

Texting for wellness: Using digital mental health tools for support in another COVID-19 winter

January 13 2022, by Tracie Risling, Gillian Strudwick



Credit: Ono Kosuki from Pexels

The Omicron variant may be testing your resolve to begin 2022 with a commitment to wellness. Certainly, it seems there is a shared sense of

[frustration and fatigue](#) across the country in the face of [yet another pandemic surge](#). Evidence-based digital tools can help support mental health and well-being during another COVID-19 winter.

For many Canadians, COVID-19 has already taken a toll on their [mental health](#), with one in four reporting symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress in 2021, [according to Statistics Canada](#). This is an increase from one in five the previous year.

Of those who reported symptoms of one or more of these [mental health challenges](#)—including a higher proportion of young people managing depression and/or anxiety—94 percent indicated they had been negatively affected by the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic [there were barriers for many Canadians seeking mental health care within strained systems](#). The combination of increased patient numbers with constraints to care due to COVID-19 resulted in calls for Canada to [increase access to digital tools for mental health support and wellness](#).

As part of its annual digital health survey, [Canada Health Infoway](#) reported 51 percent of people surveyed were interested in having access to e-mental health services in 2021.

Digital resources

In a [digital world](#) that increasingly features an "app for that" it is important to have good information about the quality, cost and intended use of digital mental health and [wellness](#) tools.

As part of our work to connect Canadians to evidence-based digital health and wellness resources, Gillian Strudwick led a [review of digital interventions](#) that could be used to support mental health across the

country during the pandemic. With this information we went on to [explore how the use of text messaging could be used to connect those in search of mental health and wellness supports](#) to these curated resources.

The result was SaskWell, a texting service for residents of Saskatchewan that provides 10 weeks of mental health and wellness prompts. SaskWell was designed in partnership with a patient and community advisory committee, bringing the voices and needs of Saskatchewan residents into this text-based service.

The service aims to connect individuals across the province with needed supports through the most commonly accessible technology. Mobile phones are a relatively low-tech intervention with widespread reach, especially in areas where internet connectivity may be sparse or unreliable.

Users who sign up for the service are connected with established and evidence-based digital mental health tools along with weekly wellness tips and resources, providing users with skills to manage their self care and well-being. Residents of Saskatchewan may [sign up for SaskWell](#) at any time by texting "JOIN" to 759355.

SaskWell is not a crisis support tool, nor is it a clinical mental health intervention. It is, however, a point of connectivity and a reminder about the importance of investing time in personal wellness, especially as we face the challenges of this winter season.

Weekly wellness messages

Feelings of loneliness or isolation are one of the primary effects of the pandemic for Canadians who are managing mental health concerns. Statistics Canada found that "[a higher proportion of younger Canadians reported experiencing at least one of the impacts, such as feelings of](#)

[loneliness or an increase in physical health problems](#)" in 2021. Nearly [half of all Canadians have noted increasing stress levels](#).

SaskWell users have identified weekly messages as a positive point of connectivity in their wellness efforts. These messages arrive a few times a week, and per user recommendations can now be scheduled for certain days and times via text.

If you are in Saskatchewan, now is the time to text JOIN, and give yourself 10 weeks of support in your wellness efforts. One benefit of the service is that the messaging is tailored to address the current needs of users, and right now we are collaborating on messaging to see us all through another COVID-19 winter.

This includes a partnership with the [University of Saskatchewan College of Engineering students' society](#). As students continue to navigate shifts in their learning landscape, in addition to managing the many other disruptions in their pandemic lives, we hope easy access to digital mental health and wellness tools provides positive support.

If you are not in Saskatchewan, you can find mental [health](#) resources through most provincial [211 programs](#), or [you can use this link to review a curated list of websites and apps](#).

No matter how you plan to support your own wellness in the weeks ahead, remember that any effort—even a small and seemingly most basic step—is still worthwhile. Even if you feel as though you have had many of these tools or positive coping mechanisms on repeat for months, they are still essential.

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