

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

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| Episode #: | 2 |
| Guest: | Beth Jaworski, PhD |
| Title: | #2: Coping during COVID with the COVID Coach app |

Pearl:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD. In this series, we talk to leading experts about posttraumatic stress disorder, mental health, and self-care with a focus on free digital resources that can help.

We have a very exciting topic today – COVID Coach, a free mobile app that was designed to help Veterans, Service members, and all of us deal with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our guest is the lead creator of the app, Dr. Beth Jaworski, a social psychologist and former UX lead for the mobile apps team at the National Center for PTSD. Welcome back, Beth.

Beth:

Hi Pearl. It is great to be back. Thank you so much for the invitation to be here.

Pearl:

So let's get right into it. Tell us about COVID Coach. I mean, it's kind of a big deal. It's been downloaded 200,000 times, actually over 200,000 times since its release back in April, 2020. Tell us a little bit about it and why you think it's become so popular.

Beth:

I think that people really are struggling right now. This has just been such a tough past few years. As the name implies, COVID-19, it originated in- back in 2019, and we are still facing a lot of challenges. In some ways things have gotten better, but they have not gotten better equally for everyone. And so there is still a lot of mental health concerns, and I think we're probably going to end up seeing more as time goes on. I think COVID Coach is-, potentially one of the reasons it could be so popular is that it is free, it's widely available, you don't have to sign up and create a username and password. And you can, you know, find a lot of different things – some of them only take just a minute or two to try out, and so I think there certainly is an appeal to that sort of micro intervention.

Pearl:

So if someone who's listening right now is hearing this and is interested in downloading COVID Coach, how would they do that?

Beth:

That is a great question. So if you have an iPhone, if you have an Android-based phone, you would go to the App store or the Play store, and you could just type in, "COVID Coach." You could also go to the VA's website and search for COVID Coach, and you would be able to find the direct download links there as well. And you can then just install it.

Pearl:

Sounds pretty easy.

Beth:

I think so.

Pearl:

And I noticed that if someone downloads the app on an Android phone, they do get that privacy screen or that privacy, I don't know if you would call it a popup or what, and they have to accept that. And, um, to some people that might raise some question, like, what am I agreeing to here? Can you give us the skinny on why people should feel okay and safe about downloading and using VA apps such as COVID Coach? Or should they?

Beth:

Absolutely. That is a very fair, very fair question. And I'm glad you, glad you brought that up. And what that means is the app is asking for permission basically, to be able to talk to the other apps that are on your device. That information doesn't leave your phone or your tablet, but rather there are certain tools in COVID Coach that allow you to customize them. For example, you can use your own photos that you've taken or saved on your device to create personalized tools. Or if you, for example, want to create a support network for moments that you're struggling and want to be reminded to reach out to certain people, you can have those contacts already integrated into COVID Coach. So that's what that permission is actually granting.

Pearl:

That's actually really reassuring. Thank you for spelling that out so clearly for our listeners. So this is an app that anyone can use. And I'm just wondering what tips do you have for someone, whether they be a Veteran, Service member, family member, loved one, provider, somebody going into this app for the first time to check it out, where should they go? And what are some of the features that you'd like to highlight?

Beth:

There are a few different things that I think I are particularly helpful in COVID Coach. One of them is the "manage stress" section. So there are a number of tools - I want to say that there's somewhere in the neighborhood of 60 or more tools at this point - for people to be able to engage with. If you try one and it doesn't work for you, I recommend trying a different one. So I really like the audio-guided exercises. It's a way for me to sort of force myself to tune everything else out. I put in headphones and I follow along. I think the other thing that's really nice is the option to track symptoms. You can track anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, um, and overall well-being. And I think that's a nice way for people to just check in with themselves. Or if they're working with a provider, the provider might ask you to track your symptoms over time, just so you can get a sense of how things are going.

Beth:

And lastly, I would like to highlight the "find resources" section. So this is a really comprehensive set of resources that folks might find helpful. So for example, there are crisis resources. There are resources to help meet basic needs. So for example, if you are facing issues of food insecurity or having trouble paying rent. And there are also resources that are specific to Veterans and Service members, resources that they can reach out to directly or ways to find their community. I'd also like to mention that COVID Coach is available in Spanish. You can go to the menu of the app and you can switch the language from English to Spanish. So all of the tools and resources and assessments have all been translated.

Pearl:

That's wonderful. Now for Veterans and Service members who do have PTSD and are now struggling with pandemic stress on top of that, what advice would you have for them? Is this app something that could be helpful?

Beth:

Yes. I would want to encourage folks to reach out to providers. This app is not a replacement for professional care, but it can be something that can help supplement that care, or it could be a starting point. For example, if you feel like something isn't quite right, maybe you're feeling a lot more angry or you're feeling a lot more sad or isolated and lonely, definitely reach out to a healthcare professional. But this app can help in those moments when you need extra support. And even if you are connected with a provider, you probably are not going to be able to get a hold of them at two or three in the morning, if you need some support. And so you might be able to reach out to the crisis line and the app could help facilitate that. Or if you find that you would like to try mindfulness or a relaxation exercise, the app can help facilitate being able to do those kinds of things. And it's a supportive coping tool rather than a, a replacement for care. And it can be used alongside being in professional care.

Pearl:

That's a really great point about how this app can be helpful and also an app isn't going to stand in the place or be an equivalent to care with a trained licensed provider. And I noticed when I was going through the app, that you can actually find resources in the app to get connected with a provider, whether that's within VA or in your community. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us and our listeners about COVID Coach?

Beth:

One other feature that I didn't mention earlier that I wanted to highlight is the home screen has a quote on it. And that changes on a daily basis. One thing I like is that sometimes even if I don't wanna go in and do anything else on the app, I'll open it and I'll look at the quote for the day. Then I would just share my favorite one, because I think it really speaks to how I think this app can be helpful. It is a quote by the author Sandra Cisneros and it's: "The older I get, the more I'm conscious of ways very small things can make a change in the world. Tiny little things, but the world is made up of tiny matters, isn't it?" And I think that really speaks to the small things that you can do in this app on a daily basis for yourself, for your mental health and your well-being. And an app is not going to solve every problem, but I think that it can help with coping in really difficult moments.

Pearl:

Thank you and your team for making this app and for making it so thoughtfully. I really hope that our listeners can take away from this, that maybe they'll go download the app and find one small thing that they can do to improve their well-being during this really difficult and challenging time. Thank you for joining us today, Dr. Jaworski, to share COVID Coach.

Beth:

Thank you so much. It was a pleasure to be here.

Pearl:

And for those looking to download the app again, you can find it in the App store or Google Play. We hope that COVID Coach is able to help you make time to take those small actions towards caring for yourself and for others during the pandemic and beyond.

Pearl:

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes, the podcast that delivers bite-sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology. Look out for new episodes, which are released every other week. Thank you for joining us.