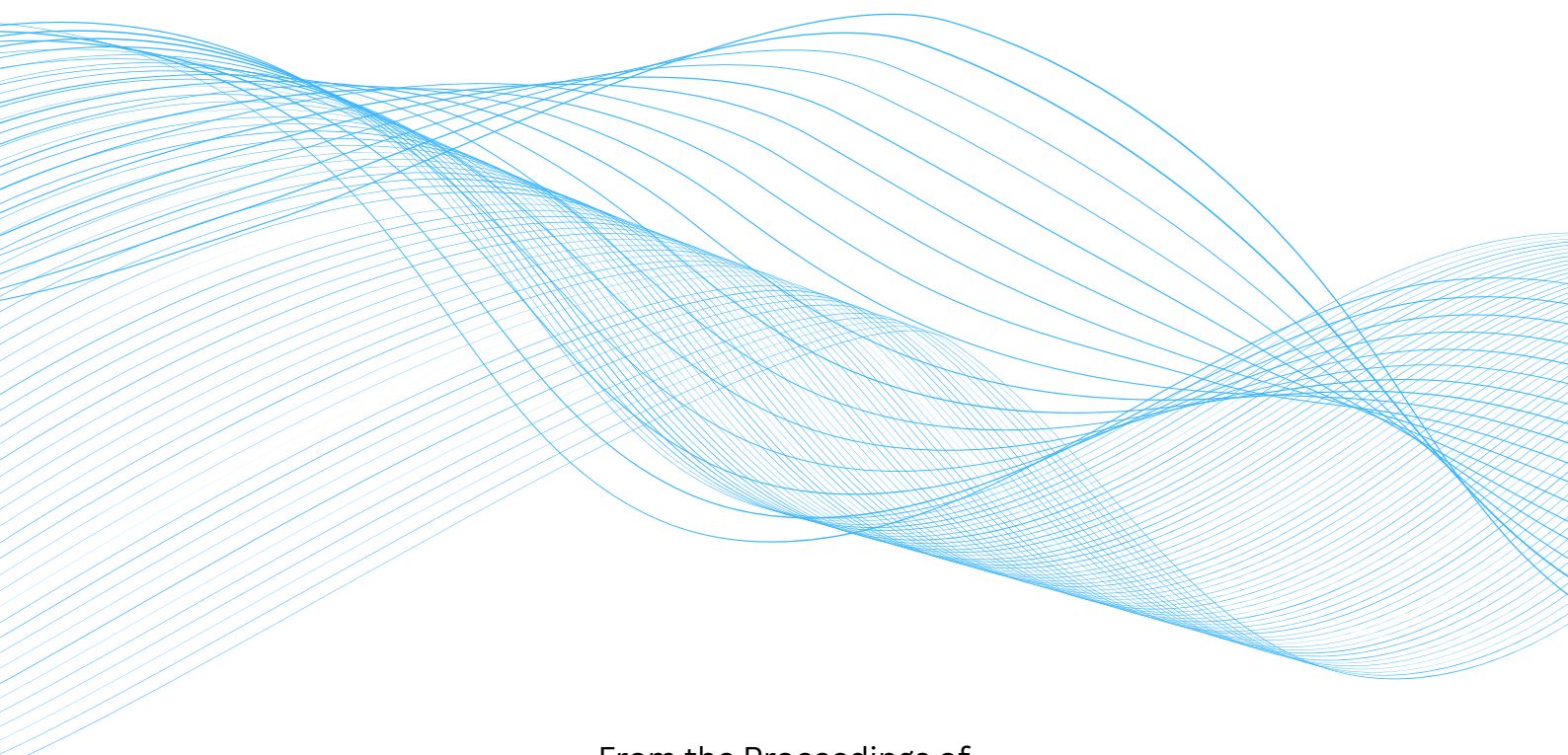




GUIDELINES ON DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH APPLICATIONS



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
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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

1. Guidelines for Developers of Mental Health Applications

Note: These guidelines primarily pertain to developers of consumer-facing mental health apps

