Top 10 Well-Being Apps for 2018

By Kathleen Greer

For the past four years, KGA has vetted well-being apps in order to recommend its top 10 choices for EA professionals. This project is more difficult today than when it first began because the market has been flooded with options. New apps appear every day, and the number of mental health ones has increased significantly. For example, in May 2016, the following number of apps were introduced: 805 medical, 1,206 health and fitness, and 2,225 lifestyle. In contrast, it is estimated that five million apps will be available to consumers by 2020 (Perez, 2016).

Can Well-Being Apps Help with the Mental Health Crisis?
One in six U.S. adults, or 48.3 million adults, live with a mental illness, which represents a national epidemic that EAPs are uniquely positioned to help address (Marshall, 2018). People with mood disorders such as depression and bipolar have a life expectancy that is 25 years less than those without these conditions. (Nichols, 2018).

Although face-to-face counseling is still a treatment choice for many, others are turning to e-mental health options, such as well-being apps, to get the assistance they need.

Study of EAP and Behavioral Health Executives
In a recent 2018 National Behavioral Consortium (NBC) survey on apps and e-health platforms, 60 percent of EAPs and managed behavioral health care organizations (MBHOs) agreed that apps were “very important” or “extremely important” in making interventions more available, helping members with specialty programs, and addressing generational differences.

As part of the survey, NBC member organizations covering more than 22 million lives identified the app categories of greatest interest:

- Stress, 73%
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), 68%
- Depression, 64%
- Anxiety, 59%; and
- Addiction: 55%

The apps most familiar to EAPs were Moodhacker, Headspace, and Happify, which focus on improving a person’s mood and outlook. But while the number of mental health and well-being apps available is staggering, engagement has not kept pace. Health experts recognize that apps can play a key role in both mental and physical health, but note that consumer interest may be lagging behind.

EAPs Can Narrow Options in a Crowded, Confusing Field
EAPs are in a unique position to recommend trusted apps to clients who may otherwise bounce around a disjointed mental health system. Critical in this process is narrowing a list so that it isn’t overwhelming.

“If we’re overwhelmed [by apps] as clinicians,” says Alison Magee, Senior VP of Clinical Services at KGA, “just imagine what it’s like for someone suffering from a mental condition.”

Apps Form a Bridge in EAP Counseling
Apps can be helpful in employee assistance work for a variety of reasons. Since EAP counseling is typically short-term, recommending an app to a client can help fill a waiting period while the practitioner searches for a good referral. Collaborating with a client on an app can also deepen a relationship that otherwise might be more superficial. For example, reviewing progress on an app with a short-term client may make three counseling sessions seem like more than that. There are also times when a client may be waiting for a session opening. Apps can also address this gap.

The Relevancy of Well-Being Apps
Apps are more specialized than ever, which makes them even more relevant and helpful. For instance, some clients prefer a private digital-based program over a face-to-face or video interaction.

Apps can also assist in treating serious mental health issues. A
recent study of men with depression showed that high-risk men were more likely to endorse accessing resources on the Internet than low-risk men (Wang, et al., 2016).

For these men, the top three reasons to access e-mental health included: getting help with sleep hygiene, improving stress and depression, and having quality information about work-related stress issues. Given that middle-aged men are at the highest risk of committing suicide, this is important data.

**KGA's Selection Process**

Each year, KGA counselors and work-life specialists are asked to recommend mental health apps based on their experience in using them as an adjunct to counseling.

They indicated that they are 30 percent more likely to recommend an app this year than last year at the same time. Ninety percent of KGA staff "agrees" or "strongly agrees" that it's easier to recommend KGA's Top 10 Apps because they have already been vetted by people they trust. When asked if they have any concerns about employees using apps, 100 percent said "no."

Comments from KGA staff included:

- **A client struggling with anxiety and depression that was affecting his work started using Headspace for mindfulness exercises and found it helpful for his concentration and focus at work.**

- **I often will use Headspace with a client face-to-face or at least show it to them.**

- **Apps are often a great option to help empower clients to engage in self-care.**

- **It's been helpful to mention free mindfulness apps to help people with acute stress or anxiety until they can get to an affiliate provider.**

- **Apps are helpful to clients with insomnia and anxiety.**

A total of 250 apps were selected for consideration from a variety of sources. KGA evaluated the popularity, reliability, and ease of use of each of the apps. Preference was given to apps that were evidence-based and were either free or had a free version for new users. (Counselors and specialists are more comfortable recommending free apps to employees who may see cost as a barrier.) Other criteria included the requirement that apps had versions for both iOS and Android, and fell into one of the following categories:

- Anxiety/depression;
- Finances;
- Suicide prevention;
- Self-awareness;
- Happiness;
- Sleep;
- Stress management;
- Mindfulness/meditation;
- Personal organization;
- Habit management;
- Parenting;
- Relationships;
- Retirement;
- Eldercare; and
- Childcare.

Another app geared towards suicide prevention and mood disorder monitoring required users to input mood data three times a day for 14 days before providing any feedback — much too long, the counselor thought.

