

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Brief No. 7

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This is a brief related to the series, Emotional Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Feeling Well. This brief contains information on the future of emotional well-being and different impacts we might see in our daily lives.

Throughout this series, we use the following definition of emotional well-being.

Emotional well-being has many parts that capture how positive an individual feels generally, and about their life overall. It includes:

- **Experiential features:** emotional quality of everyday experiences
- **Reflective features:** life satisfaction, sense of meaning, and goal pursuit

These features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and age.¹

Introduction

As this series comes to a close, we want to take some time to consider what the future of emotional well-being might look like. As we navigate a changing world, it is even more important to emphasize emotional well-being and how we can incorporate it into our everyday lives. In this brief, we specifically focus on two topics that have or are beginning to change the landscape of emotional well-being: (1) technology, and (2) societal changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technology

+ *Advantages*

One of the biggest technological advancements for emotional well-being have been mental health apps. There are hundreds of apps out there, with some focused on meditation and mindfulness, and other teaching techniques often used in cognitive behavioral therapy. Many of these apps can have benefits such as convenience, lower cost, and outreach.² One research study examined the impact of three different well-being apps—mindfulness-based, cognitive behavioral therapy-based, and personalized feedback—on adults receiving outpatient psychiatric care. This study found significant decreases in depression, anxiety, and substance use symptoms across users of all apps.³ Another research article reviewed nearly 200 studies that had examined the effectiveness of mental health apps. Overall, apps had significant, but small effects, in reducing depression and anxiety symptoms.⁴

Disadvantages

Despite the many benefits that come with mental health apps, there are many drawbacks. For example, there may not be evidence to support the skills being taught or resources being promoted on these apps. There are also no industry-wide standards for apps, so users cannot evaluate them on a universal scale when choosing which to engage with. Additionally, there is little to no regulation for these apps including the personal data being collected and how that data is stored and used. One research article reviewed nearly 40 other review articles that assessed potential risks associated with mental health apps. Many studies supported the benefits listed above, but also identified risks such as issues engaging users, supporting users experiencing an emergency or crisis, private information being exposed, and approaches that are not backed by evidence.⁴

Societal Changes

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had notable impacts on people around the world. Khalid Afzal, MD, a pediatric psychiatrist, explains that “COVID-19 affected a whole generation of individuals at every level”. These impacts were not only experienced in one life domain such as physical health, but across domains such as mental health, social connections, and education. Although COVID-19 is a respiratory virus impacting the lungs, it can significantly impact the brain. Many people with no history of mental health challenges experienced symptoms associated with “long COVID” such as mental fog, attention difficulties, depression, anxiety, and irritability. Even five years after the first peak of COVID-19 in the United States, it’s important to recognize the impact the virus had on people’s well-being, whether that be brain changes from the virus itself, or the stress that came with social isolation and disruption to routines.⁵

As we dealt with the challenges COVID-19 brought us, we practiced a valuable skill: resilience. Even with all of the negative impacts, people came together to help one another. For example, volunteers worked with older adults and other vulnerable groups to help contain the virus and prevent its spread. Efforts to help one another during stressful times can lead to a positive psychological change known as posttraumatic growth⁶, which is linked to the broader term of resilience. Factors at different levels such as the individual, family, organizational, community, and national levels influence the development of resilience⁷. Knowing how to care for yourself, your family, and your community is crucial to develop resilience during stressful times, whether it’s a pandemic or a local crisis.

The Importance of Social Connections

As humans, we are meant to be social and interact with others. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) recently found that 1 in 6 people in the world is impacted by loneliness⁸. People of all ages and lifestyles can be lonely, but certain groups are more at risk. For example, low-income adults, young adults, older adults, people with disabilities, immigrants, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) communities



are more likely to be lonely⁹. Increasing social connections can be done at the individual, community, and national levels. These solutions can look like reaching out to a friend in need, greeting a neighbor, volunteering in the community, or raising awareness for national policies such as those to strengthen public parks and libraries. Looking out for one another is key to successfully moving through life together.

Conclusion

Our world is constantly changing, and we must learn how to navigate the new challenges being thrown at us. In order to effectively do this, we must prioritize our emotional well-being. Technology has presented new ways for us to improve our emotional well-being, such as mental health apps that can help us practice mindfulness or learn new strategies. However, we must also be cautious when it comes to technology since apps and techniques being promoted are not properly regulated and may not be evidence-based. Practicing resilience during challenging times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, helps us to grow as individuals and communities. In addition, creating connections among people is crucial to preventing loneliness and social isolation that can negatively impact health.

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