Let’s Get Technical
Three Mobile Apps for Clients
A Review of Headspace; Calm; and Stop, Breathe & Think

By Nicole Owings-Fonner, MA

The sheer number of mental health apps available to smartphone users makes finding the right one a daunting task for patients and psychologists. Most apps are reasonably priced, or free, and offer a wealth of resources to choose from. Unfortunately, many do not have peer-reviewed research to support their claims. Additionally, some offer questionable business models and potential privacy/security concerns.

We asked a panel of psychologists to review three mobile apps that practicing psychologists could potentially recommend as resources for their clients. Each app focuses on using meditation and/or mindfulness for varying purposes such as reducing stress and anxiety or improving mood, sleep, or attention.

For each app, we first provide guidance on several background factors that should be considered in selecting mobile apps. Next, our panel shares their own ratings and reviews of the apps based on several key factors such as purpose, appropriateness of content and ease of use.

Apps were reviewed March 2019. This article has been edited for length. Visit APAServices.org for more information on the privacy and security risks, evidence base, cost, business models and user feedback associated with each app.

Psychologist Review Panel

Kristi K. Phillips, PsyD, is a licensed psychologist and health service provider in Minnesota. She also serves on APA’s Committee on Rural Health. Phillips is dedicated to the removal of barriers to comprehensive health care within rural and remote areas; and has found that utilizing smartphone based mental health apps within her practice along with other tools can be helpful for her patients to self-manage mental health symptoms between sessions.

JoAnna Romero Cartaya, PhD, is a licensed psychologist and health service provider in Iowa and is the owner of the Cartaya Clinic in Humanistic and Behavioral Psychology, PLLC housed at Virtue Medicine, P.C. Cartaya is also an adjunct associate professor at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics in the department of psychiatry. Cartaya is an active member of the Iowa Psychological Association (IPA) and has a specific interest in the integration of technology in clinical practice and ethical considerations.

Charmain F. Jackman, PhD, is a licensed psychologist with a doctoral degree in counseling psychology from the University of Southern Mississippi. Jackman is the founder and CEO of Innovative Psychological Services (InnoPsych), a thriving solo practice in the metro-Boston area. She also offers business development coaching and marketing support to clinicians who are poised to launch or grow their private practices.

Kevin D. Arnold, PhD, ABPP, is a psychologist who is board certified in behavioral and cognitive psychology. He serves on the boards of several organizations and is an APA fellow. He is the founder and president/CEO of the Center for Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy in Columbus, Ohio, a large group practice that specializes in cognitive-behavioral therapy and co-locating in primary care offices. Arnold has served as the president of the Ohio Psychological Association and the Ohio Board of Psychology, as well as in other national organizations.
The Headspace mobile app is intended for anyone who wants to learn meditation as a means of reducing anxiety and stress, or to help improve attention and awareness.

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JOANNA ROMERO CARTAYA, PhD:
Headspace is a fairly streamlined, user-friendly and encouraging application which features training and psychoeducation to its users. It also features short informational videos, which can be shown in session to further discuss meditation and explore with clients how a meditation practice could be beneficial given their therapy goals. There are some challenges with usability and function though. For example, if a user initially chooses a morning time and would like to change to an evening reminder (while in the set-up phase) for meditation the application does not allow the user to go back—rather, the user has to go into settings and reset the reminder; and the user can only choose one focal area to begin rather than choosing two or more reasons for engaging with the application. With that said, Headspace is one of the apps that I feel good about recommending to clients who are interested in further integrating a meditation program within their lives but do not have time to attend a meditation group and also are seeking support.

KRISTI K. PHILLIPS, PsyD:
Headspace can be a fun and easy tool to support clients while they are adopting a regular meditation/mindfulness practice and can be discussed as part of the client’s therapy session as it pertains to identifying any barriers that might get in the way of daily meditation. The app offers an easy jumping off point for clients to be mindful at any point in their day, whether it be starting off on the right foot, managing stress or promoting calmness throughout their day, or helping them wind down at the end of their day.
The Calm mobile app promotes relaxation through meditations, sleep stories, nature images and sounds, and is designed to reduce anxiety, improve sleep and help users feel happier.

JOANNA ROMERO CARTAYA, PhD:
This is a visually beautiful application with lots of nice features; however, it can be challenging for someone who is new to meditation or mindfulness as it provides limited psychoeducation and information regarding developing and integrating meditation practice. The app boasts lots of different options with experts and some star-powered performers to deliver its content—but it is unclear whether content is effective given the lack of research—especially regarding sleep stories and how this option may assist users in having better rest. While I enjoy this application, it is one that I would recommend only to clients or other psychologists who have experience with meditation, like a lot of customization and options, and would like to have either additional options to expand their already developed meditation practice skills, especially to invest in access to all the content. I also would only recommend to those clients who are high functioning, looking to expand their practice or gain additional tracking and accountability, and also have resources to invest in the application.

KRISTI K. PHILLIPS, PsyD:
Calm’s guided meditations, Breathe Bubble exercise, music, mindful body exercises, bedtime stories, master classes, are all helpful tools to encourage and reinforce positive thinking practices. I like the breadth of content, which includes content for children/adolescents and adults and is available in English, Spanish and German. I found the content of the Calm app is likely to help patients manage stress and anxiety better and the added ritual of adding a sleep-time story can help to create a peaceful environment for a good night’s sleep.

The Stop, Breathe & Think (SBT) mobile app is intended to help users cope with stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia through mindfulness and meditation.

CHARMAIN F. JACKMAN, PhD
The SBT app is an excellent way to help clients build a mindfulness practice. Once your clients understand the concepts of mindfulness, using SBT is a great way to help them build a sustainable practice outside your sessions. The data collection component allows both you and the client to track their mindfulness activities between sessions, which can be helpful as you design interventions for the client. SBT offers many options of sessions and activities; it would be a long time before clients will fatigue with the content.

KEVIN D. ARNOLD, PhD, ABPP
If you’re a therapist who uses ACT or other interventions that rely on relaxation and mindfulness this app could be useful in both facilitating homework and tracking progress of those interventions. Since anxiety treatment is based on exposure protocols, it would likely not be useful for those patients, nor would it seem well suited for depressed patients. However, to create a useful stress management program, this app likely would work quite well. Like so many apps in this genre, the ultimate question is how long your patient might use it after the first few sessions. Research on user data indicated that in a 13-month period from 2016 to 2017, 10,000 users completed 10 or more sessions, which is impressive.

Let’s Get Technical is a new column where psychologists rate and review the various software and mobile applications available to practitioners for their professional use. The column is published quarterly in the PracticeUpdate e-newsletter and on APAServices.org. The views expressed in this column are the views of the authors and do not reflect the views of the American Psychological Association or any of its divisions or subunits. All authors have no financial interests in the apps or software discussed. APA does not recommend or endorse any practitioners, products, procedures, opinions or other information that may be mentioned in this column; those who use these applications or products do so at their own risk. Please direct updates and feedback about apps to Communications Office Staff.