1.1 Ensuring Transparency about Professional Involvement and Evidence-Informed Content

1.1.1 Clearly communicate to the users about the nature and extent of involvement of mental health experts in the development of mental health applications

Developers should clearly disclose the role, qualifications, and extent of involvement of mental health professionals in the app's design, content creation, and review processes. This disclosure may specify whether experts were continuously engaged, consulted periodically, or involved in advisory roles. Transparency in such communications helps users assess the credibility

1.1.2 Provide transparent information about the developers

Apps should clearly disclose who has contributed to their development, including the names or categories of professionals involved, and the nature of their contributions (e.g., content development, review). Where an organisation or institution is involved, developers should clearly specify its nature (government, non-government, or private) and its functional setting (research, clinical, or training). This transparency helps users understand the institutional context behind the app. This information should be easily accessible to users (e.g., within the app or via app store listing) to enable informed judgment by users about the app's credibility and trustworthiness.

1.1.3 Clearly communicate the evidence-informed nature of all content used within the app, including how emerging evidence is continuously being reviewed, incorporated, and communicated to users.

Developers should specify whether the app's content is based on established psychological therapies (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy), emerging evidence, expert consensus, general wellness practices, and whether it is grounded in any research on the app itself. When applicable, references to contemporary scientific literature, practice guidelines, or frameworks should be provided in a user-friendly manner in a resource section.

Whether the app has been evaluated through usability testing, pilot studies, or clinical trials, developers should provide accessible, user-friendly capsule summaries of these findings, along with safe and usable links, highlighting key outcomes such as user engagement, acceptability, and effectiveness while avoiding overly technical language. These summaries should also include relevant contextual details, such as where the studies were conducted, the populations involved, and the settings in which the app was tested, particularly in contexts where local applicability is important. Developers should ensure that this section is regularly updated to reflect new evidence, ongoing evaluations, or changes in findings. This transparency can help users and professionals distinguish between evidence-based content and unverified approaches as well as the level of evidence for a given app-content to help them make informed judgments about the app's quality, relevance, and potential impact.

1.1.4 Provide a clear rationale for any technique or approach recommended within the app.

The exercises, recommendations, or interventions included in the app should be accompanied by a brief explanation of its purpose and intended benefit (e.g., how a breathing exercise may help regulate stress or anxiety). This helps users understand not just what to do, but why they are doing it, which can improve engagement, adherence, and appropriate use. It also reduces the risk of misunderstanding or misuse of techniques.

1.2 Promoting appropriate professional help-seeking and strengthening crisis escalation pathways

1.2.1 Include well-designed nudges or prompts to encourage users to seek professional help when high distress along with insufficiency of self-help methods are detected (e.g. through screening tools or self-reports)

When the app identifies indicators of elevated and persistent distress, symptoms or concerns causing significant disturbance in carrying out day-to-day responsibilities, long standing or complex concerns wherein self-help is appearing to be difficult to use or not proving sufficient-it should generate timely and supportive prompts encouraging users to seek professional help. These indicators may emerge from responses to validated screening tools, user inputs, or interaction patterns noted within apps. These prompts should not be limited to disclaimers that the app is not a replacement for diagnosis or therapy. Instead, these should include active educational and motivational enhancement components that help users overcome psychological, social and practical barriers to reaching out for professional help in times of need and offer actionable options such as contacting a helpline or accessing professional services.

Use graded, sensitive nudging rather than abrupt or alarming prompts. Communication during distress detection should be carefully calibrated to avoid causing additional anxiety or alarm. Developers should design a graded system of prompts that escalate in intensity based on the level of risk, starting with gentle check-ins and progressing to stronger recommendations for seeking help when necessary. Language should be empathetic, non-judgmental, and supportive, avoiding abrupt warnings or overly alarming messages. This approach helps maintain user trust, reduces the likelihood of disengagement, and encourages help-seeking in a psychologically safe manner.

1.2.2 Integrate crisis helpline numbers, SOS buttons, and emergency resource links (e.g., Tele-MANAS) within the app interface, with clear escalation pathways to human support where needed and to the extent feasible.

