

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	1
Guest:	Jason Owen, PhD
Title:	#1: VA Mobile Mental Health Apps

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to our first episode of PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite-sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee-Vincent and I'm a Clinical Psychologist at the Veteran's Affairs National Center for PTSD. Today, I'll be talking with Dr. Jason Owen, Mobile Apps team lead, about mobile mental health apps developed by his team at the National Center for PTSD. Welcome, Dr. Owen!

Jason:

Thank you. It's nice to be here with you.

Pearl:

Full disclosure for our audience, Jason and I work together at the National Center for PTSD. We've known each other for a few years. And Jason, I think you have what is one of the coolest jobs in VA. Can you start by telling our listeners just a little bit about what your team and you do?

Jason:

Sure. Myself and a number of colleagues that I work with we create mobile apps for mental health in the VA. And so we're charged with designing and creating and maintaining and responding to Veterans and trying to create the best product possible for them to address a wide variety of issues all related in some way to PTSD. So from PTSD Coach to Family Coach, and Mindfulness and Couples Coach for dealing with relationships, we have a number of products that are designed to help Veterans.

Pearl:

That's very important work. And when you say mobile mental health app, what are we talking about here? What are these and, and what do they do? How do they work?

Jason:

Yeah, so these are all mobile apps that the VA provides that are all completely free. And they provide information and coping strategies and tools. They provide resources, they provide all kinds of things to kind of help with very specific challenges. You can use an app like Mindfulness Coach that can very slowly and very gently introduce you to a practice of mindfulness that can help with managing symptoms of anxiety. And they're designed for Veterans, but they're also designed to be used by anybody in the general public who may be struggling.

Pearl:

You know, a lot of our listeners are probably familiar with downloading apps on their smart devices and have maybe even used commercially available apps for anxiety or mindfulness. Can you say a little bit more about why somebody might choose a VA-developed app versus one of these other apps?

Jason:

Yeah, apps that, that address mental health challenges, you know, that are designed to help with whether it's PTSD or depression or anxiety or challenges in a relationship, you know, are inherently very private and very personal. Because we protect privacy and so we don't require Veterans or anybody else using the apps to create an account. And so, as a result of that, these apps really are-, they're yours, right? When you download one of these apps, the information stays on your device, and it's not shared with VA. And they're free, right? So that Veterans have borne the cost of protecting our nation, and this is a service that we're providing to them that, you know, we want them to be able to have access to, and we want them to have the best quality app that they can possibly have, and that's what we strive for. So everything that goes into a mobile app that's developed by the VA is gonna have the best available, scientific evidence behind it, so you know it's gonna have recommendations and strategies that we actually believe or have strong evidence can be helpful in managing those difficulties whatever they may be. That's our mission, is to make sure that every Veteran has access to a very high-quality mobile app for addressing the most important challenges that go along with PTSD and other related conditions.

Pearl:

Wonderful. And so you're saying that for the VA apps for mental health that are publicly available, that they're free and that they're backed by scientific evidence or at least have good expertise behind the content that's in them, so they can be fairly trustworthy. So can anyone use these apps or do you have to be a Veteran or Service member?

Jason:

No. Anybody can use them. I mean, that's the great thing about these apps is that if you're a Veteran, great, know that they-, these are designed with you in mind. If you're not a Veteran, you know, these apps are also for you, right? So we know that there are many people in the general public who have experienced a traumatic event of one kind of, or another, if it, you know, maybe it's something that you experienced during your childhood, it could be a motor vehicle accident, it could be a health condition – all kinds of things that can lead to post traumatic stress symptoms. And, you know, we know that these apps have the potential to really help a lot of people, not just Veterans.

Pearl:

There's two types of apps you guys are putting out. They fall into one type that's, kind of, more self-guided and one that's a little bit different. Can you explain that for our listeners?

Jason:

Sure, yeah. There are a number of evidence-based treatments that, that the VA has gotten behind for treating PTSD and insomnia and other mental health conditions. So we design apps that are designed to support those treatments. So if you're working with a provider, for example, that's doing Prolonged Exposure Therapy with you to help you with PTSD, or you're working with a provider who's using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia, we have apps that are designed to work hand-in-glove with those treatments so that as you go through the treatment and face-to-face care with your provider, you can take the app home with you, and it supports everything that you're doing.

