

Click M' for Mental Health

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Mental health and wellbeing has become a major cause for concern, especially due to the pandemic-induced psychological traumas, stemming from spending long hours in the confines of one's home, minimal to zero social interaction, inability to meet and greet friends and family, as before and financial insecurity. Little wonder that the mental health space turned out to be 'the hot' sector in 2021, with funding more than doubling globally, climbing from \$2.3 billion to \$5.5 billion. As app-based mental health solutions are becoming a rage in APAC, we take a quick look at a few promising players.



Mental health problems are rising worldwide and Asia Pacific is no different, with anywhere between 4 per cent and 20 per cent of the population experiencing a diagnosable mental health problem, according to a Lancet report.

Even then, mental health remained an issue largely unaddressed, almost neglected, until now. In recent times, there has been a flurry of activities and funding in the sector which aim to bridge this gap. COVID-19, focus on preventive health, limited number of psychiatrists and the narrow access to clinical treatment in the region have all fuelled the adoption of apps for such disorders.

Based on the Asia-Pacific Front Line of Healthcare Report 2019, 34 per cent of physicians believe mental health service can be delivered digitally and 20 per cent are confident it can be powered by machine learning in the next 5 years.

Market is also set to reflect that. According to a report by Market Data Forecast, the size of the mental health software market was valued at \$0.31 billion in 2021 and is estimated to be growing at a CAGR of 14.86 per cent reaching \$0.62 billion by 2026.

'I believe the mental health tech scene is rapidly picking up in APAC and we're on the cusp of seeing a major boom in the region this year. This follows a similar trajectory with most industries where the US tends to lead the trend, and similarly with mental health tech. Today we see this ourselves through the significant growth we've experienced, adoption from customers and users, and capacity of funding rounds,' said Theodorick Chew, CEO, Co-Founder, Intellect, Singapore.

Singapore-based Intellect wants to make mental healthcare and wellbeing support accessible for everyone. In August 2021, the firm raised \$2.2 million in pre-Series A funding. Intellect offered two main product suites: a consumer app with self-guided

programs based on cognitive behavioural therapy techniques, and a mental health benefits solution for employers with online therapy programs and tele-health services.

'The APAC region has seen a huge demand for mental well-being solutions over the last couple of years driven by the impact of COVID-19. A big part of this demand has come from employers looking to incorporate mental well-being solutions in the workplace and employee benefits programmes. Studies show that one in four employees in both Hong Kong and Singapore have experienced mental health issues and burnouts in the past year,' said Paul Feldhausen, Vice President, Growth Operations, Holmusk. Paul is based in New York, USA.

Founded in 2015, Holmusk is headquartered in Singapore and New York. Holmusk is building the world's largest Real-World Evidence (RWE) platform for mental health to deliver clinical and regulatory grade evidence to all major stakeholders of the healthcare ecosystem.

'Driven by this demand and need for a workplace mental well-being solution we have seen a swift adoption of our mHaven solution across corporates in the region. mHaven is currently available in HongKong and Singapore, and is expected to expand to three more countries in the region by the end of 2022,' said Paul.

In line with the increase in demand the region has certainly seen an increase in funding for digital mental health solutions, with local companies such as MindFi, Intellect and ThoughtFull also raising a round of funding in 2021.

In addition to spurring a groundswell of startups, COVID-19 has also brought to the attention of government authorities, issues of mental health and wellbeing. Leading among them is Singapore, which has taken various initiatives in this space. In August 2021, Singapore's Ministry of Health announced that it's building an online portal that will serve as a trove of resources for mental health. It will be introduced on HealthHub, the ministry's web and mobile app-based platform that hosts a range of health content, rewards and e-services.

The New Zealand Health Ministry has set up a one-off defined mental health innovation fund to further expand the support available to those who need it. The government is investing \$1.2 million in the mental wellbeing innovation fund pilot project.

Are apps the solution?

Unfortunately, although mental health issues have exponentially grown over the decades, services to address these needs have not been able to keep up with the demand.

That could be why such apps are being touted as the newest solutions to increase access to mental health services. And these apps have seen a huge surge in popularity, according to the mental health charity Mind. Inevitably the increasing use of smartphones has led people to look for support in new ways, with many now turning to apps.

But can an app actually solve such a complex issue?

'Yes we definitely believe so. However it is critical that digital mental health interventions developed are evidenced-based and designed with clinical experts to ensure its efficacy and safety. The great advantage for virtual mental healthcare is its ability to massively scale to millions more lives, and with that, it is key that innovation is done to further the immersiveness and effectiveness of virtual care,' said Theodoric.

A 2018 study showed that mental health apps may help improve both the monitoring and management of mental health conditions. According to the study, suggested apps work because they're easy to use, increase engagement in treatment plans, and make monitoring symptoms easier.

'It may be difficult to quantify or qualify what it means to 'solve' mental health problems due to its complex nature. However, digital apps could certainly be helpful in facilitating the identification, management and treatment of these problems. Traditionally, there are several key issues around mental health and seeking support for such difficulties. For instance, there is limited understanding of mental health in the general public, which leads to difficulties in differentiating between a stressful season in life versus a persistent issue that should be addressed with professional help. This contributes to the entrenched stigma around mental health difficulties and seeking help for it. Should an individual manage to overcome these barriers, they may also face other obstacles to receiving support such as the high cost of treatment or therapy, long waiting times, and limited knowledge of mental health professions and how they differ (e.g., when to see a psychiatrist versus a psychologist),' said Paul.

Apps and digital solutions have great potential to bolster mental health by utilising a more preventative approach. In promoting self-care techniques, they could encourage regular check-ins with one's own well-being, as well as improve general knowledge about mental health through content provided.

'Apps could also increase accessibility to resources that could provide an assessment of mental health issues and needs, much like a casual visit to a GP (General Physician) when one has concerns about their physical health. It is important to note, however, that not all digital mental health solutions (i.e., mHealth apps) are evidence-based, and many are still in the process of developing the best and most effective solution for mental health. This could discourage users from seeking further help if they were solely reliant on the app to improve their well-being but found it to be ineffective,' said Paul.

Mental health apps have potential in improving the monitoring and management of mental health symptoms or disorders especially in APAC where such disorders are not easy to talk about. Experts suggest that the future of mental health will comprise a 'blended' combination of digital health and traditional care.

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