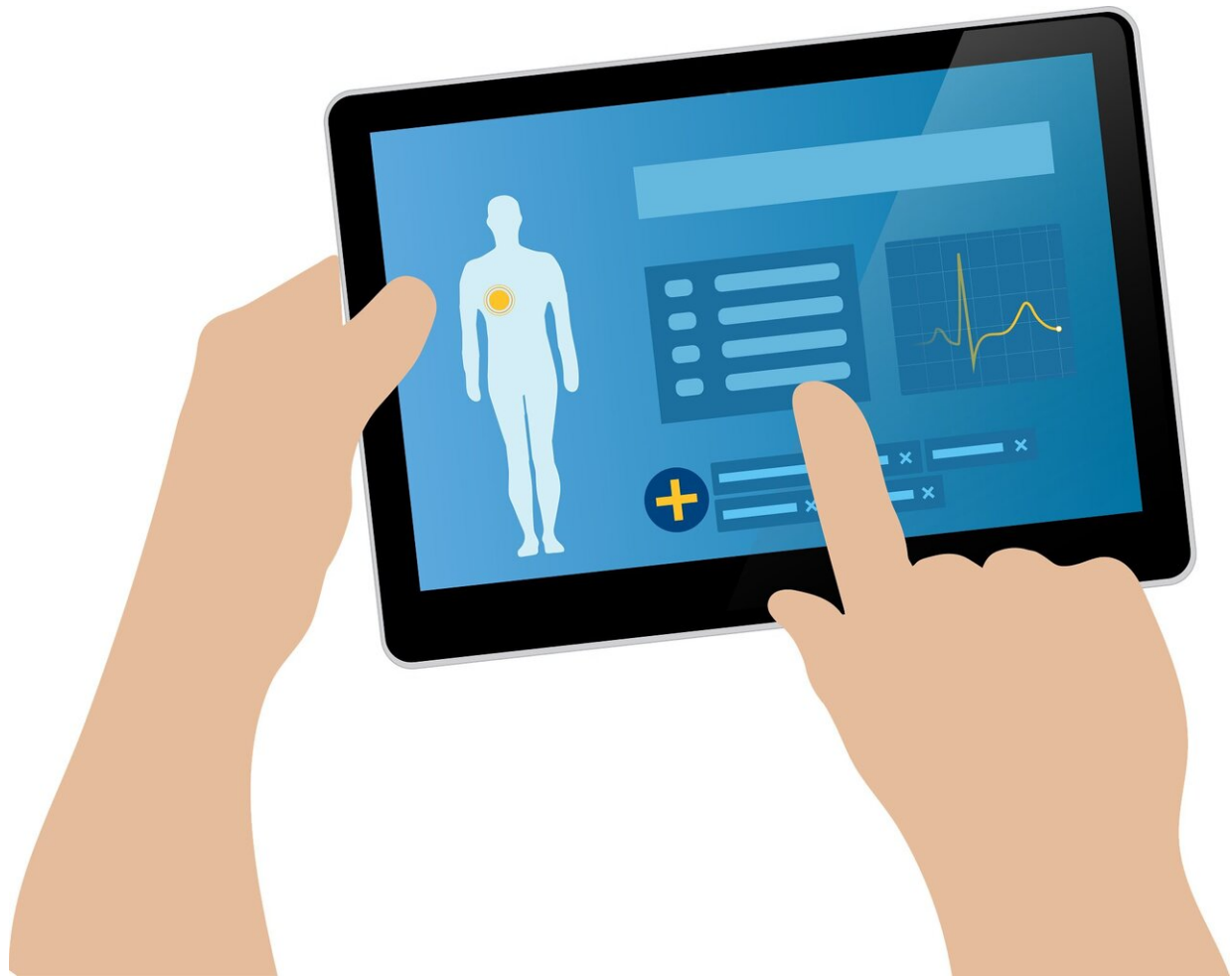


One size may not fit all: Psychiatrists develop mental health app assessment tool

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About one in five U.S. adults, an estimated 47 million people, lives with a mental illness. Fewer than half of them receive treatment, counseling or medication. In recent years, smartphone apps have emerged as potentially cost-effective means of expanding access to mental healthcare. But with some 10,000 mental health apps—which are not subject to FDA oversight—available in mobile app stores today, the task of determining which apps are safe and effective can seem overwhelming to patients and providers alike.

Now, researcher-clinicians from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC) and Lahey Hospital and Medical Center, both part of Beth Israel Lahey Health, have collaborated to develop an online assessment tool, currently available in its beta version, to help patients and providers make more informed decisions about choosing and using a mental health app. The 105-question interactive tool does not endorse or recommend specific apps, but rather helps potential users weigh apps' safety, ease of use, and commitment to user privacy, the scientists reported in *npj Digital Medicine*.

"The absence of regulatory oversight leaves the app stores' user reviews and rankings as the major sources of information for consumers interested in mental health apps," said corresponding author John Torous, MD, Director of Digital Psychiatry at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. "To fill that void, we developed a database of mental health apps that is grounded in principles of medical ethics. Rather than focusing on what is the 'best' app we aim to help people find one that is the 'best match' through guiding them through informed [decision making](#)."

The largest database of its kind, the assessment tool currently features more than 200 apps and allows users to easily filter and find apps by the criteria that matter most to them. The six-step, 105-question [interactive tool](#)—developed in collaboration with the American Psychiatry

Association (APA)—incorporates concepts from nearly 1,000 questions from 45 existing but non-standardized app evaluation frameworks. By boiling these concepts down to just 105 questions with yes/no or numeric answers, the assessment provides objective guidance that allow users to sort and filter mental health apps according to individual preferences and priorities.

"We remain focused on growing the database to encompass more apps and more diseases and to enhance the user experience for patients and providers," said Patrick Aquino, MD, Chair, Division of Psychiatry & Behavioral Medicine, Lahey Hospital & Medical Center. "This collaborative effort shows what is possible through our new health system."

More information: Sarah Lagan et al, Actionable health app evaluation: translating expert frameworks into objective metrics, *npj Digital Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41746-020-00312-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41746-020-00312-4)

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