

Audio Transcript

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Guest:	Christine Gould, PhD
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Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veteran's Affairs National Center for PTSD.

In today's episode, we will be talking about older adults and mental health apps. I'm joined today by Dr. Christine Gould, who is a clinical psychologist and Associate Director for Education and Evaluation at the Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center at VA Palo Alto. She's also a clinical associate professor in the Stanford University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. Welcome Dr. Gould.

Christine Gould:

Thanks for having me.

Colleen:

So I'd like to begin by asking you, who are we talking about when we use the term 'older adults'?

Dr. Gould:

That's a great question. When we use the term older adults, we're generally talking about individuals aged 65 years and older. So really the term older adults spans a varied and diverse group of older adults spanning a 30 plus year age difference. It would be similar to drawing comparisons between a teenager and their parents. They may have different tastes, likes, different historical contexts in which they grow up and so on. So this is something to keep in mind.

Colleen:

Yeah, that's a great point. And what kinds of mental health concerns do older adults have? Are they the same concerns as younger adults?

Dr. Gould:

Well, let me first say that most older adults have good mental health and many continue working, volunteering, enjoying leisure, or they may serve as caregivers to spouses or other loved ones. Older adults generally have lower rates of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, substance use, and post-traumatic stress disorder. But it's important to note that even though older adults might not have all the symptoms of depression per se, they might still have depression and anxiety symptoms that bother them and get in the way of their enjoying life.

Colleen:

And so if they don't have all of the symptoms of depression and anxiety, what symptoms do they have?

Dr. Gould:

For example, with depression, older adults may not report as much sadness, but they're more likely to report problems that overlap with medical problems, such as problems with sleep, low appetite, or concerns such as hopelessness and issues with memory or concentration. For PTSD as another example, older adults may report more sleep problems, but they're less likely to say that they feel on guard or extra alert all the time. And these differences could be due to greater stigma around mental health among older adults. They could be due to biological changes in our bodies as we age. Or these could be due to generational differences. For example, men who grew up with traditional gender roles may feel less comfortable expressing emotions. And chronic medical conditions and changing in our bodies as we age might also affect what depression or anxiety can look like or what we worry about.

Colleen:

So rates of mental health disorders may be different and symptoms might look different. Are there any other differences?

Dr. Gould:

Well, one last, but very important thing to note is that the rates of death by suicide are highest among older white males. Some possible reasons for this include mental health concerns, but it also includes issues such as chronic pain or problems with sleep. So paying attention to mental health symptoms is not only an important way to improve the wellbeing among older adults, but also very important to help detect and prevent suicide.

Colleen:

That is such an important message. Now, when it comes to treatment, do we see any differences in older adults seeking care?

Dr. Gould:

Yes, we do see some differences. Older adults might be less likely to access mental health services. And what we see is that older adults are more likely to share mental health concerns with their primary care provider, which then might lead them to being prescribed medications instead of being referred to a therapist or other mental health professional. And then if older adults are referred for psychotherapy and are interested, they might then have mobility difficulties or have trouble accessing reliable transportation, which then in turn limits their ability to get to or from these clinic appointments. Other older adults also live in rural areas where there aren't as many mental health providers.

Colleen:

Yeah, so there's this big need, but older adults might not be interested or able to get treatment. So I'm wondering how can technology close the gaps here?

Dr. Gould:

What we've seen in rural areas and now more with the COVID pandemic is that older adults are willing and able to successfully use technology to receive mental health services. In the VA, older adults may go into smaller local clinics for a telehealth appointment with a provider who's at a different clinic that may be far away. Older adults also can see their doctor from the comfort of their own home via tablet, a

smartphone, a computer with a webcam. And older adults also are downloading apps to support their mental health.

Colleen:

I've heard some older adults say that they really struggle to learn how to use new technology, or they say it's all too complicated. What would you say to them?

Dr. Gould:

Well, that's a great question and a really good point. The way I'd begin is I'd first want to find out what matters most to the older adult who I'm working with, and then figure out if that's why they're interested in using the technology. For example, is it about connecting with family or friends? Or staying active through activities? Attending telehealth appointments with their healthcare providers, or maybe even learning relaxation or learning how to meditate?