Mental health applications should prominently include access to crisis support within the user interface, ensuring that users experiencing distress can quickly and easily reach appropriate help. This includes offering or integrating reliable national and regional helpline numbers, SOS or “panic” buttons, and links to verified emergency resources that are locally relevant. The helpline numbers listed must be periodically verified and updated by the developers to ensure that the listing includes functional and responsive helplines and that the support offered by them may meet the minimum and critical requirements of distressed callers. These crisis support features should be visible across key sections of the app (not buried in menus), accessible at all times, and designed to function with minimal steps, including one-click calling or direct connection wherever possible.

In addition, apps should go beyond simply listing resources and should actively encourage and guide users toward human support when needed, including providing clear and regionally appropriate referral pathways to the extent feasible. This may include integration with teleconsultation services, on-call professionals, or referral networks. Clear workflows should be defined as to how alerts are triggered, and timely human intervention is facilitated. This helps ensure that individuals in distress are not left navigating multiple options on their own, but are meaningfully supported in accessing timely human assistance.

1.3 Transparency about scope of use and limitations

1.3.1 Provide clear and accessible explanations of the app's purpose and features, using user-friendly formats such as video walkthroughs where appropriate.

Developers should ensure that users can easily understand what the app is designed to do, who it is intended for, and how to use its features effectively. This includes providing simple, jargon-free descriptions during onboarding and within the app, supported by user-friendly formats such as guided tutorials, visual aids, or short video walkthroughs. Clear explanations help users set appropriate expectations, navigate the app confidently, and use features safely and as intended.

1.3.2 Clearly communicate the app's limitations beyond standard disclaimers, including that it is not a substitute for diagnosis, therapy, or emergency services.

In addition to legal disclaimers, apps should explicitly and repeatedly communicate their limitations in practical, understandable terms as part of the description of the scope. Users should be informed as appropriate that the app does not provide clinical diagnosis, replace professional therapy, or function as an emergency response service. This information should be integrated into onboarding, key interaction points, and relevant features to prevent overreliance or misuse, particularly in situations requiring professional intervention.

1.3.3 Ensure that pricing, subscription, or paywall details are clearly visible upfront.

All financial aspects of the app, including subscription fees, in-app purchases, trial periods, and paywall restrictions, should be communicated transparently before users engage with paid features. Hidden costs or unclear pricing structures should be avoided, as they undermine trust and may constitute deceptive practices.

1.3.4 Clearly specify whether the app includes human support, detailing the nature, purpose, modules involved, availability, professional qualifications, associated costs, and expected response times.

If the app offers any form of human support (e.g., chat with a counselor, guided sessions, moderation), developers should provide comprehensive and transparent information about these services. This includes clarifying what type of support is available, who provides it (including qualifications), when and how users can access it, how quickly they can expect responses, and whether there are any associated costs or subscription requirements. This enables users to make informed decisions and set realistic expectations about the support they may wish to seek.

1.3.5 Define the target user group, including age range and level of severity for which the app is intended.

Developers should clearly state the intended audience for the app, including relevant demographics such as age group (e.g., adolescents, adults), language, and the level of mental health need (e.g., general well-being, mild distress, specific mental health symptoms or conditions). This helps ensure that users can determine whether the app is appropriate for their needs and reduces the risk of misuse by individuals for whom the app may not be suitable.

1.3.6 Clearly explain whether AI is used, including its role and limitations, in simple and accessible language. For GenAI-based chatbots, clearly and consistently disclose that users are interacting with an AI system and not a human.

If the app uses artificial intelligence, developers should clearly describe what functions or sections of the app are AI-driven (e.g., chatbot responses, personalization, risk detection), how the AI operates at a high level, and what its limitations are. This explanation should avoid technical jargon and be understandable to a general audience. It should also clarify that AI outputs may not always be accurate or appropriate and should not replace human judgment. GenAI based chatbots should make it clear at various points of interaction, to the user, that they are engaging with an AI system. This disclosure should not be hidden within 'terms and conditions' but should be visible and reiterated where necessary. This helps prevent confusion, minimizes the risk of misattribution of human qualities to the system by naive users, and may also discourage inappropriate reliance on AI for emotional or clinical support.

