

PTSD Bytes – Transcript

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Guest:	Sarah Senti, PhD
Working title:	How Veterans Inform VA Mental Health Apps

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about posttraumatic 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 Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

On today's episode, we will be discussing the ways in which Veterans inform the development of mental health apps from the VA. I'm joined today by Dr. Sarah Senti, clinical psychologist and lead of user experience research at the National Center for PTSD's Public Digital Health Innovation Program. Welcome Dr. Senti.

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So, on our first episode, we interviewed your colleague, Dr. Jason Owen, who leads the Public Digital Health Innovation Program. And for those that didn't catch that episode, can you briefly review what the program does?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Sure. My coworkers and I work to create and also maintain a suite of mobile apps for improving mental health and wellbeing for Veterans coping with PTSD. VA has over 17 mobile mental health apps that are completely free and they provide information, resources and coping tools for specific problems that are related to PTSD. For example, Insomnia Coach offers tools and tracking for improving sleep.

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Or another example is Mindfulness Coach, and that's an app that introduces the user to mindfulness strategies for managing symptoms of anxiety. I work on the team of people who are charged with designing and creating and improving these apps so they can be as helpful as possible for Veterans.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Now, can anyone download these apps or are they just for Veterans?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Good question. Anyone can download these apps, not just Veterans. With that being said, all of these apps are designed for Veterans in mind. For example, all of the apps contain helpful VA resources for Veterans in addition to offering resources that can be used by anyone.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Okay. So, these apps were made with Veterans in mind. Does that mean that Veterans get a say in the design of the apps themselves?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Yes, absolutely, and that's the purpose of our user experience program. We have our user experience research program UX for short, to make sure that we're hearing from Veterans directly about what they're wanting and needing and our mobile apps, and this just helps us make sure that we're making them as helpful as possible for Veterans.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So why do you think it's important for Veterans to have a say?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

I think Veterans are the ultimate source of truth about whether or not our apps are helpful. We want to make sure that our apps are not just functional, but also enjoyable to use and we really want to make sure that they're successful in helping the Veteran get what they're hoping to get out of using the app. We have no way of knowing how to make our apps most helpful if we don't listen and prioritize their voices.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And how do you and your team incorporate Veterans' voices into VA's mental health apps?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Well, I will start by saying that we welcome any feedback on any part of our app at any time. We often get emails from users with suggestions, and we find that ongoing feedback really helpful because it helps us understand what users like, what they don't like, and it helps us know what improvements need to be prioritized across our suite of apps. An example of this is we recently added a journal feature to the PTSD Coach app, and this was based on user emails that said that they wanted this. We're even currently adding more content to PTSD Coach on PTSD and relationships again just because we received a lot of feedback from users that they wanted that content. But our team knows that this sort of ongoing open feedback that we get from users via email, it really isn't enough to get the apps right. This is where our user experience research program becomes really important.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah. So what exactly is user experience research? I'm curious about the goals and how the research is conducted.

Dr. Sarah Senti:

So, user experience research is really just a fancy way of saying that we find it helpful to watch Veterans use our apps so we can directly see what's working well or not working well. Our team essentially organizes opportunities for Veterans to offer their opinion on the design of the apps or new features that maybe we're working on to update an app that already exists. Sometimes we collect this feedback from Veterans by sending out surveys that ask them specific questions about something that we want their opinion on, but most often we gather this data by meeting with Veterans virtually. And during

