

Psychologist Interview: Dr Michael Carr-Gregg on Great Tools to Use with Young People



What are the best online tools to help young people improve their mental health? Renowned psychologist and Young and Well CRC Director Dr Michael Carr-Gregg explores apps and websites that can complement treatment.

Why use technology with young people?

Young people love technology. I can't be there when they are having an episode, but technology can. It's low cost, which is important as young people tend to be price sensitive. Technologies enable me to communicate with young people and for them to communicate with me. Plus technology is a part of their world and what they are doing day to day. It's the way it is and it's how they communicate, and anyone working in adolescent health really needs to be thinking about working this way.

What phone apps and online programs do you use with young people?

Mood Assessment Program: I ask all my patients to complete this web-based program online prior to the first consultation. It's a computerised assessment and diagnostic tool for mood disorders that gives me a thorough breakdown and a quite accurate diagnosis. It helps identify depressive sub-types, improves detection of bipolar disorder, identifies vulnerable personality styles, lifestyle and environmental factors contributing to the depressive illness, and provides a rational basis for development of a formulation and treatment plan.

MoodGYM: I use this every single time for cases of depression and anxiety. Together, the client and I use it on synchronised tablets. It's ideal for cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT).

MoodKit: This smartphone app is the logical CBT follow-up homework for a young client – it's a toolkit for what they can do to improve their mood, recording events and feelings, and rating their mood along the way. They can email me how they are feeling each day or week.

iCope: This was developed by mental health nurses. It offers alternatives to deliberate self-harm by providing practical and easy steps to distract, displace and seek-help, all at the touch of a button and accessible at all times.

[Smiling Mind](#): Young people adore this. Smiling Mind is a meditation app customised by age for anxiety and depression. We also use a skin conductance ([galvanic skin response](#)) machine to give visual biofeedback as they listen. Gizmos can help with engagement!

[Talking Anxiety](#): This phone app can help young people and families understand anxiety.

[Body Beautiful](#): A unique iPhone app that promotes positive body image and self-esteem among women and girls.

[DeepSleep](#): This app incorporates guided meditation to help overcome insomnia and get to sleep. It can be customised for short or long inductions, and has an alarm for waking up.

[SuperBetter](#): A remarkable online game that supports young people to achieve health-related goals by increasing resilience.

[Live Happy](#): A positive psychology app I use in the final stages of therapy.

[Pillboxie](#): This pill reminder app provides useful reminders to take medication.

[iCounselor](#): Incorporates strategies for managing a range of conditions, including anger, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and depression.

[Mnf](#): Always making excuses for not meditating? This is simply the best way to learn and enjoy mindfulness meditation.

What advice do you have for professionals for using apps and other programs?

You need to have a good relationship with your client first and a good grasp of the program you are recommending. You can't be stuffing around working out how to use it, or they'll look at you as though you are an idiot. Never forget one size does not fit all – not everyone is interested in technology. And always, go through the program with them and demonstrate how it works. Some clients will hate one app while others will love it.

A difficulty with almost all of these apps is that they have not been subjected to proper evaluation, so they can only be used as adjuncts or in support of evidence-based treatments. It is my hope that eventually they will be evaluated rigorously and we'll have a better understanding of what works and why.

Where can professionals find out more?

On 12 November, I will be presenting a webinar on 'Smart phone and web-based technology and their use in adolescent psychology' alongside Associate Prof Jane Burns, CEO of the Young and Well CRC, hosted by the Australian Psychological Society.

Any final thoughts?

I'm particularly excited that the development and evaluation of online tools and interventions such as those I've listed are a significant part of the Young and Well CRC's research mandate. Specifically, the Young and Well CRC is currently conducting a literature review to evaluate existing mental health apps. The Young and Well CRC is the single most exciting venture that I've ever been involved in. Using technology is very important to meeting the demand for mental health services and effectively reaching rural, remote and disadvantaged populations. I believe the Young and Well CRC will become the worldwide hub for research in this area and will develop the most advanced, cutting-edge programs and apps the world has seen.

Dr Michael Carr-Gregg is one of Australia's highest profile psychologists. He works in private practice as a nationally registered child and adolescent psychologist and is passionate about delivering national and international evidence-based psychology workshops and seminars that make a difference to the health and wellbeing of young people. The young person pictured above is a member of the Young and Well CRC's inaugural Youth Brains Trust and is not a client of Dr Michael Carr-Gregg.