1.4 Ensuring Data Protection and Transparency about Privacy and Security

1.4.1 Ensure compliance with applicable data protection laws (e.g., the Digital Personal Data Protection Act) and align data practices with legal requirements and user rights.

Developers must ensure that all data collection, storage, processing, and sharing practices comply with relevant national and regional data protection laws as applicable at any given point in time, such as the Digital Personal Data Protection Act. This includes adhering to principles such as lawful processing, purpose limitation, data minimization, and user rights (e.g., access and erasure of data). Periodically review and update privacy policies to reflect evolving standards and regulations. Users should be notified of significant updates in a clear and timely manner, with options to review and consent to revised terms where applicable. Given the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies and associated risks, developers should create internal processes to periodically review and update their data protection and governance practices. On the whole, compliance should not be treated as a one-time activity but as an ongoing responsibility, with systems in place to monitor regulatory updates and ensure continued alignment.

1.4.2 Present the privacy policy prominently in an easily accessible location using simple, understandable language, including formats such as video walkthroughs where helpful.

Privacy policies should be clearly visible and accessible within the app and on app store listings, rather than being hidden in lengthy or complex documents. Developers should use plain language to explain key points and consider alternative formats such as summaries, infographics, or short videos to improve user comprehension. The goal is to enable users to meaningfully understand how their data is handled, rather than simply obtaining formal consent.

1.4.3 Clearly specify what data is collected, the purpose of collection, duration of storage, where it is stored, how it is disposed of, and whether and with whom data is shared. Disclose the involvement of any third parties in data processing or storage.

Developers should provide detailed and transparent information about data practices, including the types of data collected (e.g., personal information, usage data, health-related inputs), the

specific purposes for which each type of data is used, how long the data will be retained, and where the data is stored (e.g., on-device, cloud servers, geographic location where relevant). They should also clearly explain how data will be securely deleted, anonymized, or otherwise disposed of. Once it is no longer needed after expiry of the data retention period or upon user request. In addition, any sharing of data with third parties should be explicitly disclosed, including the nature and purpose of such sharing. This information should be presented in a structured and user-friendly manner to give users a clear understanding of the complete data lifecycle. If external vendors, cloud service providers, analytics tools, or other third parties are involved in handling user data, their role and due safeguards should be clearly disclosed.

1.4.4 Clearly explain whether the app shares or links user data with other health platforms or maintains records over time (e.g., tracking progress across sessions), and ensure this occurs with explicit user consent.

Developers should transparently communicate whether user data is stored longitudinally (e.g., to track mood or symptom changes over time) and whether it is shared with or accessible to other systems such as electronic health records, healthcare providers, or third-party platforms. The purpose, scope, and implications of such data use should be clearly explained. Any such integration or data sharing for the intended purpose must occur only after obtaining explicit, informed user consent, with options to opt in or opt out.

1.4.5 Provide clear options for users to delete their accounts and associated data. Clearly state what happens to user data after account deletion or app uninstallation.

Users should have straightforward and easily accessible options to delete their accounts and request deletion of their personal data. The process should not be complex, hidden, or unnecessarily delayed. Clear instructions should be provided within the app, and users should be informed about the timeline and scope of data deletion once a request is made.

Developers should explicitly inform users whether any data is retained after account deletion or app uninstallation, such as for legal, regulatory, or other specified purposes. The duration of such retention and the reasons for the same should be clearly explained. This prevents misunderstandings and ensures transparency regarding residual data storage.

1.4.6 Incorporate dynamic consent mechanisms, enabling users to provide, review, and withdraw consent as features or interaction contexts evolve.

Developers should implement consent systems that go beyond one-time agreements. Users should be able to revisit, modify, or withdraw their consent as new features are introduced or as the nature of data use changes. This includes providing clear interfaces for managing permissions and ensuring that changes in consent are respected in real time. Dynamic consent supports user autonomy and aligns with evolving standards in ethical digital practice.

