VA Mobile Discussion Series

March 2019 Webinar: Coaching Apps for Veterans Struggling with PTSD and their Families

VA's Mobile Discussion Series is a monthly webinar featuring a variety of topics focused around app development and mobile health at VA.

Micah Azzano: Hello, everyone. Welcome, and thank you for attending our VA Mobile Discussion Series webinar. This month's discussion is coaching apps for veterans struggling with PTSD and their families. My name is Micah Azzano, and I'm going to run through a few brief technical reminders before we begin.

Your phone lines are muted, so we will be taking questions with the chat feature. The chat function is available to you at the right of your screen. And if you're experiencing technical difficulties, please use the chat, and someone will be with you to offer assistance.

If you would like to download the presentation, please click on the file name below the chat screen at any time during the live webinar. The presentation will also be available at a later date on the VA Mobile Discussion Series webpage.

Today we welcome our presenter, Kelly Ramsey, Mobile Apps Program Manager at the National Center for PTSD Dissemination and Training Division.

During the webinar today, we will be discussing VA apps and technologies, including PTSD Coach, PTSD Family Coach, AIMS for Anger Management, Mindfulness Coach, and CRAFT Web Courses. We will be taking your questions periodically throughout the webinar, so once again, if you have any questions during the presentation, please type them into the chat feature on the right. And with that, I will turn it over to Kelly to discuss PTSD Coach.

Kelly Ramsey: Hi. I'm Kelly Ramsey from the National Center for PTSD Dissemination and Training Division. I've been with our division's mobile apps initiative since 2012, and apparently I need to mute my audio. I apologize. Get my speakers. I've been a part of initiatives since 2012, and today I'm here to talk about apps of ours that are related to the theme of coaching PTSD and family members. We have a few, one of them of course being our flagship app, PTSD Coach, which I'll have to begin a new discussion of that nature.

This is National Center for PTSD's flagship mobile app for PTSD support since Julie Hoffmann built version one back in 2011. It'll be the app's eight year anniversary next week interestingly. We work on keeping it up to date with developments and mobile devices and operating systems. The current version does have a completely new code base, and it is available for iOS and Android devices. Many of you may already be familiar with this. This is a self-management app. It's intended to be usable without any kind of therapy context or high learning curve. It has a number of feature stats, including educational texts to introduce people to the basics of PTSD and what is it, what are the symptoms, what treatments work in alleviating it, what are the

treatments like, how can I get into treatment, various interactive tools for coping with PTSD-related issues in the moment, different kinds of audio calming and mindfulness exercises, ambient nature sounds, inspirational text tips, and an anger time-out tool.

A major benefit of mobile is that several of these tools can build on customized contents. For example, a couple of these soothing tools will ask the user to select their own relaxing picture or relaxing music from the pictures and music that they already have on their mobile device. So they can serve up something that the person already finds helpful, rather than necessarily just some stock images. The current version also expanded the range of exercises from the original. We also added a create-your-own tool feature, where one can add their own new tool to the lists, essentially creating it from scratch using your own content, using your own picture, video, or music. Record your own audio, write your own motivational message, and then open that personal tool if they want to.

PTSD Coach also has...sorry...also has a symptom tracker. It's a PCL-5 with a line-graph display, helps people assess their progress over time, and resources for seeking support whether by making a list of one's personal contacts or getting sources of professional help or crisis assistance.

Soon to come, we are working on graphics refresh. We're in progress. We're looking at maybe late spring for the deployment of that. The little stick figures in the app are feeling a little bit dated, and it's time we're trying to move on from the puppy people. We're making some user interface improvements as well. Some will be deployed for both iOS and Android. This coming version, we're seeking to add some more family-related tools from PTSD Family Coach. It has some additional options for customization and tool favoriting.
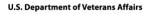
Micah Azzano: Okay. Thanks, Kelly, and I want to pause for just a minute, ask you a couple questions on PTSD Coach. You mentioned that this tool can be customized based on the user preferences, integrate contacts, photos, and music. Can you explain a little bit more about the benefits of this feature?

