

Hack Your Happiness

In a season (and year) when joy may seem elusive, new apps and tech can help lift the load and build your resilience.



COLLAGE BY FELIPE POSADA @THE INVISIBLE REALM

Developing emotional resilience can be an essential tool in coping with or preventing depression—and, with current challenges, this is a critical year to do so. A recent survey published in JAMA Network Open showed a threefold increase in symptoms of depression since the onset of COVID-19. Those already experiencing stressors, such as fewer economic and social resources, are at particular risk, the study says, but many of us face mounting challenges, such as health issues, layoffs, home schooling, and the return of the winter blues, that can tip the scales as well. “There is the literal trauma of loss and grief, as well as fear and anxiety around catching COVID,” says Danielle Ramo, PhD, an adjunct associate professor in the department of psychiatry at University of California, San Francisco. “The good news is there are a lot of technology and social-media-facilitated inventions that support our mental health.” Here, the latest ways people are finding help using new digital tools.

GET GRANULAR WITH YOUR FEELINGS.

Youper is an AI therapy app that helps you precisely identify emotions and triggers (plans start at \$45 per year). This taps into “emotional granularity” (aka articulating feelings with specificity) and has been shown to improve coping abilities. Youper also includes mindfulness exercises and an interactive chatbot.

CORRAL YOUR ANXIETY.

If your mind wanders while you meditate (whose doesn’t?), the Muse 2 (\$250) headband—which measures brain waves—can detect when thoughts wander into anxious territory. When tipped off, Muse plays sounds to guide you back into a relaxed state. Meditation has been shown in brain scans to have positive effects on areas of the brain associated with depression.

THINK BEYOND YOURSELF.

Double up on activities that release mood-boosting dopamine and serotonin with the free Charity Miles app, which allows you to donate by being physically active. “Whether you’re making masks for frontline workers or [decorating] a letter for someone living alone,” helping others gives a sense of purpose, Ramo says.

ENGAGE IN TALK THERAPY.

Never felt you had time for therapy? With the growth in teletherapy—which studies show can be as beneficial as meeting face-to-face—there are fewer boundaries to tap into your inner world. Talkspace and Teladoc are two apps that can connect you to a live counselor. Rates vary, but the pandemic has caused many insurance companies to offer better telemedicine coverage.

FIND EMERGENCY HELP.

If you need to talk immediately, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-TALK) or text the Crisis Text Line (text HOME to 741741).—SUSHMA SUBRAMANIAN

You’ll Be Hearing More About... Ketamine-Assisted Psychotherapy

Select physicians have begun recommending ketamine (a popular club drug first used as an anesthetic in the ’70s) as an off-label therapy for patients with severe, treatment-resistant depression. Now new clinics like Field Trip Health, with locations in Los Angeles, New York, and Toronto, aim to make ketamine treatments (combined with talk therapy) more accessible. While the substance received scrutiny for its use by law enforcement, some research on people with major depressive mood disorders shows that controlled use can be fast-acting and effective, and may increase the brain’s receptivity to talk therapy (large-scale human trials have not yet been published). “For certain patients with depression, esketamine [a derivative of ketamine] is truly lifesaving,” says Gerard Sanacora, PhD, MD, director of Yale Depression Research Program. But he warns that there are risks involved. “It’s not a medication for everybody, so it has to be used with caution.”