1.4.7 Minimize data collection to what is strictly necessary and avoid sharing with third parties without explicit user consent.

Apps should follow the principle of data minimization by collecting only the information that is essential for delivering core functionalities. Unnecessary or excessive data collection should be avoided. Additionally, any sharing of data with third parties should occur only after obtaining clear, informed, and explicit consent from the user, with options to opt in or opt out.

1.4.8 Implement strong data security measures, including encryption, secure storage, and other safeguards to protect confidentiality.

Developers should adopt robust technical and organizational measures to protect user data from unauthorized access, breaches, or misuse. This includes using encryption (both in transit and at rest), secure authentication mechanisms, access controls, and regular monitoring of systems. Given the sensitive nature of mental health data, heightened security standards are essential. Where feasible, adopt practices to minimise risk of data exposure in transit and interception risks (for eg: edge computing).

1.4.9 Conduct regular security audits to identify and address vulnerabilities.

Periodic security assessments, including internal audits and independent third-party evaluations, should be conducted to identify potential vulnerabilities in the system. Findings from these audits should be promptly addressed, and improvements should be documented and implemented. This proactive approach helps maintain system integrity and user trust.

1.5 Ensuring Content Quality and Responsible Design for Maximising Benefits and Minimising Harm

1.5.1 Involve qualified mental health professionals at all stages-conceptualization, content development, testing and periodic review, especially for apps supporting users with self-reported or diagnosed mental health conditions.

Developers should ensure that appropriately trained and licensed mental health professionals (e.g., psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychiatric social workers) are meaningfully involved throughout the lifecycle of digital mental health applications. Their role should go beyond superficial consultation and include shaping the conceptual framework of the app, developing and reviewing therapeutic or psychoeducational content, informing risk management strategies, and validating outputs during testing. Ongoing involvement is essential to ensure that content remains clinically and socioculturally relevant, safe, and aligned with evolving standards of mental health care, particularly for apps targeting individuals experiencing psychological distress or mental health conditions.

1.5.2 Include content that actively dispels common myths and misconceptions about mental health, mental illness, and treatment approaches.

Developers should ensure that the mental health app includes accurate, evidence-informed information that challenges common myths, stereotypes, and misinformation related to mental health. This may include addressing misconceptions about causes of mental illness, effectiveness of treatments, stigma associated with seeking help, and unrealistic expectations of recovery. Content should be culturally appropriate, easy to understand, and designed to promote mental health literacy, reduce stigma, and encourage informed help-seeking behaviors.

1.5.3 Use diagnostic terminology cautiously, avoiding premature or definitive labeling without appropriate professional evaluation.

Apps should avoid assigning or implying clinical diagnoses based solely on user inputs, self-assessments, or algorithmic outputs. Diagnostic terms (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders) should be used carefully and, where necessary, accompanied by clear explanations that they are not

substitutes for professional evaluation. Developers should ensure that screening tools or symptom checkers are evidence-based, presented as indicative rather than definitive, and should guide users toward qualified professionals for accurate diagnosis and assessment.

1.5.4 Conduct periodic third-party reviews to ensure continued alignment with emerging scientific and ethical standards.

Regularly update content in line with current scientific evidence and best practices. Developers should try to engage independent experts or organizations to periodically review the app's content, features, and overall functioning. These reviews should assess alignment with current scientific evidence, clinical guidelines, ethical standards, and user safety considerations. Findings from such evaluations should be used to update and improve the app, and where appropriate, summaries of these reviews may be shared publicly to enhance transparency and credibility.

1.5.5 Provide ethical reporting mechanisms that allow users or professionals to flag misleading, harmful, or unsafe content.

Apps should include accessible and user-friendly mechanisms (e.g., in-app reporting tools, feedback forms) that enable users and professionals to report concerns about inaccurate, misleading, or potentially harmful content or features. These mechanisms should be clearly visible, easy to use, and supported by defined processes for timely review and response. Developers should ensure that reported issues are taken seriously, investigated promptly, and addressed appropriately.

