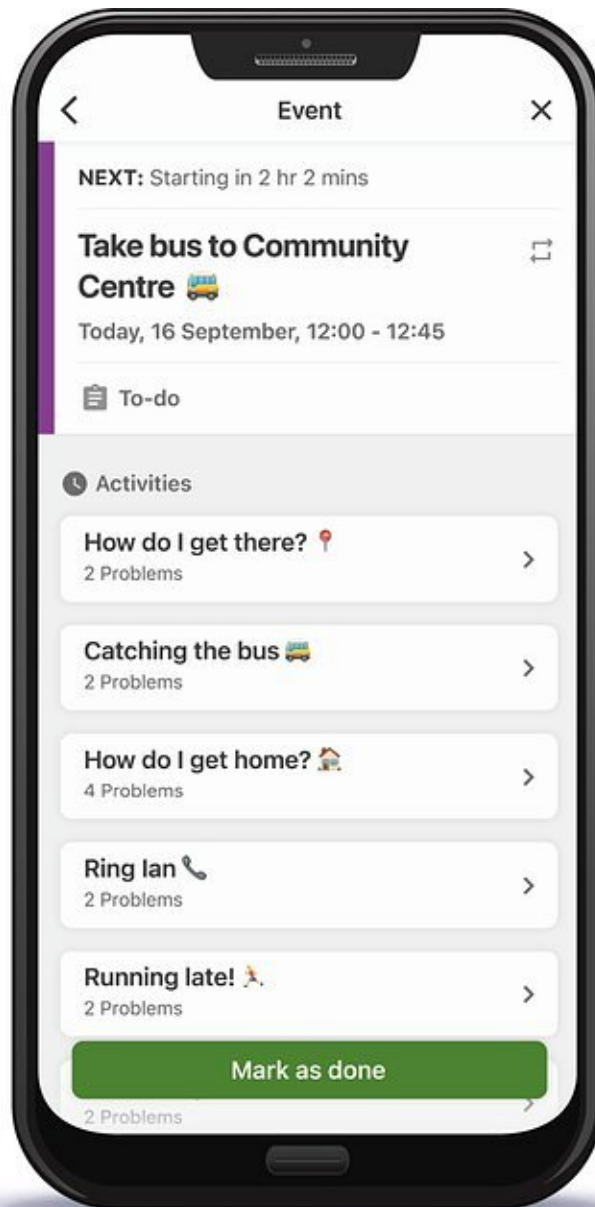


Digital support can significantly reduce anxiety among autistic adults

May 30 2023, by Alan Williams



Credit: University of Plymouth

A digital innovation that provides autistic adults with 24/7 support and practical tools to manage the challenges of everyday life has been shown to significantly reduce anxiety levels.

Brain in Hand combines practical solution-based coaching with a user-led digital self-management system to help individuals build their independence in a variety of situations.

When trialed by a small cohort of adults diagnosed as being, or suspected to be, autistic with low support needs, Brain in Hand was found to significantly lower reported [anxiety](#) levels.

The independent study, published in *British Journal of Psychiatry Open* (*BJPsych Open*), is the first of its kind to investigate the impact of digital self-management in helping to support [autistic adults](#).

As well as reducing [anxiety levels](#), the study also revealed significant improvements for other aspects of quality of life.

In particular, self-injurious behavior scores on the Health of the Nation Outcome Scales (HoNOS) were halved, reducing from 1.30 at baseline to 0.58 on follow up, and memory and orientation problems reduced from 0.88 to 0.47.

Communication problems, sleep problems, problems with eating and drinking, and problems with relationships were also significantly reduced, while using the app also helped participants feel a greater sense of self-awareness.

The study was led by Professor Rohit Shankar MBE, Professor of Neuropsychiatry at the University of Plymouth and Director of CIDER—Cornwall Intellectual Disability Equitable Research. He said, "There are more than 700,000 autistic people in the UK and, therefore, it's important to find and research therapeutic methods of helping those who need it. Every autistic individual has a unique set of experiences and needs but we know that many suffer chronic day-to-day anxiety, which can impact their mental health. The development of the Brain in Hand app is just one tool which could provide vital assistance to them at home or elsewhere."

Dr. Samuel Tromans, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Leicester, led the writing of the study and said, "Autistic adults often face increased challenges in their [daily life](#) because of differences in their [social interaction](#) and communication. This can make everyday tasks sometimes feel overwhelming or anxiety-inducing, such as going into a shop to buy groceries, picking something up or ordering an item. The digital app, which can be installed on phones, is designed for people whose needs may include support with planning, [problem solving](#), and initiating tasks."

"It helps them establish routines, deal with unexpected events, and manage the stress and anxiety that can arise when things go off track. While anxiety is a part of the human condition, continuous feelings of anxiety can have a profoundly negative impact on a person's ability to function adequately."

The app, which can be installed on a [mobile phone](#) (making it easily accessible), works by providing on-demand human support through a chat function, should the individual user need it.

Connor Ward, autistic consultant and Co-Production Lead at Brain in Hand, added, "For a lot of [autistic people](#), anxiety can make it really

hard to do the things we want to do and live life to the full. It's really exciting to be part of something that could genuinely help a lot of people manage the challenges of day-to-day life better so they can focus on the things that matter most to them."

More information: Samuel Tromans et al, The psychological and social impact of the digital self-support system 'Brain in Hand' on autistic people: prospective cohort study in England and Wales, *BJPsych Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1192/bjo.2023.57](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2023.57)

Provided by University of Plymouth

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