Mental health apps can promote resilience, study finds

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Mobile health apps can be a vital tool for military members and first responders seeking mental health support, according to new University of Alberta research.

"These apps should not be seen as a way to replace clinician-based mental health interventions, but they can be a great starting point for those who aren't comfortable seeking in-person support right away," said occupational therapist and study co-author Kaitlin O'Toole.

Mobile health apps such as Mindfulness Coach and LifeArmor—which O'Toole also refers to as resilience apps—give users a sense of what mental health interventions look like, and may reduce the stigma related to mental illness.

"[By using the apps] people become more familiar with mental health concepts and interventions," she explained. "They practise breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation and other techniques that can be used in everyday life—during activities like yoga or stretching after exercise. Their view of mental health support starts to become more normalized."

O'Toole, a recent U of A graduate who worked on the study with occupational therapy professor Cary Brown in the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine, said the apps are useful for military members and first responders because they may not have access to professional mental health services due to deployment, time constraints and social barriers.

She added that while the apps are generally more geared towards military members and first responders, "they can absolutely be useful to anyone looking for online mental health strategies."

O'Toole said the online options offer new ways to provide therapy for these populations, especially since they have such differing occupational stressors.

"We often hear about physical ailments related to the job, but mental

health issues are starting to become more prevalent—they need to be addressed," she added.

She offered the following tips for finding reliable mental health apps:

- Pay attention to reviews of apps. Recommendations can go a long way when they come from others who might be in a similar situation.
- Look for apps that include deep or diaphragmatic breathing, mindfulness strategies, visualization techniques, and progressive muscle relaxation and sleep strategies.
- Seek out apps that provide ways to practise mental health strategies and techniques. These can take time to be effective, so make sure you're following the proper directions.
- Check the app's developer to make sure it was created by a reputable source, such as a government veteran affairs agency. Reliable apps should be researched and tested carefully for effectiveness.
- Look for features that make you feel most comfortable. Many of the available apps use the same general concepts but can present their information in different ways. If you're a visual learner, choose an app with more diagrams and videos. If you learn by reading, pick an app with more text.

"You are the one who is using the app, so it's important to pick one that feels comfortable and will be the most useful for your own specific mental health needs," said O'Toole.

Resilience apps that met the study's inclusion criteria included AIMS for Anger Management, Breathe2Relax, Concussion Coach, DoD Safe Helpline, HighRes, LifeArmor, Mindfulness Coach, Mood Coach, Moving Forward, PTSD Coach, PTSD Family Coach and Tactical Breather.

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