

SMART PHONE: THE NEWEST PSYCHOLOGIST IN TOWN



Have you got a smart phone? Have you updated yourself with the newest fashion app on the app store? Planning on buying your household needs online? Are you booking the tickets, hotels etc. for the cheapest price online? Are you using an app to channel your doctor? If yes, then this is an article you might be interested in reading.

Sri Lanka is a country where there's still much stereotypes regarding the approach and effects of psychology, as well as stigma in getting psychological support from a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist. For some, having a mental illness is a disgrace to the family, and therefore such individuals are almost hidden from or invisible to the society. For such people taking psychological support is a big "NO". Hence, as a solution to this, consider using an app on a smart phone! Indeed this sounds like a fantastic solution. This way, no one needs to disclose their mental health condition to anyone, and it's just a matter of clicking some buttons on an app secretly. However, is this reliable, safe, and actually useful?

According to a report by the IMS Institute for Healthcare Informatics (2015), there are over 165,000 health-related apps all around the world. Among these apps, 30% are related to mental health. Even though these are not immensely popular within the Sri Lankan context, there are many who use these apps. Though not many researches have been done on usage of mental health related apps among Sri Lankans, according to David Luxton, PhD, co-author of "A Practitioner's Guide to Telemental Health", 1 in 5 Americans use such apps.

One main objective of such apps is to build a better connection with the therapist while allowing the therapist to keep track of the symptoms and moods of the client. Moreover, certain apps provide advices daily on managing day-to-day life situations as well as to enhance the mood of the user. Further, according to Keely Kolmes (PsyD), who is a San Francisco-based clinical psychologist, this helps the therapist to get more reliable feedback on the client's diet, sleeping schedules, frequency of exercising, and even the consumption of alcohol rather than the client writing about these factors on a paper. Moreover, certain apps help therapists to analyze the progress of their clients as well as decide the interventions which are more effective based on charts and graphs generated through these apps. Most importantly, several studies conducted on this topic show that these apps cause an improvement in patients: A meta-analysis conducted by John Torous (MD), who is a psychiatrist of Harvard Medical School, found that there is an improvement in patients who had depressive symptoms.

However, among the many pros of using apps to take mental health support, there are certain cons as well. It's important to note that not all available apps are research-based and therefore in such apps the appropriacy for people and the validity is questionable. Furthermore, the privacy of the people who use such apps can also be at stake. According to Marlene Maheu, PhD, who is the executive director of the Telemental Health Institute in San Diego, mental health related apps can be used actively and passively. Apps where the user has directly involved in giving information about himself/herself, is known as active using. However, if the app is acquiring information without the user's involvement (eg: Through GPS), it's called passive. Therefore, through passive usage there's a higher risk of invading privacy.

For some, use of mobile apps to get mental health support seems to be an absurd idea as it's almost like letting a machine control over a human body, when indeed it was the human who invented the machine. Moreover, in psychology, we learn every tiny detail on how to approach and manage individuals, and it's not an easy task; rather a great responsibility. Furthermore, there are ethics and other guidelines which the professionals in the field of psychology should observe when dealing with patients. Yet, we let a mindless app to handle one's mental health? However, on the other hand, for communities who still have the stigma of getting help from a professional in psychology, using an app is like a drop of water in the desert. We need to keep in mind that every advancement in technology has its own positives and negatives, and it's the users' responsibility to use technology appropriately and wisely.

Reference:

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