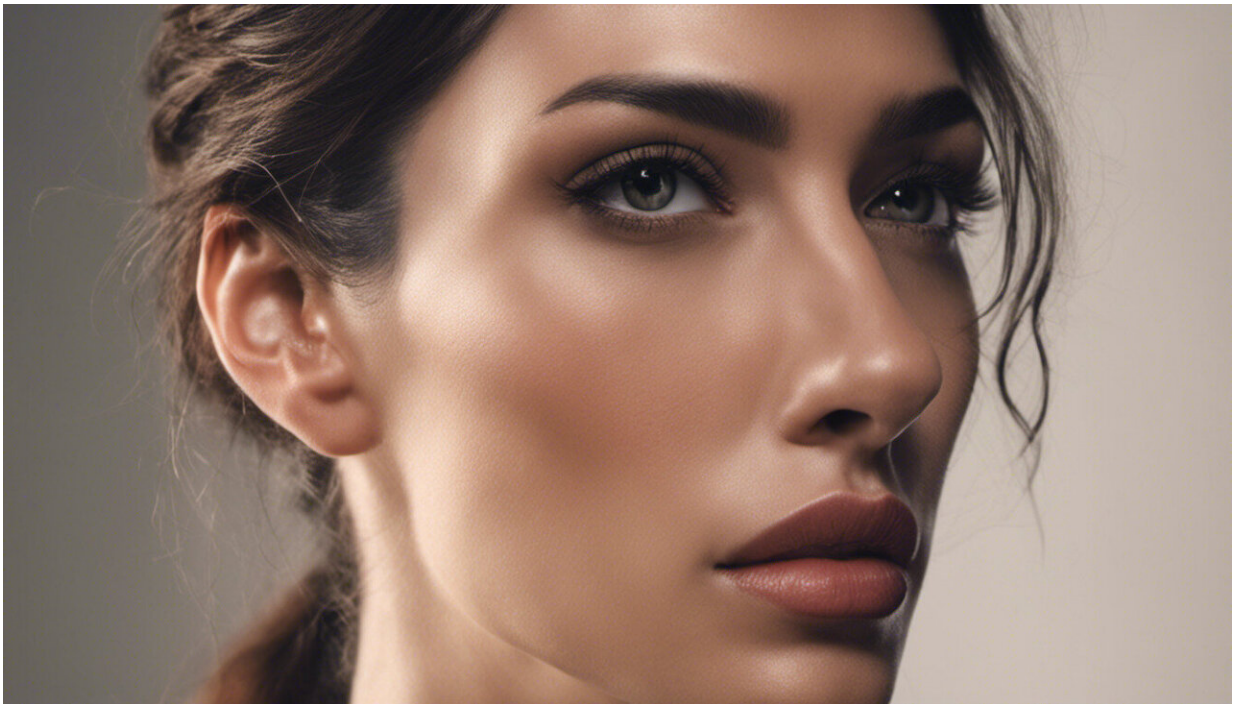


Your smartphone could be good for your mental health

May 28 2015, by Joanna Rodriguez And Nadine Page



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

When it comes to mental health, technologies such as smartphones and social media networks are almost always discussed in terms of the dangers they pose. Alongside concerns expressed in [the media](#), some experts believe that technology [has a role](#) in the rising rates of mental health problems. However, there is also evidence to suggest your

smartphone could actually [be good](#) for your mental health.

The brain is a sensitive organ that reacts and adapts to stimulation. Researchers have looked into smartphone usage and the effects on the day-to-day plasticity of the human brain. They found that the finger movements used to control smartphones are [enough to alter](#) brain activity.

This ability of technology to change our brains has [led to questions](#) over whether screen-based activity is related to rising incidence of such conditions as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or an increased risk of depression and insomnia. Technology has also [been blamed](#) for [cyber-bullying](#), isolation, communication issues and [reduced self-esteem](#), all of which can potentially lead to [mental ill health](#).

Positive potential

However, focusing only on the negative experiences of some people ignores technology's potential as [both a tool](#) for [treating mental health issues](#) and for improving the quality of people's lives and promoting emotional well-being. For example, there are programmes for depression and phobias, designed to help lift people's moods, get them active and help them to overcome their difficulties. [The programmes](#) use guided self help-based cognitive behavioural principles and have proven to be very effective.

Computer games have been used to [provide therapy](#) for adolescents. Because computer games are fun and can be used anonymously, they offer an alternative to traditional therapy. For example, a fantasy-themed role-playing game [called SPARX](#) has been [found to be](#) as effective as face-to-face therapy in clinical trials.



Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

Researcher David Haniff has created apps aimed at [lifting the mood](#) of people suffering from depression by showing them pleasing pictures, video and audio, for example of their families. He has also developed a computer game that helps a person examine the triggers of their [depression](#). Meanwhile, smartphone apps that play subliminal relaxing music in order to distract from the noise and worries of everyday living have been proven to be beneficial in [reducing stress](#) and anxiety.

Technology can also provide greater access to [mental health professionals](#) through email, online chats or video calls. This enables individuals to work remotely and at their own pace, which can be

particularly useful for those who are unable to regularly meet with a healthcare professional. Such an experience can be both empowering and enabling, encouraging the individual to take responsibility for their own mental well-being.

This kind of "telemedicine" has already found a role in child and adolescent [mental health services](#) in the form of online chats in family therapy, that can help to ensure each person has a chance to have their turn in the session. From our own practice experience, we have found young people who struggle to communicate during face-to-face sessions can be encouraged to text their therapist as an alternative way of expressing themselves, without the pressure of sitting opposite someone and making eye contact.

Conditions such as social anxiety can stop people seeking treatment in the first place. The use of telemedicine in this instance means people can begin combating their illness from the safety of their own home. It is also a good way to remind people about their appointments, thus improving attendance and reducing drop-out rates.

New routes to treatment

The internet in general can provide a gateway to asking for help, particularly for those who feel that [stigma is attached](#) to mental illness. Accessing information and watching videos about people with mental health issues, including high-profile personalities, helps to normalise conditions that are not otherwise talked about.

People can use technology to self-educate and improve access to low-intensity [mental health services](#) by providing [chat rooms](#), [blogs](#) and [information](#) about [mental health conditions](#). This can help to combat long waiting times by providing support earlier and [improving the effectiveness](#) of treatment.

More generally, access to the internet and use of media devices can also be a lifeline to the outside world. They allow [people to connect](#) in ways that were not previously possible, encouraging communication. With improved social networks, people may be less likely to need professional help, thus reducing the burden on over stretched services.

Research into the potential dangers of technology and its affect on the brain is important for understanding the causes of modern [mental health issues](#). But technology also creates an opportunity for innovative ways to promote engagement and well-being for those with [mental health](#) problems. Let's embrace that.

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