



MENTAL HEALTH ON-CALL

Virtual therapy apps are one way to talk it out.

BY EMILY MCCLUHAN

THE PANDEMIC HAS been trying for everyone, and some have found that if they weren't seeking counseling or therapy services already, they are now. Social distancing, stress, anxiety, and not being able to see family and friends regularly can all exacerbate an unhealthy mindset.

The prevalence of smartphones, coupled with society's heightened focus on fostering mental wellness, has played a large role in the rise of virtual therapy apps like Talkspace, BetterHelp and Lifehelp, offering licensed professionals who can work with patients in the channel of their choice: video, text or chat.

Therapists in brick-and-mortar offices like Dr. Lesley Chapin, vice president of the Center for Psychological Services at Pauquette Center in Madison, also had to quickly adjust to not being able to meet with patients in person. Chapin says Pauquette had already been considering telehealth options before the pandemic, but by April, the majority of their eight locations in Southern Wisconsin were offering remote services.

"The good news is that the whole world was thrust into this domain, so there is a fast and furious look at the data to make sure [telehealth therapy services] are effective and to evaluate if modifications need to be made," she notes.

Chapin says that although in-person therapy allows patients to be more vulnerable and encourages a personal connection, she's thankful that online access has allowed her practice to cast a wider net to those who may need it. She also sees the rise in the popularity of apps like Talkspace and BetterHelp as a solution.

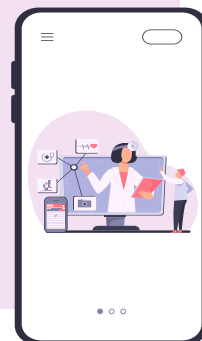
There is a caveat to using virtual therapy services, Chapin says. Her focus is dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), or working with high-risk suicidal behaviors, eating disorders and personality disorders, as well as prolonged exposure therapy

VIRTUAL THERAPY 101

The advantages of virtual therapy include affordability, flexibility and access.

WHAT TO KNOW:

- Insurance plans differ in coverage for telehealth services — be sure to check your plan benefits for the number of sessions allowed and coverage amount.
- Therapy apps are generally not meant to treat severe mental health conditions like suicidal thoughts, bipolar disease, schizophrenia or court-ordered therapy. Seek out a board-certified therapist to build a relationship with and have a plan for in-person visits when possible.
- Most apps offer monthly billing with cancellation anytime. Fees can range from \$240 to \$400 per month.
- Set-up typically starts with an initial assessment, choice of a provider and booking your first appointment.



for trauma. She notes that this particular type of work is best suited to in-person sessions and requires an evidence-based approach — and that evidence hasn't caught up to being able to counsel these types of patients virtually. However, as the need for therapy increases, Chapin says virtual offerings will be needed.

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"We're in the middle of an opioid and suicide crisis, and the pandemic has exacerbated this. The reality is, that we as a nation do not have enough providers to meet that need," Chapin says, and adds that if therapy apps can help most people in need gain easier access to therapists, she's on board. 🌸

Emily McCluhan is a program manager and freelance writer. She considers herself a Madison native now that she's been exploring, running around, eating in and paddling the city for 13 years.



APPS TO CONSIDER

Talkspace allows a choice of three plans: unlimited chat; phone; and live, scheduled video conversations (for an additional fee) available five days a week. They also partner with employers to offer online therapy through insurance plans and employee assistance plans.

BetterHelp offers unlimited access via chat, video or phone seven days a week, with no scheduling necessary.

Lifehelp centers on women's mental health with a focus on pre-marriage counseling, children and parenthood, parent and family relations, and sex and intimacy.

Doctor on Demand is akin to a true telemedicine app with board-certified clinicians available for scheduled video consultations across a range of conditions. The setup is similar to other apps, but the fee structure for behavioral health is on a per-session basis, similar to in-person therapy.