



# **GUIDELINES ON DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH APPLICATIONS**

From the Proceedings of  
**National Consultative Meeting on Digital Technologies for Mental Health**  
*Evolving Policy and Regulatory Recommendations for Safe Use*

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Organised by  
**NIMHANS-ICMR Centre for Advanced Research in Digital Interventions for Mental Health Care**  
at National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru



## BACKGROUND

Digital technologies are increasingly recognized for their potential to address unmet mental health needs in India. However, the rapid growth of digital mental health applications has also raised critical concerns related to content-quality, privacy, and user safety. Addressing these challenges through responsible development and safe, ethical deployment is essential to maximize benefits for users while minimizing potential risks.

In this context, stakeholder-specific guidelines for mental health application developers, mental health professionals, and end users have been developed. These guidelines are informed through an iterative process involving a comprehensive review of digital mental health applications available to Indian users, existing research and global frameworks, stakeholder consultations, and deliberations during the National Consultative Meeting on Digital Technologies for Mental Health: Evolving Policy and Regulatory Recommendations for Safe Use (15–17 April 2026), organized by the NIMHANS–ICMR Center for Advanced Research in Digital Interventions for Mental Health Care, NIMHANS, Bengaluru.

The consultative meeting brought together 126 participants representing a diverse range of stakeholders, including experts in technology, mental health, and public health; developers, scientists, and educationists; representatives from non-governmental organisations and young scholars; as well as officials from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India, WHO India, UNICEF India, and ICMR.

# **GUIDELINES ON DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH APPLICATIONS**

## **3. Guidelines for End Users**

### 3.1 Assessing App Claims and Credibility

#### **3.1.1 Check the credibility of the app by looking for involvement of qualified mental health professionals and the organizations involved in its development.**

Users should make an effort to verify who has developed or contributed to the app development. This includes checking whether qualified mental health professionals (such as psychiatrists, psychologists, or other trained practitioners) and credible institutions (e.g., hospitals, academic institutions, or recognized organizations) have been involved. This information is often available in the app description, “About” section, or official website. Apps developed without professional input may lack clinical accuracy or safety considerations, making it important to assess credibility before use.

#### **3.1.2 Be cautious of apps that make unrealistic promises or claim to “cure” mental health conditions. Watch for exaggerated or guaranteed outcomes (e.g., “cure depression,” “heal trauma,” “overcome ADHD in 4 weeks,” or “fix anxiety”).**

Mental health conditions are complex and typically require comprehensive, evaluation and individualized care plans. Recovery is often gradual and varies across individuals. Users should be wary of apps that promise quick fixes, guaranteed results, or complete cures, as such claims are often misleading and not grounded in evidence. Such statements may create unrealistic expectations or lead to disappointment if results are not achieved. Responsible tools usually present themselves as supportive aids rather than definitive solutions.

#### **3.1.3 Understand the difference between the roles of mental health professionals and AI chatbots. Recognize that GenAI tools cannot diagnose or treat psychological conditions.**

Users should recognize that mental health professionals are trained and licensed to assess, diagnose, and treat psychological conditions through evidence-backed treatment approaches and personalized care, whereas AI chatbots are automated systems that generate responses based on patterns in data. While chatbots may offer general guidance or support, they are often likely to fall short in terms of clinical judgment, accountability, or the ability to understand complex individual contexts in the way a trained human professional can. Generative AI tools may simulate conversations or provide suggestions, but they do not have the ability to conduct clinical assessments, make diagnoses, or deliver therapy. Users should avoid relying on such tools for medical or psychological decisions and should seek consultations from qualified professionals for accurate evaluation and care.

#### **3.1.4 Be wary of apps or platforms presenting themselves as therapy services without verifiable professional credentials.**

Some apps may market themselves as offering therapy or counseling services without clearly providing information about the qualifications or credentials of the individuals involved. Users should look for clear details about who is providing the service, their training, licensing, and professional background. Lack of transparency in this area may indicate that the service is not appropriately regulated.

### **3.1.5 Be cautious of misleading diagnostic claims such as “instant diagnosis” or “AI therapist-approved diagnosis.”**

Diagnosis of mental health conditions requires a comprehensive assessment by a qualified professional, typically involving detailed history-taking and clinical evaluation. Apps that claim to provide instant or automated diagnoses may oversimplify complex conditions and lead to misunderstanding or inappropriate self-labeling. Users should treat such claims with caution and seek professional evaluation when needed.

## **3.2 Privacy and Data Protection Awareness**

### **3.2.1 Read privacy policies carefully and ensure you understand how your data are collected, used, and stored.**

Users should take time to review the app's privacy policy before using it, paying attention to what types of data are being collected (e.g., personal details, mental health information, usage patterns), how this data will be used, and where and how it will be stored. While privacy policies can often be lengthy or complex, users should focus on key aspects such as data sharing, storage duration, and user rights. Understanding these elements helps users make informed decisions about whether they are comfortable sharing sensitive information through the app.

