

# Therapist experiences of supplementing counselling with guided use of a well-being mobile phone app

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## 1. Overview

This article presents findings from a focus group exploring therapist's experiences of supplementing counselling with guided use of a well-being app in a student counselling setting. Preliminary findings address the implementation, acceptability, usage, and potential implications described during the therapist focus group.

## 2. Background

University counselling services (UCSs) face a unique challenge to offer short-term therapeutic support to students presenting with complex mental health needs, and in a setting which suits the academic timetable [1,4]. In addition, new government initiatives to widen university participation have increased demands for student services without the necessary funds to recruit additional therapeutic staff [2]. The recent availability of mobile phone applications (apps) provide an opportunity to supplement face-to-face therapy and have the potential to reach a wider audience, maintain engagement between therapy sessions, and enhance therapeutic outcomes. Therefore, the present study aimed to establish the feasibility of supplementing counselling with guided use of a well-being app. The reported focus group contributes to the ongoing feasibility trial comparing counselling alone, against counselling supplemented with guided use of a wellbeing mobile phone app in university students experiencing anxiety or depression.

## 3. Methods

The feasibility trial recruited 40 university students with moderate anxiety (score  $\geq 10$  on the Patient Health Questionnaire, PHQ-9 – [5] or depression (score  $\geq 10$  on the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Scale, GAD-7 – [6]). Students were allocated to one of two treatment conditions: 1) counselling alone (control); or 2) counselling supplemented with guided use of a well-being app ([3], intervention). Students in the control condition received ~6 counselling sessions within a 6-month period; in line with standard practice. In addition to the standard level of support, students in the intervention condition received therapist advice on using a well-being app to: 1) track moods and

behaviours; 2) reflect on diary entries; 3) set goals; 4) complete exercises to relax and defuse negative emotions; or 5) interact with anonymous online communities. The usage, acceptability, feasibility, and potential implications of the intervention will be assessed through counselling session recordings, telephone interviews with students, and a focus group with therapists. Preliminary results from the therapist focus group will be discussed.

### 3.1 Ethical statement

Ethical approval was provided by the University of Sheffield Department of Psychology Research Ethics Committee (REC) before advertising for recruitment.

## 4. Results

Five therapists from the intervention condition took part in a focus group to discuss their experiences of supplementing counselling with a well-being app. Thematic analysis identified two prominent themes - feasibility and facilitation. The feasibility theme contained sub-themes which refer to the acceptability and implementation of the intervention including: 1) therapist commitment and engagement; 2) managing client expectations; and 3) fit with clients and therapy style. With successful implementation, therapists described using the app as a short-term practical solution to facilitate the therapeutic process. The feasibility theme also contained sub-themes that could interfere with the acceptance and implementation of the intervention, including: 1) therapist resistance to change and protection; 2) misperceptions of research; and 3) misunderstandings of intended use. The facilitation theme refers to the potential implications and mechanisms for facilitating the therapeutic process; whereby supplementing counselling with a well-being app showed potential to teach students about self-awareness of mental health and how to become their own therapist when they are ready to leave therapy.

## 5. Discussion

This feasibility trial aimed to identify the acceptability and potential implications of supplementing counselling with guided use of

a well-being app. In particular, by using an app alongside counselling to track moods/behaviours and complete wellness exercises, this study aimed to identify implementation strategies to support therapeutic engagement between counselling sessions and enhance outcomes. Analysis on a therapist focus group revealed that integrating the app with therapy relied on therapist commitment, client expectations, and fit with therapy style. Successful implementation showed potential to facilitate the therapeutic process, whereas implementation difficulties were at risk of misperceptions and resistance.

## 6. Conclusion

These results inform the training needs and knowledge base for university counselling services that are interested in being more research active, or are considering to offer well-being apps to students. Our findings highlight factors which interfere with the acceptance and implementation of a new intervention and give rise to potential misperceptions of research. Our findings also suggest that apps have the potential to promote student self-awareness and responsibility of mental health.

## 7. References

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Student mental health, mobile phone apps, counselling, anxiety, depression, feasibility, acceptability, qualitative

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