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COVID-19: PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON HEALTHCARE WORKERS

Digital approaches for mental health in the age of covid-19

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Gold's editorial on psychological first aid interventions recognises the major psychological consequences arising in the covid-19 pandemic.¹ In this current climate, mounting effective mental health responses faces challenges, including the widespread reduction of available in-person mental health services and broad limitations in mobility as a result of the public health measures enacted.

Covid-19 is occurring in an age of unprecedented adoption of digital technology, creating opportunities for data driven testing and dissemination of effective solutions to assess and treat mental health problems in the wake of the pandemic. Digital mental health programmes offer the ability to respond quickly and efficiently and to reach people over great distances with minimal mobility requirements.

There are currently over 10 000 smartphone apps related to mental health, each with diverse approaches ranging from remote cognitive behavioural therapy to the use of automated “chat bots.”² Despite the large number of available digital treatment options, little evidence based guidance exists. It is vital to deploy digital mental health services that are evidence based and efficacious.

Pragmatic clinical trials could allow us to rapidly assess the association between digital interventions and outcomes in a real world context.³ Whereas randomised trials of traditional mental health interventions typically take years, recent studies using digital interventions have shown that they can be carried out among more than 1000 participants in a matter of weeks.⁴ Pragmatic trials could lead to dramatic enhancements in our abilities to monitor, assess, and treat mental health, not just during covid-19 but potentially for populations in historically underserved areas such as rural populations or low income regions, faced with limited availability of local mental health resources.

Guided by a rigorous evidence based approach, digital health solutions might be the “killer app” to help combat the behavioural and psychosocial fallout from this global pandemic.

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1815/rr>.

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