

Smartphone app offers counselling by text

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Credit: University of Nottingham

It's good to talk. Most young people these days find communicating using smartphones or social media isn't a problem, yet talking about personal issues can still be a difficult and taboo subject.

Gavin Dhesi, a former University of Nottingham student, realised there was an obvious gap in mental health support today. He developed a new smartphone app called Spill, which offers an online service, where users can feel safe talking to a trained counsellor from the comfort of their own device and without having to book a face-to-face appointment.

Spill began life in 2017, developed by Gavin and co-founders Dr. Annemarie O'Connor and Calvin Benton. The app links the user to a team of counsellors, registered with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). The user gains contact with a team of up to three counsellors, with at least one of them always available to respond to a text. Users can send an unlimited number of

messages and can expect a maximum of two responses per day.

The ability to afford therapy is also an issue for many [people](#) as it is rarely cheap. Although Spill is not designed to replace treatment for those with diagnosed [mental health](#) problems, for a small monthly fee, it is an affordable preventative tool for those who are bottling things up, and becoming anxious or worried.

Gavin, who graduated from the University in 2014, said:

"There is often a stigma attached to talking to a counsellor and often society only deems it necessary when we have had a formal diagnosis.

"We designed Spill so people can come on to talk about whatever is on their mind, no matter how small."

The entrepreneur originally developed Spill as a business to business initiative. Working with the likes of property company Rightmove, Timeout Magazine and banking app Monzo, Spill offers message-based counselling to business employees. At Rightmove, the service was made available to 490 staff and was downloaded by 132 of them.

There are currently 500 people signed up to the app through their employers, and 50 BACP-qualified counsellors on Spill records to service them.

After finding out that a lot of employees were trying to refer their friends or family to use the app, and noticing that there was an uptake in users, Spill began testing a direct-to-consumer version of the app earlier this year that has already seen an overwhelming number of people sign up to use it. It now has over 1,000 people on the waiting list.

Research from IKEA of 12,000 people across 12 major cities found that

68 per cent of people preferred to communicate with others via messaging services rather than face-to-face. Online counselling is a relatively new offering to the UK market and its ease and appeal is beginning to be recognised due to its 'anywhere, anytime' nature.

The Spill app reached the semi-final stages for the Santander Universities Entrepreneur Awards 2018 in the Technology Business category. The semi-final event took place in Strathclyde on 26 June.

On making it as far as the semi-final stage, Gavin said:

"Getting to the semi-finals was brilliant and a real credit to how hard the team have worked. We are quite a young team and know first-hand how important this app could be for students who have a lot of pressure from exams and the change in lifestyle. We're hoping that the award can bring greater awareness to a modern way in thinking about support."

The Santander awards are aimed at giving a financial boost to student and graduate business ventures in their early stages. Businesses compete for a share of the prize money as well as access to a range of other prizes designed to support and help grow their business.

Provided by University of Nottingham

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