You know, and then we have a suite of apps that are designed to be used on their own whether or not you're working with a provider. For many people, I think what these apps do is kind of help to really take away the stigma of mental health care. Mental health care really is for everybody. You know, it doesn't

mean you're weak. It doesn't mean that you need help or aren't strong enough or anything like that. And these apps will help you get connected with somebody if you're not already connected.

Pearl:

So PTSD Coach is your most downloaded app. For somebody interested in downloading an app like PTSD Coach, they might be wondering, is this the cure? Will PTSD Coach resolve my PTSD? Will it help me assess if I have PTSD, if I haven't been diagnosed? What can somebody who downloads PTSD Coach expect from the app?

Jason:

Yeah, I mean, PTSD Coach, it's a really great app, but it's not a replacement for treatment. It's not an evidence-based treatment for PTSD and I think it's important for people to understand that. What PTSD Coach can do is really help you manage in-the-moment distress. So you're at home, you're between sessions with your provider, you're not connected with a provider and you need help right now. What can you do? And you can pull PTSD Coach up on your phone or your tablet, and it can give you some tools to help right now in the moment to help you calm down, to help you manage flashbacks, to help you manage anxious thoughts. And we know that PTSD Coach can be helpful. So there have been scientific studies on PTSD Coach, and it does look promising for reducing symptoms of PTSD. But we don't think it should be used in isolation. You know, PTSD Coach is not gonna diagnose you with PTSD. PTSD Coach does have an assessment for kind of tracking the severity of symptoms that commonly go along with PTSD, but it's not gonna make a diagnosis, that can only be done by a trained clinical provider.

Pearl:

Do you have a favorite VA mental health app?

Jason:

I love Mindfulness Coach. I, uh, one of the things I love about Mindfulness Coach is that I'm a huge mindfulness skeptic. I've had friends and colleagues that have, have tried to get me into mindfulness for a long time and, and I've been really resistant to that. But I helped build the Mindfulness Coach app and I kind of fell in love with it. It was designed, I think for people like me and for Veterans, I think, who don't necessarily understand what all the hoopla is about with mindfulness. In the process of building the app, I've learned a lot about mindfulness, and can appreciate that it's an extremely helpful tool in the, for managing things that are going on in the moment. We've just gotten such, such wonderful feedback about the app that it's hard not to love.

Pearl:

How many VA mental health apps can you name in 10 seconds?

Jason:

Mindfulness Coach, CPT Coach, PE Coach, Insomnia Coach, PTSD Family Coach, PTSD Coach, PFA Mobile, Couples Coach... <laugh>

Pearl:

Time. <laugh> Pretty good, pretty good, I don't know if I could have done as well. And if our listeners are interested in checking out the portfolio of apps that your team has developed, how would they go about that, and how would they know that an app was developed by VA and the National Center for PTSD?

Jason:

So the easiest way to find out about our apps and to get more information is just to Google “PTSD mobile apps” or “National Center for PTSD mobile apps,” and that will take you directly to the National Center for PTSD’s website, which has all of the information about PTSD Coach, Mindfulness Coach, and all the other apps we’ve talked about.

Pearl:

We'll make sure to share those links, on our blog and in the show notes. And just one last question, how can someone give feedback about VA mobile apps for mental health, if they encounter a, a bug or a glitch, or they wanna compliment your work or have a suggestion, how would they do that?

Jason:

Yeah, that's a really important question and a really important point and something I think we pride ourselves in, is that anybody who uses our apps or has a question about our apps can shoot us an email. So there, there's an email address, it's mobilementalhealth (all one word) at va.gov, and anybody can email us with questions, suggestions. We respond to everybody that sends something in.

Pearl:

Thank you. And thank you so much to you and your team for creating these fantastic products. I really like the idea of these as a bridge to care, as a way to learn about treatment, and resources and coping for PTSD and other related concerns that are common to Veterans and civilians alike. But I really appreciate the effort that your team puts into making sure that these are Veteran-centric products. And thanks for our listeners for tuning in today.

Jason:

Well thanks for inviting me and for giving me an opportunity to share this with your audience. We're excited about what we have to offer and excited to make it available and excited to hear back from Veterans.

Pearl:

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes. Find us on your preferred podcast platform by searching PTSD Bytes. That's PTSD B-Y-T-E-S. New episodes are released every other week.