Kelly Ramsey: So one thing we've learned is that people do like customization. People like to be able to modify the app for their own purposes, so this is one thing that we found. It helps with engagement. People are able to make the app their own, something that reflects them, and they're more likely to come back to it and want to use its features if they're in need.

Micah Azzano: Okay. And you said that people like the customization. That makes sense. Do you have any success stories that you can share related to sort of the benefits and the features that they like?

Kelly Ramsey: I think we get feedback on a regular basis, and people tell us that it really helped them with their in-the-moment situations, where they could keep calm to reduce the feelings that they had. One of the iconic stories we like to tell is that soon after the app was launched, we were informed that a veteran had called the crisis line and said, "I don't really know why I'm calling, but I got this app and it told me that I'm in crisis, and I'd want to talk to you." So the app

was able to, by giving person's feedback about their very high level of distress, it was able to route them to some help that they would not have otherwise gotten.

Micah Azzano: Yeah, that's a great example. And I have just one kind of last question on PTSD Coach before we move into PTSD Family Coach. For veterans interested in using PTSD Coach, do you have any recommendations for how they can get started?

Kelly Ramsey: I'd say it is designed to not require a specific path of use. It is sort of left open for people to explore as they will, so one of the best approaches I would suggest is get in there and just see what...Don't be intimidated by all the choices. Don't feel as if you have to do anything. Just go in there and see what helps with the particular question or concern you have at the moment. So if you're interested in reading a few brief things, then check out the links section. If you want to check in on your progress, try out the assessments. But just take it at your own pace and just work with it as you will.

Micah Azzano: Alright, great. Thank you for all that information on PTSD Coach. We are going to be taking questions periodically throughout the presentation, so if you do have questions, please enter them into the chat feature. And when we stop, we can answer those, or we will also be taking questions at the very end of the presentation. Now we're going to move on into PTSD Family Coach.

Kelly Ramsey: PTSD Family Coach. This is a spinoff of PTSD Coach. It was designed specifically for the family members of people who are managing post-traumatic stress, or PTSD. This app is also available for both iOS and Android devices. What you see here in the presentation, this is the currently available version two of the app, that you can get from the App Store or the Play Store. If you used version one maybe a couple of years ago, what you saw then was maybe a more basic app. It very closely paralleled, replicated the features of PTSD Coach, came in a less than ideal shade of purple. What we have now is substantially expanded from that. It tries a lot of visual accompaniments, as you can see here, and includes a lot of family-specific content additions.

PTSD Family Coach does still have the same structure as PTSD Coach, the same main sections, which is an intentional choice. We want to support the possibility that someone with PTSD might be using PTSD Coach for themselves while they're family member is using PTSD Family Coach further to help them. The app also does make suggestions about which content might be most helpful. One of early log-in, not log-in, but one of the early introductory tabs that the person was asked about is giving a list of what are the that main things you want from this app? What are your main needs? And then based on what that person checks off for their main needs, the app will then develop a section or the app will suggest, "Here are maybe the things you want to start with reading," or maybe, "Here are the type of tools that might most be applicable to you."

There is PTSD Family Coach. There's quite a bit to read here in the educational contents, depending on a family member's needs. It was written specifically for the perspective of the

family member. There's a lot of new material that's newly written added to this app, especially for people who are living together, or who are managing an intimate relationship.

Coping tools. If you previously tried out version one, you saw a lot of pretty much the same PTSD Coach tools in that version. In the current version two, tools have been greatly renovated and expanded. So the app has quite a large number of interactive tools that are specifically for various needs of the family member or for managing their relationship. They're all...whether their own stress or their own...They're helping. They help their family member or what have you.

Of course, PTSD Family Coach does have the tracking feature. It supports tracking several kinds of progress. The family member's wellbeing, the stress, as well as the partner version of the PCL-5, or assessing the family member's PTSD, as well as the customized goal tracker. It allows you to enter any number of personal or family goals, and then record through the daily progress and reading those.

