Digital technology can help more people access mental health support

Executive statement
Mental health problems and lack of access to treatment are a growing global concern. Big White Wall, a digital mental and behavioral health service, recommends integrating digital technology to meet the growing demand for mental health support.

Key messages
- Digital technology presents a powerful opportunity to provide mental health care to large populations, flexibly and around the clock
- Digital technology can benefit individuals feeling low or stressed, struggling to cope with chronic illnesses or life stressors, or experiencing common mental health issues
- Digital solutions are more effective when they are embedded in existing healthcare pathways
- Healthcare needs to see digital technology as integral, and not just a bolt-on, in order to lower costs and improve patient choice

Recommendations
1. Join up healthcare commissioning across large areas to lower costs
2. Integrate digital technology into the whole health and care system
3. Use technology to drive patient choice

Context
Depression affects an estimated 350m people worldwide and mental health problems, as a whole, account for 10% of the global burden of disease. As well as causing considerable distress to individuals and their families, poor mental health is linked to worse physical health, and it is estimated that lost economic output from poor mental health will total USD $16 trillion in the next twenty years. Access to effective and evidence-based mental health treatments and support is inconsistent and often poor, especially in low- or middle-income countries.

As traditional approaches, based around face-to-face treatments, will struggle to meet this overwhelming need, new technologies are required to expand access and improve health outcomes at lower costs. Across the globe, the adoption of technology such as smartphones is growing faster than the development of healthcare. For example, Sierra Leone has one psychiatrist for a population of four million. However, the number of Internet users in Sierra Leone has doubled since 2010, to 76 in every 100 people, according to the World Bank. Here and worldwide, digital technology presents the opportunity to personalize mental health care and make it accessible from anywhere, at any time. Whilst not replacing face to face services, digital technology can help reach more people and augment existing service options.

Big White Wall recommends integrating digital solutions at scale in order to meet the demand for mental health support and integrating technology with other care options to maximize outcomes.
About the Innovation

Welcome to Big White Wall. Having a tough time? Feeling low or stressed? Start feeling better now.

Big White Wall (BWW) is a digital support network for mental and behavioral health and wellbeing. It offers an anonymous peer community, moderated and facilitated 24/7 by experienced healthcare professionals trained in online interventions. Members can share experiences anonymously in words and images, browse a library of self-care resources and follow modular programs to address issues such as depression, anxiety, smoking cessation, alcohol and weight management. One-to-one therapy delivered via webcam, audio or text is also available in some areas.

BWW was founded by social entrepreneur Jen Hyatt in 2007. It operates in the U.K., U.S. and New Zealand.

“I would have kept it all bottled up, but being able to speak anonymously and ask for other people’s opinions was really useful.”

- Big White Wall member

Case study: Implementation of Big White Wall in the U.K.

Big White Wall worked to embed the service at a primary care level, familiarising clinicians with the digital solution and working to integrate it to complement existing services. BWW works with General Practitioners and talking therapies services to refer patients, as well as facilitating self-referral. Big White Wall places its members at the heart of the service and works to promote the service directly to patients, via social media and traditional marketing.

In the UK, Big White Wall also developed a pool of counsellors and therapists, who are experienced in online interventions. They receive regular supervision sessions and operate within a clinical team.

Big White Wall is registered with the UK Care Quality Commission. It was designated a National Health Service (NHS) High Impact innovation and was named best e-health solution in the European Union in 2014. Most recently, it was included in the NHS library of endorsed digital mental health solutions.
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- Auckland District Health Board

For more information please see:

Editorial by BWW team: C Harding et al, ‘Digital Mental Health Services in General Practice’, *British Journal of General Practice*, 2015

Article by BWW team describing the service and its members: S Dosani et al, ‘Online Groups and Patient Forums’, *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 2014

Impact

- 70% of members report that using the service improved wellbeing in at least one way, with reduced isolation the most common reported benefit. Two thirds of logins are outside office hours, when other services are less accessible.
- Just under half of members share an issue troubling them for the first time on BWW, demonstrating that digital services can help overcome the barrier of stigma attached to poor mental health.
- Using U.K. National Health Service costs of treatment, initial figures suggest that in the UK, BWW can create up to £38,000 (US $54,800) in direct healthcare savings per 100 members with six month memberships. This does not include any savings for physical health care, to social care, or to the wider economy.  

Recommendations

From its experience of implementing a digital mental health solution, Big White Wall recommends the following to improve access to care:

1. **Join up healthcare commissioning across large areas to lower costs**

   Fragmented healthcare commissioning prevents innovations from being implemented at scale, and reduces the efficiency of resources used for implementation. It is cheaper to introduce digital innovations at scale and easier to measure impact.

2. **Integrate digital technology into the whole health and care system**

   A range of apps and digital services enable people to manage their finances, travel and shopping at the touch of a button, yet healthcare lags behind in adopting digital technology. The potential to improve efficiency and care at lower cost is too great for digital technology to be used only as a secondary resource in the health sector.

3. **Use technology to drive patient choice**

   Optimizing digital and mobile technology puts patients at the centre of their care, by allowing people to access care from a location and at a time that suits them. Digital services like BWW can offer a range of therapeutic pathways, including peer support, within a single platform.
References


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