

Therapy at your FINGERTIPS

More of us are turning to technology to manage our mental health, but is an online option really as effective?

During the pandemic, people looking for online mental-health tools soared. Searches for apps to ease depression rose by 156%, while searches for mindfulness apps saw a 2,483% increase*.

Although this was largely down to lockdown preventing in-person therapy, we now have other reasons to go digital for our health needs. Online therapy and self-help apps can be a cheaper way to manage stress and low mood – a must for many as we navigate the cost-of-living crisis.

They can also be quicker – an immediate resource at our fingertips in comparison to long NHS waiting

Did you know?
Many employers and health insurance companies now cover online therapy.

lists for mental-health services. Being supported from the comfort of home is arguably more relaxing and easier to fit into our time-poor lives than travelling to therapy sessions. Plus, we lead increasingly tech-driven lives – we shop online, watch films on laptops and order food from delivery apps. Why not access therapy this way, too?

OPTING FOR ONLINE

'Lockdown accelerated interest in online therapy,' says Natalie Bailey, chair of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). 'It was a real eye-opener for many clients – and therapists – that worked really well for them. I think this forced shift has led to a long-term change out of choice. Many now offer in-person and online therapy, while others have moved to working entirely online.'

Adenekan Oyefeso, lead psychologist at Livi, agrees. 'Lockdown cemented online therapy as an option,' he says. 'The ability to receive therapy from home has made it more accessible than ever. In addition, online therapy can be flexible and fit around busy schedules. It offers anonymity, which some people prefer, it can provide a larger pool of therapists to choose from – helpful for people who live in rural areas or have specific therapeutic needs – and is typically less expensive than in-person therapy. For these reasons, online therapy is likely to continue to grow in popularity.'

THE CONS

So, we know online therapy works – and there are many positives to commend it – but there are drawbacks. 'Some people may find it difficult to engage when communicating online or feel uncomfortable discussing personal issues, making therapy less effective,' says Adenekan. 'Plus, there's a limit to the range of assessments that can be carried out online, and it's not >>

always the best option in emergencies. Suppose you're experiencing a mental health crisis? In that case, you may benefit more from a face-to-face provider.'

Then there are practical issues, such as technical problems, which can disrupt sessions, says Adenekan.

And not everyone has the luxury of privacy.

'It's important you have a safe, private place to speak to your therapist, but that can be difficult if

91%
of BACP therapists said that, post-pandemic, they'll continue working with clients via video***.

WHERE TO GET ONLINE SUPPORT

Making sure the help you're getting is reputable is key...

WEBSITES

- + **Welldoing** An online therapy directory with thousands of verified therapists, welldoing.org
- + **Livi** A digital healthcare service for GP and online therapy appointments, livi.co.uk
- + **ACTO** The Association for Counselling and Therapy Online provides details of professionals specifically trained in online therapy, acto.org.uk
- + **UK Therapy Guide** Search for qualified online or in-person therapists via this portal, uktherapyguide.com
- + **Be Mindful** An NHS-assessed, mindfulness-based cognitive

therapy (MBCT) course you can do in your own time, £40, bemindfulonline.com

APPS

- + **SAM** Backed by academic research, this wellbeing app allows you to monitor and manage your mental health, free via App Store/Google Play.
- + **Daylio** A mood tracker and journal to help you recognise triggers and develop self-awareness, free with paid extras, App Store/Google Play.
- + **Wysa** Enables users to 'self-manage stressors' – see separate box for more info – free with paid extras, App Store/Google Play.
- + **Headspace** The go-to app for mindful meditation to reduce stress and aid sleep, free trial, then from £4.17 a month, App Store/Google Play.
- + **Mindscape** Created with mental health charity Mind, Mindscape offers guided analysis and therapeutic soundscapes for anxiety sufferers, free via Amazon Alexa.



you share a home with family or friends,' says Natalie.

Potential pitfalls aside, there are still several reasons to try online therapy. Fundamentally, most key elements are the same as in-person therapy, says Natalie. 'What's essential is that you feel heard and understood, and that it's a safe space for you to talk about your feelings without judgement – however your therapy is delivered.'

'Ultimately, the decision between online and face-to-face therapy depends on what works best for you and your individual needs,' adds Adenekan. And if one doesn't work, don't be put off. You still have options.

WORDS: DEBRA WATERS. *ORGANISATION FOR THE REVIEW OF CARE AND SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH. **MANPOWER REPORT 2021. PHOTOS: POSTER BY MOOHEI. GETTY. IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH, SEE YOUR GP.

CAN A PENGUIN REALLY HELP?

Used by more than four million people worldwide, the Wysa app offers cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), and visualisation and meditation exercises. And your therapist is a penguin!

Well, not quite. Wysa is an emotionally intelligent chatbot (in the form of a cute penguin) that uses artificial intelligence to understand and react to your emotions and concerns. It then provides guidance and the building blocks needed to self-manage your emotions. For further support, you can also book appointments with a (real) mental health professional.

COST: Basic is free, premium is £66.99 a year. Four sessions with a therapist cost £19.99 each. Also available through the NHS, wysa.io

'I could turn off the camera if it got too much'

Wendy, 46, from Wiltshire, found the ideal online resource to help her manage prenatal anxiety.

'My midwife referred me to the Pregnancy in Mind course, which is run by the NSPCC to improve outcomes for families and babies.

I'd lost my 18-year-old son to suicide, so there were a lot of worries about how my pregnancy would affect my anxiety.

On top of that, it was an unexpected pregnancy after a traumatic birth with my last child, so I definitely needed some support!

It was a free group session on Zoom, because in-person group therapy wasn't an option during COVID-19.

I've done face-to-face group therapy, but always found it slightly awkward. For someone with anxiety, just going to the venue can be stressful. Being at home and being able to switch my camera off if it got too much was beneficial.

Going forward, I'd be happy to do it online or face-to-face, although it depends on the type of therapy and what I'd want to talk about.

If it's a group, I find online easier as there's less pressure to contribute.

Whereas, for me, one-to-one therapy would be better in person as I'd feel more connected to who I'm talking to.'

+ **For details about Pregnancy in Mind, visit nspcc.org.uk**

THE THERAPIST

Karen Morton is a psychotherapist and counsellor at kmpsychotherapy.co.uk. She says...



'Online therapy has a surprisingly long history. Automated text-based services date back to the 1960s, with internet-based online video therapy from around the mid-1990s. However, it was conceived by many therapists as a different and perhaps lesser offer to its in-person counterpart.

Online and in-person therapy are different, but are both – in my experience – equally therapeutic and effective. Online means clients aren't limited to their locality and don't have travel expenses. Clients find it advantageous that there's no travel time, more accessibility and choice, and they're able to schedule sessions with more flexibility. Some therapists may charge less for online therapy

where they would incur room rental for in-person therapy, but there are costs when using platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and doxy.me, plus webcams, upgraded internet connection, and gaps in sessions to avoid screen fatigue.

I charge the same because one service isn't superior or inferior to the other, and I spend the same time preparing sessions and reviewing client material. When working online, I prefer video because visual information is crucial to listening and attuning to my client's body language.

Engagement for some is difficult when online. Others find it intimidating, or work from home and cannot bear another meeting on Zoom. For these clients, in-person therapy is more suitable, but it's down to what works for the individual client.'