1.5.6 Avoid deceptive design practices that mislead user decisions (e.g., hidden costs, forced consent, confusing navigation, or barriers to opting out).

Developers should ensure that the app's design and user interface respect user autonomy and informed choice. This includes avoiding practices that intentionally manipulate behavior, such as hiding important information, making it difficult to decline consent, using confusing language or navigation, or nudging users toward decisions that may not be in their best interest. Transparent, ethical design fosters trust, supports user agency, and aligns with responsible digital health practices.

1.5.7 Incorporate design features that reduce the risk of emotional dependency on AI systems.

Developers should proactively design features that discourage excessive reliance on AI interactions for emotional support. This may include setting limits on continuous interaction, consistently and appropriately reinforcing users to engage in activities outside the app-environment, avoiding language that fosters exclusivity or emotional bonding with the AI, and prompting users to seek human support from various reliable sources. The goal is to ensure that AI serves as a supportive tool without diminishing or replacing real-world relationships or professional care.

1.5.8 Adopt a participatory approach by involving people with lived experience in the co-design, development, and evaluation of the app, ensuring their perspectives meaningfully inform features, usability, and relevance.

Developers should actively engage individuals with lived experience of mental health conditions as partners in the design and evaluation process, rather than as passive participants. This includes involving them in identifying user needs, testing prototypes, providing feedback on usability and

language, and shaping features that reflect real-world experiences. Such engagement helps ensure that the app is accessible, culturally appropriate, non-stigmatizing, and responsive to the needs and preferences of its intended users, while also aligning with rights-based principles such as “nothing about us without us.”

1.5.9 Ensure active involvement of parents or legal guardians in the design and deployment of digital mental health tools intended for children and adolescents.

For applications targeting minors, developers should incorporate mechanisms that enable appropriate parental or guardian involvement, including consent processes, usage monitoring (where appropriate), and guidance on safe use. Content, language, and features should be developmentally appropriate, and safeguards should be in place to protect minors from harm, misuse, or exposure to inappropriate material. Developers should also consider how to balance adolescent autonomy with parental oversight in ethically appropriate ways.

1.5.10 Consider incorporating voice-based interactions to improve accessibility.

To enhance inclusivity, developers should consider integrating voice-based features such as audio instructions, voice navigation, or speech-to-text input. These features can make the app more accessible to users with limited literacy, visual impairments, or those who are more comfortable with spoken language. Designing for diverse user needs helps broaden reach and ensures equitable access to mental health support.

1.5.11 Incorporate measures that enable access to essential features in low-connectivity or offline environments.

To improve equity of access, app developers can make an effort that the key functions remain usable to the extent feasible even when connectivity is weak or unavailable. This may include allowing offline access to essential materials such as psychoeducation, self-help tools, or previously downloaded modules. Such features can help users in low-bandwidth or underserved areas to continue to use a given app.

**GUIDELINES ON
DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH APPLICATIONS**

**2. Guidelines for Mental Health
Service Providers**

2.1 Competencies in evaluating digital tools for inclusion in practice

2.1.1 Build competencies to critically evaluate mental health apps with respect to privacy, data security, content quality, and fit for purpose before recommending them.

Mental health professionals should strive to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to systematically assess digital mental health applications before integrating them into clinical care or recommending them to clients. This includes evaluating the app's data privacy and security practices (e.g., how user data is collected, stored, and shared), the quality and accuracy of its content (e.g., whether it is evidence-informed and clinically appropriate), and its overall suitability for a specific client's needs, context, and level of distress. Professionals should also consider usability, accessibility, transparency of claims, and potential risks, including overreliance or misuse.

2.1.2 Stay updated with emerging digital mental health guidelines, standards and frameworks to ensure clinical recommendations align with current best practices.