Counselors also rejected apps that called for a lot of effort syncing the app with other devices, as well as apps that didn’t have a clear purpose or connected users with non-digital resources.

**A Closer Look at KGA's Top 10**

The apps that made KGA’s top 10 list this year aim to make life easier and healthier for users — whether by streamlining tasks, improving sleep, supporting sobriety, increasing physical fitness, or quelling anxiety.

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The top picks also met KGA's criteria for ease of use. They are well designed, with clear prompts and thoughtful organization. Counselors felt strongly that the top apps shouldn’t be frustrating to use or unnecessarily distracting.

Many of the apps KGA selected serve as an additional counseling tool. The apps SAM: Self-Help for Anxiety Management, Daylio, Sober Grid, HabitBull, Grateful: A Gratitude Journal, and SuperBetter offer opportunities to record information that can be used for self-assessment. The recorded data, patterns and observations stemming from the apps can then be shared with a counselor during a face-to-face or phone session.

The top apps also provide support once a client has received a counselor referral and is waiting for an appointment. They have resources for coping and also connect the user to a digital support network. For someone experiencing isolation, SAM: Self-Help

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Here are the Top 10 Apps of 2018:

**Sleep Cycle Alarm Clock**
The Sleep Cycle Alarm Clock listens in on movements while you’re asleep and wakes you up during a lighter sleep phase, leaving you more refreshed than if you were jolted out of a deep sleep. Users can set a time by which they must wake up, and the app will wake them up within a 30-minute range of that time.

**HabitBull**
HabitBull assists users in maintaining good habits or breaking bad ones by encouraging them to track progress on a calendar that they customize. App features like graphs, a forum, reminders, and motivational words provide additional habit-building help.

**Sober Grid**
Sober Grid creates a virtual, online sober community where users can communicate, encourage each other, and instantly reach out for help when struggling to stay sober. Users can remain anonymous or use the geotagging feature to meet up in real life.

**Wunderlist**
This is a list-making app that allows users to share lists with family, friends, and colleagues. Wunderlist aims to help users tackle “to-dos”. Along with the ability to collaborate on lists, Wunderlist also includes reminders, due dates, and room for notes.

**10% Happier**
10% Happier bills itself as “meditation for fidgety skeptics” and combines guided audio meditations and video lessons to build a lasting and compelling meditation practice.

**SuperBetter**
SuperBetter turns everyday emotional, physical, and mental challenges into a “game”, with the user as the “hero” of the story. In time, players develop resiliency and decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety.

**Daylio**
With this private micro-diary, users track their moods and habits throughout the day by using simple icons and quick notes. Daylio then converts this data into a chart to show patterns over time and provide other insights.

**Grateful: A Gratitude Journal**
As opposed to starting at a blank screen, Grateful users are given prompts like, “What made you smile today?” to get their gratitude juices flowing. They can also create their own recurring prompts. The reminders are pleasant and easy to use.

**Sworkit**
Sworkit refutes the “no-time-to-exercise” excuse with its library of more than 50 videos ranging in length from 5 minutes to an hour. Users can customize workouts and workout plans based on impact level, difficulty, exercise type, and focus area.

**SAM: Self-Help for Anxiety Management**
Created in the U.K., SAM guides users through small steps they can take to manage anxiety. The anxiety-management toolkit includes breathing exercises, and prompts to acknowledge the source of anxiety and rate and record anxiety levels. Through a closed in-app social network, users can connect with others coping with anxiety. ✫
for Anxiety Management offers a useful social cloud feature. Apps like Grateful, HabitBull, and SuperBetter make keeping healthy resolutions less of a chore.

Summary
Apps are here to stay. EA counselors are advised to embrace this trend and recognize how apps make a positive difference in the lives of employees and their families. This includes a meaningful improvement in the user’s immediate day-to-day existence and in the long run.

References


curricula, such as Social Work, Industrial Psychology, Occupational Health, and Human Resource and Management. Many members have used EAPA-SA as an informal method of “upskilling” through discussions and mentorship by more experienced EAPA-SA members. At the graduate level of study there are many universities where Health, Social and Business Science Doctoral and PhD candidates choose EAP as a subject of study. EAPA-SA is positioning itself to offer EAP mentoring and coaching to its network of EA professionals and specialists; influencing the development of an EAP undergraduate qualification.

Summary
EAP practitioners have come a long way in “professionalising” the EAP field and getting business leaders to understand their role in relation to business and performance. They have come a long way and have accomplished much. However there are still many issues that require additional work:

> The current counselling environment curtails professional development. With life coaching, and peer, lay, pastoral, debt, and other forms of counselling, work organizations content with compliance do not feel the need to invest in EAP professional development as long as they have someone coordinating an EAP. This is an area that needs to be studied and remedied to protect employees and organizations.

> Internal EAPs — especially those in government — remain extremely focussed on compliance. We need to get away from bureaucratic red tape and work towards outcomes and ROI. We still struggle with the link between investment and internal EAP expertise. Training needs to broaden expertise from basic clinical practice to demonstrate the business case for EAP return on investment (ROI).

> Finally, we need to finalise our RPL and other professional development processes. This will give EAP practitioners the accreditation they deserve.

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