And one of my favorite things in working with older adults is that they bring so much experience to most situations. So throughout their lifetime, they've generally learn new technologies. In most cases, they've been successful, such as they've probably adapted to using atm machines, they've adapted to using credit cards, flip phones, maybe learning to email. So what I'd do is I would build on that experience – beginning by working slowly, maybe with handouts or simple written instructions when possible, and help them learn the basics first. And the most important thing would be I'd try to stay as positive as possible and say that we can work through any barriers that we encounter, and we can learn this new technology just like they learned other things.

Colleen:

That's such a helpful frame that innovation is always happening, and they've had to learn how to navigate new technology in the past. And for all of us, at any age, there may be a bit of a learning curve when it comes to using apps and other tech-based resources for mental health. So what are some things that older adults can do to help familiarize themselves with the technology?

Dr. Gould:

Well, one thing they can do is find a friend or ask a family member for help. That is a great way to get started if someone is really uncomfortable and doesn't know where to begin. And then one thing I remind older adults is that technology nowadays compared with maybe 20 or 30 years ago is so much more forgiving. So you can open a smartphone app and explore it by reading some simple instructions that pop up, and then you can tap around using the back arrows and then the home button to navigate. So those are two core features that we really try to teach older adults early on.

Colleen:

Are there any ways that mental health apps can be made easier to use?

Dr. Gould:

In addition to teaching about the basic icons, we try to think about using some features that are built into smartphones, such as a feature to help increase the font size or display size on a phone or tablet can really help someone with visual impairment. And then other things that we can do are review other icons, maybe use handouts, tap around and try new things, practice opening and closing the app.

Colleen:

Yeah, that sounds like that would be really helpful. Does the VA offer any support for those who may need help with apps?

Dr. Gould:

Yes. The VA and your local community are both great resources for anyone who might need help. My team at the Palo Alto VA has created some simple guides to help people learn about the basics of mobile devices that is smartphones or tablets, including what the different symbols and icons mean. We also created some handouts on how to download apps and then some step-by-step guides for two common VA mental health apps, Mindfulness Coach and PTSD Coach. Another really helpful resource that I love is the wonderful Tech into Care team at the National Center for PTSD, they have some really great videos that demonstrate how to use the different mental health apps.

Colleen:

For the simple guides you mentioned, I do want to share with our listeners that those can be found at Gouldresearchlab.com. That's G O U L D, like your last name. Gouldresearchlab.com, and go to the resources section. Are there any other ways that older adults interested in tech could find help?

Dr. Gould:

Yeah. Senior centers and libraries may offer some tech support drop-in hours or even classes to help learn about technology. These can be a great place to start for someone who's new to using a smartphone or someone who wants to learn specific features such as using their calendar to document appointments or setting reminders. There's another group called Help at Hand, which has created videos that will help people learn about digital literacy. And digital literacy includes things such as how to stay safe online, cautions about using public Wi-Fi, and how to create and manage your passwords.

Colleen:

Yeah, we'll be sure to link to those websites in the show notes. And are there mental health apps that you might recommend for older adults?

Dr. Gould:

Definitely the two mental health apps that I mentioned before, and I very much like our Mindfulness Coach and PTSD Coach, both are free and available for anyone to download. What I really like about Mindfulness Coach is that it provides a simple introduction to mindfulness, what it is and some basic to more advanced exercises. There's also this really neat feature within the app called the mindfulness training feature, and it gives someone a step-by-step way to learn about mindfulness through readings, exercises, and some self-assessments. And this can be used to maybe introduce someone to the different features in the app that they might not have tried on their own. And then the other app that I really like is PTSD Coach, and I recommend it frequently. But I often remind people that it's not just for someone with PTSD, as we could all really use help coping with stress. I like that it gives you some suggested tools to try based on the symptom that's bothering you right now.

Colleen:

Well, I think that's actually all the time we have for today. You've shared so much great information about apps that older adults can try and resources to help them get started. Thank you so much, Christine.

Dr. Gould:

Thanks so much, Colleen.

Colleen:

Our listeners are encouraged to check out PTSD Coach and Mindfulness Coach. These apps can be downloaded for free from the App store or Google Play. You can also find all of the websites mentioned in this episode in the show notes.

Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.