Given the rapidly evolving nature of digital mental health technologies, professionals should actively engage in continuous learning to remain informed about new developments, regulatory updates, and best practice guidelines. This may include reviewing national and international frameworks, attending training programs or workshops, participating in professional networks, and engaging with current research. Staying updated enables clinicians to make informed decisions about the use of digital tools, provide accurate guidance to clients, and ensure that their practice remains aligned with ethical standards, technological advancements, and evolving evidence.

2.2 Judicious integration with clinical practice

2.2.1 Where appropriate and beneficial, judiciously integrate digital tools into routine care (e.g., for mood tracking, psychoeducation, or between-session activities).

Mental health professionals should thoughtfully incorporate digital tools into clinical practice where they can add value to care by appropriate usage (e.g. low intensity interventions, psychoeducation during waiting periods before therapy initiation, adjuncts to the ongoing treatment process, therapeutic homework assignments, monitoring concerns, strengthening coping and facilitating recovery process by integrating meaningfully with face to face therapies). Integration should be tailored to the individual client's needs, preferences, digital literacy, and clinical presentation. Clinicians should also monitor how the tool is being used and its impact on treatment outcomes, ensuring that it complements ongoing clinical management.

2.2.2 Proactively inquire about patients' use of wellness apps and GenAI chatbots, using this as an opportunity to discuss potential benefits, limitations, and risks (e.g., development of unhealthy reliance on AI tools).

Clinicians should routinely ask clients about their use of digital mental health tools, including wellness apps and GenAI-based chatbots, as part of assessment and ongoing care. These conversations can provide valuable insight into the client's coping strategies, sources of information, and support systems. Professionals should use this opportunity to discuss both the potential benefits (e.g., accessibility, self-reflection) and limitations (e.g., lack of personalization, inaccuracies), as well as risks such as overreliance, misinformation, or emotional dependence on AI systems. This approach helps promote informed and balanced use of such tools

2.2.3 Recognize that clients may bring app-based or AI-generated inputs into therapy, and support them in critically evaluating and contextualizing this information.

Clients may present suggestions, interpretations, or advice generated by apps or AI tools during therapy sessions. Mental health professionals should acknowledge these inputs respectfully and use them as opportunities for discussion, rather than dismissing them outright. Clinicians can help clients critically examine the relevance, accuracy, and applicability of such information in the context of their individual experiences and treatment goals. This process supports critical thinking, strengthens the therapeutic alliance, and ensures that external inputs are appropriately integrated into care.

2.2.4 When recommending tools for children and adolescents, provide age-appropriate guidance on risks such as emotional attachment, and ensure parental consent and child assent are obtained.

When working with minors, clinicians should exercise additional caution in recommending digital tools. They should provide clear, developmentally appropriate guidance to both the child/adolescent and their parents or guardians regarding potential risks, including emotional attachment to digital agents, exposure to inappropriate content, or misuse. Informed parental consent and, where appropriate, the child's assent should be obtained before recommending or integrating such tools into care. Ongoing monitoring and open communication with both the child and caregivers are essential to ensure safe and appropriate use.

2.2.5 Foster a safe and open environment where patients feel comfortable discussing their use of digital tools, including concerns or adverse experiences.

Mental health professionals should create a non-judgmental and supportive space where patients feel encouraged to share their experiences with digital mental health tools, including both positive and negative aspects. This includes inviting discussions about any confusion, distress, or dissatisfaction arising from app use or use of a general purpose AI platform for mental health support.. An open dialogue allows clinicians to identify potential risks early, correct misinformation, and integrate relevant insights into the therapeutic process, thereby enhancing safety and trust.

2.2.6 Exercise heightened vigilance when working with vulnerable populations using GenAI or wellness apps. Screen for and monitor patterns such as maladaptive reassurance-seeking, overreliance, or reinforcement of harmful behaviors—particularly among individuals with conditions such as OCD, autism spectrum disorder, psychosis, history of self-harm, or high social isolation.