And support resources as well. Personal contacts can be imported. We have a personalized list of people who they can get a hold of, as well as various family-related resources, help lines, communities, tips for navigating healthcare. PTSD Family Coach also has display, which shows tweets from Twitter, if you're familiar with that social media platform, that have the PTSD Family Coach hashtag associated with them. It encourages people to tweet their own contribution to converse with other people in that situation. This is a curated feature. We're not just giving them a raw feed of that hashtag. New tweets with that hashtag are checked by a person or they're being approved for display in the app, so we can avoid any potentially objectionable or risky content there. It's a slice of Twitter, rather than just drinking from the fire hose.

Micah Azzano: Okay great. Thank you, Kelly. And real quick, I just want to jump in with a quick couple questions on PTSD Family Coach. First, earlier you mentioned that PTSD Coach was integrating features from PTSD Family Coach. Can you clarify, do you need both apps or one app to get the other or do they work better in tandem?

Kelly Ramsey: They can work completely independently. You don't have to have one app to use the other. We can't make them communicate with each other, so it's not as if they're dependent upon each other for content, although there is a couples' coach app that's in research development for that kind of situation. Really, you don't have to be familiar with one to use the other.

Micah Azzano: Yeah, well they do...but they can work together, so that's good to know. Okay, great. And then what are some of the features that you've heard of as being the most helpful or seem to be getting the best response from users?

Kelly Ramsey: I think that one is a little bit to be determined. We have had a couple of instances of positive feedback in which people have generally said that it really helped them for

their circumstance, but we're still kind of waiting for the uptake of this app to see what people find useful or the most useful about it. Kind of waiting and seeing on that.

Move on to Mindfulness Coach. Be relatively briefer with these next couple of apps. I want to mention in this context that Mindfulness Coach does have a heavy coaching component to it. This is our app for supporting daily mindfulness practice, daily rehearsal of mindfulness, daily mindfulness exercises. And it does have a 14-part training plan, a coaching plan as it were, to walk the person through learning various components of mindfulness. Why is it helpful? What are some things to watch out for? What are some tips on practice and even into different kinds of mindfulness exercises, as well as working up their daily silent practice?

It does have a lot of educational contents about mindfulness, the various aspects of it, a tracking feature to track weekly progress, so on. As well, it does have remastered exercises for the audio. We are about just on the verge of launching the update to increase the audio. We have had feedback from people who are using it without earphones, without headphones, and they requested that the audio be louder, so we are about to launch an update that incorporates that improvement.

Micah Azzano: Great. And so really quick, Kelly, on Mindfulness Coach, I have a couple of questions. You mentioned the different exercises. Approximately how many exercises are available currently?

Kelly Ramsey: There are 12 that come shipped with the app already loaded, and then it does have a feature which the app offers the ability to download additional exercises into it. We currently have about 20 more that can be downloaded, and every once in a while we do incorporate an additional exercise in the download options for people to add if they want.

Micah Azzano: Okay. And what are some of the benefits that have been noted of using Mindfulness and specifically those who use these exercises and practice mindfulness with the app?

Kelly Ramsey: It generally comes down to resilience and self-care. There's some indication that mindfulness can help reduce the effects of stress, better cope with painful thoughts and emotions, improve capacity to concentrate and to relax, as well as improve things like accepting yourself and having compassion for yourself and just appreciating the day to day specifics of your life, not remain caught up in thinking about the past or the future.

So as far as it comes down to any kind of mental health issue, this is a very evolving topic of research, and the concepts are very much subject to debate and discussion. For PTSD specifically, since we're in the National Center for PTSD, I do keep handy ...Let me find it. There's a recent article. I'd like to keep kind of just post that in the chat. There we go. Some of recent research developments are discussed. For other areas of mental health wellness, my main recommendation would be check with your prior clinical practice guidelines. Check with the current contemporary developments in your PO, and see what he's saying about this or that particular approach to mindfulness for your area.

Micah Azzano: Okay, excellent. At this time, I don't have any additional questions on Mindfulness Coach. So we will move onto AIMS for Anger Management, but I do want to encourage people to enter any questions they have again into that chat feature. We will be taking them again after we talk about AIMS and then again at the end of the presentation. Thank you.

