

Audio Transcript

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Topic:	How to choose the right mental health app
Guest:	Dr. John Torous
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Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

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 experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health with a focus on free digital resources that can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Beckett Davenport.

In this episode, we will talk about how to choose the mental health app that is right for you. I'm joined today by Dr. John Torous, who is a psychiatrist, and the director of the Digital Psychiatry division of the Department of Psychiatry at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. He's also an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Welcome Dr. Torous.

Dr. John Torous:

Thank you for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So let me start with a broad question. When it comes to mental health, why might someone want to use an app? How can an app help?

Dr. John Torous:

I think apps are a very exciting thing for anyone to consider because there's so many different ways that you could potentially use them. You could use them to manage your mental health, such as tracking your mood, your medications, or your sleep. You could also use them to engage in self-help or therapy activities. Some apps let you communicate with your treatment team and work with them even outside the session. So between tracking your health, doing apps for interventions and connecting your team, there's a lot of things you could potentially do with these tools.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Now what do you say to people who might be skeptical that an app can help?

Dr. John Torous:

I think one should always be skeptical. So, I would say great. There's so many out there that you want to make sure it's the right one for you. I'd also say if you're never going to look or try them, you may not know what you're missing.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, that's a really good point – it's hard to know if you haven't tried. Now let's say someone is interested in finding a mental health app, what should they look for? I'm wondering how you can tell the difference between maybe a higher quality app versus the others?

Dr. John Torous:

There's a lot of apps out there. You want to be a picky consumer and you want to find apps that are safe, that protect your data. You want to find ones that are evidence-based, you want to find ones that are engaging and you want to find ones that can meaningfully impact your health. Ideally, they would be free as well.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

When you say engaging, what do you mean by that?

Dr. John Torous:

There's pretty good data that if an average person is given a mental health app, even though it's there on their phone, most people after about a week, will stop using the app. They're just hard to stick with and different people will find different things to be more engaging. You want to find an app that you feel that you could use for not only days or weeks, but perhaps even months or longer.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Are there any risks or concerns to be aware of when it comes to mental health apps?

Dr. John Torous:

I think we really have to be careful first and foremost about privacy of using these mental health apps, it implies that they're going to help your health. A lot of these apps in their terms and conditions in fine print most of us don't read, actually say they're a wellness device and you may say, well that's a very technical point – is it a wellness device or a mental health device? But the reason it makes a difference, if the app declares it's a wellness device, it doesn't have to follow privacy practices like HIPAA or the things that you expect when you go see your nurse practitioner, your psychologist, your therapist, your psychiatrist. Those privacy rules are really out the window. The app can often do what it wants to do with your very personal mental health data.

I think another category of risk is there's a lot of things that sound like they're a good idea to improve your health or mental health. But the question is, are they really evidence-based? Are they really doing what we want? Unfortunately, there isn't very much regulation right now, and that means that apps can often make a lot of bold claims and say that they offer therapy, they offer important information. Sometimes we don't know if that therapy is actually evidence-based or information is even correct. So we do have to be a little bit skeptical and careful as we're picking these apps.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Of course, if I search the internet or app stores for mental health, I will literally get thousands of results. So, if someone is looking for help, where do you recommend that they start?

Dr. John Torous:

Even though I work at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center's civilian population, I often send people to the VA app store because the VA has a suite of apps that are completely free, they're evidence-based, they're engaging, and they've been well-tested. And of course we know not everyone wants a VA app. There are so many apps out there. So, our team actually made a website and it's also a completely free website. It's called mindapps.org, M-I-N-D-A-P-P-S.org. And what we do on mindapps.org is we let you search for apps by things that matter. Things we've talked about like privacy, like cost, like evidence, like

engagement style. So let's say I want an app that's totally free, maybe it addresses PTSD, it's evidence-based, and it has a privacy policy that says my data will stay on my phone, it's not going to leave my phone and go to the internet. You can't really type that into Google or the Apple Store or Android store. But with mindapps, you can actually put those in as filters and what it will do is it'll come back and in this case, it'll actually show you the app, PTSD Coach. So, it doesn't actually tell you what the best app is, it just says, based on what you're searching for today, based on what your needs are, here's what could be of interest to you. So, we think it's a nice way to highlight high quality apps, like PTSD Coach, which of course is one of the highest quality apps in the world.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Wow, that sounds really helpful. Like it takes a lot of the guesswork out of searching for a good app.