When working with individuals who may be more vulnerable to the risks associated with digital tools, clinicians should adopt a more cautious and proactive approach. This includes routinely assessing how such tools are being used and identifying patterns that may be clinically concerning, such as excessive reassurance-seeking, emotional dependence on AI interactions, withdrawal from real-world support systems, or reinforcement of maladaptive beliefs, behaviors or breakdown of reality testing. Particular attention should be given to populations where these risks may be heightened, and appropriate guidance on boundaries, or discontinuation of use should be considered where necessary.

2.3 Educating Potential End-Users

2.3.1 Educate patients and the general public on safe, informed use of digital mental health tools, including recognizing when to seek professional help.

Mental health professionals should play an active role in improving digital and mental health literacy by guiding patients and the wider public on how to use digital tools safely and effectively. This includes helping individuals understand the appropriate role of such tools, how to evaluate their credibility, and how to use them as supportive resources rather than primary or exclusive sources of care. Professionals should also educate app users on recognizing warning signs that indicate the need for professional intervention, such as worsening symptoms, persistent distress, or thoughts of self-harm, and guide them on when and how to access appropriate services.

2.3.2 Reinforce that digital tools are not substitutes for professional assessment, diagnosis, or therapy.

Professionals should consistently emphasize that while digital tools can support self-management and complement care, they do not replace professional evaluation, diagnosis, or therapeutic intervention. Reinforcing this distinction helps prevent delays in seeking appropriate care and reduces the risk of misinterpretation or self-diagnosis.

2.3.3 Engage parents and guardians through psychoeducation, and involve them actively in selecting and overseeing digital tool use for minors.

For children and adolescents, mental health professionals should actively involve parents or guardians in decisions related to the use of digital mental health tools. This includes providing psychoeducation about the potential benefits and risks of such tools, guiding caregivers in selecting appropriate and credible applications, and supporting them in monitoring usage. Collaboration with caregivers helps ensure that digital tool use is safe, developmentally appropriate, and aligned with the child's therapeutic needs.

2.4 Engagement in Research, Consultations and Collaborations

2.4.1 Contribute to the co-design and evaluation of digital mental health tools by offering clinical expertise to enhance their safety, reliability and effectiveness.

Mental health professionals should actively participate in the design, development, and evaluation of digital mental health tools by contributing their clinical knowledge and experience. This includes collaborating with developers to ensure that app content, features, and user flows are clinically appropriate, ethically sound, and responsive to user needs. Professionals can also play a key role in pilot testing, usability assessments, and outcome evaluations, helping to identify potential risks, improve intervention quality, and ensure that tools are both safe and effective for real-world use.

2.4.2 Advocate for independent and rigorous evaluation of apps that make clinical, therapeutic or diagnostic claims.

Clinicians should promote the importance of evidence-based practice in the digital mental health space by advocating for independent validation of apps that claim to offer therapeutic benefits or diagnostic capabilities. This includes encouraging the use of robust research designs (e.g., controlled trials, implementation studies) and transparency in reporting outcomes. They can also

guide patients and institutions toward using tools that have been appropriately evaluated, while remaining cautious about those that make unsupported or exaggerated claims.

2.4.3 Engage in research to identify the therapeutic contexts in which different categories of digital tools can be used safely and effectively.

Mental health professionals should contribute to building the evidence base for digital mental health by engaging in research that examines when, how, and for whom different types of digital tools are most beneficial. This may include studying their use as adjuncts to therapy, in preventive contexts, or for specific populations and conditions. Such research can help clarify appropriate use cases, inform clinical guidelines, and ensure that digital tools are integrated into care in a manner that maximizes benefit and minimizes harm.

2.4.4 Develop foundational communication and collaboration skills to work effectively with technology developers and interdisciplinary teams.

As digital mental health involves collaboration across disciplines, professionals should build skills to effectively communicate clinical concepts to non-clinical stakeholders such as developers, designers, and data scientists. This includes the ability to articulate user needs, ethical considerations, and clinical requirements in ways that can be translated into design and technical solutions. Strong interdisciplinary collaboration helps bridge the gap between clinical practice and technology development, leading to more user-centered, safe, and effective digital tools.

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.

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.