Kelly Ramsey: So AIMS I just want to briefly touch upon. This is based on the VA anger management course, AIMS, and this is something in support for a very common situation that occurs in PTSD, anger. So this is an app that can really walk people through helping to learn about how anger works, the manifestations of anger, how they can better be aware of themselves to recognize angry feelings and angry thoughts, how better to control their expressions of anger when they feel anger upon them, and also track their angry situations.

There is an anger log for people to fill out so they can track what was the situation, how did I experiencing it, how did I react, and so on. And a variety of audio-guided relaxation tools. We have some of the audio tools that are specific to anger control and then a selection of others that are ... Some are stock that are appropriate for anger.

And then as well, I realized this isn't one of our app products. So this is a web course that came out of a different part of National Center for PTSD, but let me ... When I made this slide, I realized I should have posted a more general URL. Let me also paste that into the chat box here, which is the National Center for PTSD website, where you can read about the course rather than dropping right in and taking it.

But this is their acronym, VA. It stands for Community Reinforcement and Family Training. This is a web course. These are both web courses. They're intended for family members of veterans who are managing PTSD or managing a substance abuse issue probably related to PTSD. It's really... These are intended for people who, not just any family member, but people who are in regular contact with the veteran, maybe three or four times a week or more, or they live with them.

This is a more guided-learning experience. It's a course. It walks a person through a sequence, rather than giving them a free range of exercises, and it does prioritize establishing the personal safety as the initial prerequisite. So just walking them through and recognizing abuse, creating a safety plan to bug out if needed, and then walking through various issues related to recognizing PTSD in a partner, helping your family member cope, helping yourself cope, positive reinforcement, and so on.

These courses, they're not apps. In fact, they were designed some time back specifically for desktop and laptop web browsers. So this was before the current mobile first trend, so they may have issues if you try to view them on a mobile device. If you try to view it on iPhone or an iPad, or tablet, other tablet, the videos may not play, for example. But for people who have access to a sit-down computer and maybe are less enthusiastic about a mobile app, these are something to consider as well for handling PTSD.

Micah Azzano: Okay great. Thank you, Kelly, for walking us through each of those technologies and tools. At this time, I would like to ask if you have any questions to again please enter them into the chat feature on your right. I'm going to kick things off with a couple questions that we received prior to the webinar.

The first one is regarding the overlap in some of these technologies. Some of the apps have similar features or similar issues that they address. Can you kind of address why there's some overlap between the apps?

Kelly Ramsey: There are two parts to that. One is the overlap in topics is because there's just a lot that kind of comes along with PTSD and that we want to make sure that we catch in an app in general. So PTSD Coach will have a catch-all of individual- and family-related issues, and themes will touch upon PTSD generally in some places. It's just where the necessary outgrowth of having a lot of overlapping conditions.

The content. You see some replication of content. Some of the audio exercises may be carried over. Other exercises may be carried over. In some cases, you see this as a general applicability of the tool. We find that if the intention is to get a general relaxation exercise, then muscle relaxation works just as well as an anger alternative as it does for a PTSD-coping mechanism, for example. So we're happy to include that in both. And in some cases, you can see us sort of evolving the tools as time passes. We did make some changes to the structure of some of the tools, especially detective tools, starting in vet change for alcohol, and we carried those over into PTSD Coach Three, for example, to just make use of those improvements in our process.

Micah Azzano: Okay great. I have another question here from one of our attendees. Is there a plan to add this app to My HealtheVet?

Kelly Ramsey: I'm not sure I understand that. Add to My HealtheVet as in the-

Micah Azzano: I believe they're asking if there's any plans to incorporate any of these apps into My HealtheVet.

Kelly Ramsey: As in-

Micah Azzano: Or link them in any way.

Kelly Ramsey: For linking inside the websites, I will have to talk with the marketing people about that. They have various outreach efforts going on. The only web-based alternative would be PTSD Coach Online, which is put out by our executive division. That replicates some of the features of PTSD Coach. But we don't have any other plans to make web versions of our apps. We would essentially severely reduce the functionality of them.