### **3.2.2 Look for and appropriately utilize available options to limit data sharing and stay aware of how to request deletion of your data.**

Many apps provide settings that allow users to control how their data is shared or used. Users should actively explore these options to restrict unnecessary data sharing, especially with third parties such as advertisers. Additionally, users should be aware of their right to request deletion of their data and should use available features to delete their accounts or specific data when they no longer wish to use the app. Taking these steps helps users maintain greater control over their personal information.

### **3.2.3 Be aware of the difference between essential and non-essential cookies, and check whether you can control or opt out of non-essential tracking.**

Users should understand that essential cookies are required for the basic functioning of an app or website (e.g., enabling login or core features), while non-essential cookies are often used for purposes such as analytics, personalization, or advertising. Where possible, users should review cookie settings and opt out of non-essential tracking if they are uncomfortable with their data being used for these purposes. Being aware of these distinctions allows users to make more informed choices about their privacy.

## **3.3 Safe and Informed Usage**

### **3.3.1 Use mental health apps as self-help tools or adjuncts, not as substitutes for professional diagnosis or therapy.**

Users should approach mental health apps as supportive tools that can aid in self-reflection, skill-building, or day-to-day well-being, rather than as replacements for professional care. While such apps may offer useful exercises, tracking features, or general guidance, they do not provide individualized clinical assessment or treatment. Relying solely on apps in place of professional help may delay appropriate care, particularly when dealing with significant or persistent mental health concerns.

**3.3.2 Be aware of signs that self-help is not proving sufficient and professional support may be needed.**

Users should monitor their mental health and recognize when additional support is necessary. Indicators that self-help may not be enough include worsening symptoms, persistent distress, difficulty functioning in daily life, thoughts of self-harm, or lack of improvement despite continued app use. In such situations, it is important to seek help from qualified mental health professionals or appropriate services rather than relying solely on digital tools.

**3.3.3 Prefer apps that provide crisis support options, include some level of human oversight, and encourage seeking professional help when distress increases.**

When choosing and using mental health apps, users should look for features that prioritize safety, such as access to crisis helplines, clear pathways to professional support, and some degree of human involvement (e.g., moderation, counseling services). Apps that actively encourage users to seek help when distress intensifies are more likely to support responsible and safe use.

**3.3.4 Regularly reflect on how the app affects your mental well-being; discontinue use if it causes distress, confusion, or leads to emotional dependency or overuse.**

Users should periodically evaluate their experience with the app and its impact on their emotional state and behavior. If the app leads to increased anxiety, confusion, frustration, or fosters a sense of dependency - such as feeling compelled to use it excessively or relying on it for emotional reassurance - it may be appropriate to reduce use or stop using it altogether. GenAI chatbots may result in conversations that focus mostly on validation which feels comforting and soothing without balancing this with appropriate reflective questioning or therapeutic-challenging that helps generate newer perspectives or insights, unlike in evidence-based therapies by trained human professionals. Being mindful of these potential effects helps prevent potential harm and supports healthier engagement with digital tools.

**3.3.5 Strengthen your digital and mental health literacy to make informed decisions about using technology for well-being.**

Users are encouraged to enhance their understanding of both mental health and digital technologies to make more informed choices. This includes understanding basic mental health concepts, recognizing reliable sources of information, learning how to stay safe in online environments, evaluate credibility of digital content, and being aware of the benefits and limitations of digital tools. Improved digital and mental health literacy empowers users to engage with technology in a safe and beneficial manner.

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**3.4 Communication with Healthcare Providers****3.4.1 Discuss with your mental health professional your needs and preferences for supplementing care with app-based support.**

Users should actively engage in conversations with their mental health professionals about their interest in using digital tools as part of their care. This includes discussing what kind of support they are looking for (e.g., mood tracking, coping strategies, reminders), their comfort with technology,

and any concerns they may have. Such discussions enable professionals to recommend appropriate tools, tailor their use to individual needs, and ensure that app-based support complements ongoing treatment in a safe and meaningful way.

**3.4.2 Inform your healthcare provider about any GenAI tools or wellness apps you are using, so they can help assess whether the guidance is appropriate, safe, and aligned with your care plan.**

Users should keep their healthcare providers informed about any digital tools they are using, including AI-based chatbots or wellness applications, rather than keeping this a secret. Sharing this information allows professionals to evaluate the accuracy and relevance of the guidance provided by these tools, identify any potential risks or inconsistencies with the treatment plan, and offer corrective input where necessary. A collaborative approach can help ensure that digital tool use supports, rather than interferes with, effective care.

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