Dr. John Torous:

Exactly. And we don't want to rely on lists that get out of date or search for just the most popular app that comes at the front of a search on the iTunes or Android store because you want to use something that's going to be helpful for your mental health, not something that is winning a popularity contest.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, I like the way you put that about not choosing an app based on what's most popular, but based on what works for you. You also said something earlier that I wanted to get back to about whether or not some of these apps are needing to meet certain standards in order to make some of their claims. Is there any approval process for mental health apps? I'm wondering if the mental health apps are approved by the Food and Drug Administration or the FDA.

Dr. John Torous:

So, there is an approval process that some mental health apps can go down, but due to the way that the rules are structured that the Food and Drug Administration has on apps, the vast majority do not need or require approval because they're generally considered by the Food and Drug Administration to be relatively low risk. So, I can say I've recommended many apps to my patients over years and I've never once actually recommended a single one that has been cleared or approved by the FDA because again, it's not really necessary and there are so many good ones that don't require data clearance that overall it's not an important factor to consider in picking an app today.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So it sounds like you wouldn't be concerned about using an app if it's not FDA approved?

Dr. John Torous:

Exactly. I think I would, in some ways I'd almost be more worried if it was FDA approved. Because I'd go, why did the company get this approval? And if they had to spend all that money to get that approval when they may have not needed it, are there going to be hidden costs in my personal data or direct money it's going to cost me to use this, when there could be completely free alternatives that are actually better or more evidence-based available today.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I see. Okay so, it sounds like there really isn't a lot of oversight when it comes to apps and with so many to choose from, it seems like the process of finding the right app could be pretty overwhelming. You spoke about mind apps.org, which is wonderful. Can you recommend any other resources or tools for finding high quality mental health apps?

Dr. John Torous:

The American Psychiatric Association, we've actually made an App Evaluation model. You don't have to be a psychiatrist or a psychiatric patient to use it, but if you Google APA App Evaluation Model, we have a lot of videos on how to look at apps. We have recommendations of what to look for, we have checklists to do. So, I think it's a useful resource. One that I think is sometimes underutilized, is it really makes sense to ask your clinician about what apps that they could be thinking would be useful for you. A lot of times, clinicians are hearing more about apps. So, I wouldn't be shy about asking your clinician for some advice on apps.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, that makes sense. And I think it's really nice that you highlighted the APA App Evaluation model because this is a resource not just for consumers of the apps, but also for mental health professionals. – that that model can be used for them to evaluate apps for their patients as well, which I think is really important to note. All right, so let's say I'm someone who downloaded a mental health app and I'm finding it helpful. Do I still need therapy or will the app help me enough?

Dr. John Torous:

I get this question a lot because I think if you put the effort in and you use the right tools, you can find a good app that's a match for you. But I think there's not a single mental health app in the world – it's a bold claim, but I'm going to stand by it – that says it is a replacement for care. Even the few that got FDA approved say it should be used in conjunction with a clinician. So I think even if you're finding an app helpful, think of it like a digital supplement. Or it's like perhaps, a vitamin that could be useful to use, but it's not going to replace going for your annual physical. It's not going to replace the need for meeting with a qualified mental health professional.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And do you have any apps that you like to recommend?

Dr. John Torous:

Again, even though I work in the civilian sector, I often send people to the VA app library because it meets so many of the criteria we set out in the American Psychiatric Association App Evaluation framework of being apps that are very privacy centric, very evidence-based, engaging and meaningful. If you play with mindapps.org, you'll often find when you make more demands on an app, we end up suggesting VA apps as the one that kind of met what you're looking for. But I would say I think sometimes people find non-classical mental health apps that are helpful for them. For some people, it may be an app that helps connect you to friends. And I think sometimes we overlook what are called a native apps on your phone. Most of us have a smartphone now and those phones come with a calendar. Sometimes using the calendar to schedule medication reminders....there's a lot of creative things you can do with the apps, that kind of come pre-installed on your phone. You can almost make your own digital mental health tool kits. So I think between the VA apps, whatever works for you and you can find in native apps, there's a lot to explore.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Alright, well that's all we have time for today. Thank you so much Dr. Torous for walking us through how to choose the right mental health app.

Dr. John Torous:

Thank you for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, you can find comprehensive reviews of many mental health apps on the marketplace on www.mindapps.org. You can also find the VA mental health apps that Dr. Torous recommended at ptsd.va.gov/mobile.

Dr. 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.