Micah Azzano: Okay. And someone else just posted that the My HeatheVet website does have a button to go to the mobile VA.gov page, so you can definitely get to these apps through there as well. Another question that we received prior to the webinar is along the lines of can you

expand on how these technologies are being used to improve access to care or used to support veterans?

Kelly Ramsey: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So I know access to care has been one of the big shifts in VA over the last couple of years. Really what we do, one of the founding motivations we've had from the beginning, is these are apps to reach out to people who are not in care, and if they're not ready and not able, then we give them something to fall back on or help them out in the moments, but ideally to get these people into VA care.

This is, in some respects, a public outreach effort. In some respects, a public educational effort to get people to recognize that this is...what you're going through, other people are going through it. It does have known contours, it does have... We do know things about how to make you better, and there are real resources at the VA that you can come in and talk to a therapist and get a provider that needs help with. So we always make a point to include educational content about here's what we know about evidence-based treatments for your situation. Here are options you can look into for going to VA and getting help with that. It's one of our main objectives I think.

Micah Azzano: Yeah. So it's not about replacing providers. It's about adding to that care and that care that they receive and making it more accessible.

Kelly Ramsey: Yeah, yeah. I really love to talk about that. I won't talk everybody's ear off about that, but I think people at VA, I mean... I'll take 30 seconds on a side note. They do need to watch out for overall development in the provision of healthcare and mental healthcare. Related to efficiency metrics, performance, and what not, absolutely. But as far as our apps are concerned, we're the absolutely last who would be on board with replacing providers with apps, which is maybe a little bit ironic, I think, considering that we're the apps people and we're in Silicon Valley.

Our research psychologists who are all about professional care, my therapist is evidence-based, and the very idea of replacing a human provider with a computer software or website, what have you ... just absurd. We're aware that it's absurd. It's really just not in keeping with anything about how we think about care, research base, and how mental care works necessarily. We're not the people who are going to come up with this flashy hype, block-chain artificial intelligence ad of the week. If you have a computer, fix your problem. It's more we have a force multiplier for you. If you're a provider, the app. Yeah.

Micah Azzano: Yeah. These are great tools that anyone has access to. And there's some of these apps that you don't have to necessarily have a My HealtheVet account to access as well, so that's another thing I want to note on some of these apps. I want to jump back to AIMS for a second. AIMS is based on the Anger Irritability Management Skills online self-help course. Do users have to participate in the course to use the app, or are there any other prerequisites to using the app?

Kelly Ramsey: They do not. They are not expected to have gone through the AIMS course. They are not expected to bring any kind of pre-work or pre-knowledge into it. As far as ... We have had some reports that maybe some people might think they have to or they don't find the onboarding in AIMS ideal I think. We are batting around some ideas for improving the app to make it a little bit ... improve the experience of introducing to the people to the concepts that they're going to be using. I think we do have some work to do there to make that better, but they are not dependent on each other, no.

Micah Azzano: I'm going to repeat myself here for just a second because I think my phone line cut out for a minute. I just want to jump in and thank Kelly again for taking the time to present today and thank you all for participating in today's webinar. Again, on the screen we want to get your feedback and see how you're doing. On the screen is a link to tell us how we're doing, submit topics, and any other information that you want us to know. Give us feedback. Please take a moment to fill this out. We really appreciate your input. We hope you're going to join us next month for another discussion series. Next month, we will be talking about sleep. And thank you, everyone, for participating, and have a great day.

Kelly Ramsey: Can I also mention... If you want to contact us at the National Center for PTSD and our apps initiative, mobilementalhealth@va.gov. We have a provider Tech Into Care, community of practice, announcement lists, a monthly continuing education series for providers, tech support, marketing swag, anything except treatment consultation. That's a different resource. Other than that, anything tech-related, please feel free to email us.

Micah Azzano: And we will stay on the line for just a few more minutes in case anyone has any questions they want to type into that chat. We will answer them through the chat and again, if you have any feedback, please use that link. Fill out the survey. We'd love to hear new topic ideas and also to let us know how we're doing. Thank you.