these virtual meetings we will have more in-depth conversations with them and actually watch them interact with the design that's being worked on and ask their opinions on the design. This just gives us an opportunity to ask questions about what the user wants, what they need, what they're expecting out of the app. This just helps us ensure that we're making our apps as most helpful to them as possible.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Who do you interview as part of your work? Is it mostly people who are experienced app users?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Oftentimes we do interview Veterans who've reached out to us because they're already using our apps, but we do also have Veterans who are not familiar with our apps participate as well. You don't need to have used any of our apps to be able to participate.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Are interviews focused on a particular feature or is it fair game to offer any feedback during testing?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Well, again, I will say that we welcome any feedback on any part of any app at any time. You can just email us or each of our apps actually has a section that encourages users to send in their feedback. You can find that feedback section in most apps on the side lateral menu. It's like three bars in the upper left hand corner that looks like a hamburger. If you tap on that menu, you'll then see an option lower down in the list to submit feedback on the app. Again, we always welcome that kind of feedback, but outside of that ongoing open feedback, when we are conducting the organized interviews, we're almost always conducting those on a specific part of an app. During these interviews, we typically ask participants to interact with a specific design part, guide participants through the interview with questions that we want to make sure to get their opinion on. Examples of this might be like, what do you think of the screen? What do you think will happen if you tap this button? But then we also leave space in the interview for them to freely offer any other feedback they might have on the design that they're interacting with. And that is actually really helpful because sometimes people will mention something that wasn't even on our radar. An interesting example of this recently was we did a round of interviews with PTSD Coach and we had used a word to describe a screener for PTSD symptoms in the track progress section and we had used the word quiz to describe it and people had very strong reactions to that. Did not like that word point of saying that they would not even complete the screener if it was labeled as a quiz. And that was a really easy fix for us to make. We just used a better word to describe the screener. We never would've known it was a problem or why people weren't using it. We find these interviews very helpful for that kind of feedback.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, that sounds really invaluable. And I'm curious, what do you do with the information you learn with your research?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Yeah, we use the information we gain from our research to inform the design of our products. What we do is we typically collect data for a specific part of an app for two to three weeks with different participants. And after we've gathered users' feedback, we summarize the feedback and then we meet with our designers and tell them what changes need to be made to the design. Then the designers make

those changes and then we go back and do another round of feedback from Veterans to see if the design is right. We'll go back and forth several times until most participants seem really happy with it and don't have any suggestions for how to make it better.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Now, at what point in an app's lifecycle do you conduct user experience research? Is it only at the beginning?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Yeah, so we do conduct user experience at all stages of an app's lifecycle. We're definitely also interested in updating our existing apps with improvements, but with that being said, it is true that we tend to do a lot of our user experience research for new apps and new features because we want to make sure that the user's voice is being heard during the initial design process. We keep track of suggestions and feedback from Veterans throughout the lifecycle just so we know what changes or improvements need to be prioritized.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And of course we know people volunteer to participate in UX testing and give their feedback. In your opinion, what motivates people to participate in testing?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

I think there's several reasons why people enjoy doing it. For starters, it's kind of fun to do. I think there's something neat about getting to see a sneak peek of a new app or a feature that we're working on, and I think participants like knowing that their voices are being heard, I'll also just say that I've worked with Veterans for a long time and if there's anything that I've learned about them, I would just say that they love to help out other people, especially if it means that they're getting to help out other Veterans. It really is truly inspiring, and we don't want to take advantage or dishonor that goodwill. So I will also say that we compensate people who participate in our research with gift cards to say thank you just for the time and energy that they've spent participating.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

That's great to hear, and I could not agree more of what you said about Veterans and their motivations. If a Veteran is interested in offering their feedback on VA mental health apps, what should they do?

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Yeah, so the quickest way to get looped in is to email us at mobileux@va.gov. Just let us know that you're interested in joining our Veteran participant panel. What it means to join our Veteran participant panel is just that you're willing to share your name, your email address, and then answer some questions about your background. And this information just helps us know which of our apps an individual might be interested in giving their feedback on. Once your name is in our Veteran participant panel doesn't mean that you're required to participate, it just means that we will email you when we have new opportunities arise to see if you're interested in participating in a specific research opportunity that we have going on at that time.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Fantastic. Well, I think that's all the time we have for today. Thanks so much for joining us, Dr. Senti.

Dr. Sarah Senti:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport: And as a reminder to our listeners, anyone who is interested in participating in user testing for VA mental health apps should email mobileux@va.gov. That's M-O-B-I-L-E-U- X@va.gov.

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.