

# Digital therapeutic alliance in the context of unguided mental health apps

Fangziyun Tong, MS; Simon D'Alfonso, PhD; Katherine Berry, PhD; Sandra Bucci, PhD

contact: fangziyunt@student.unimelb.edu.au

Our findings suggest that: 1) **Interactive elements** are crucial for users to build **emotional connections** with (mental) health apps; 2) Apps may need to help users to set up a concrete **goal** at the beginning; 3) **Rewarding systems** could help to maintain users' accountability.

## INTRO / BACKGROUND

Therapeutic alliance (TA) refers to the relationship between a client and a healthcare professional, and has been shown to be an important predictor of outcome in clinical outcomes in face-to-face therapy. Given the significance of TA in traditional therapy, it follows that the notion of a digital therapeutic alliance (DTA) in the context of unguided mental health apps merits investigation.

## METHODS

We conducted interviews with twenty unguided mental health apps' users to explore dimensions of DTA and performed thematic analysis.

## RESULTS

1. Flexibility helped users to build a convenient relationship with an app.
2. Building DTA requires a high level of self-initiative.
3. Apps can be emotionally supportive.
4. Users can uniquely open up to apps.
5. Most users do not have a goal.

"I just wanted to de-stress and stuff, but no specific goals or things..... I feel like the (relationship with an) app is similar (to the relationship with therapists). Obviously, it's not a real human. But I think it can help you. It's not rude. The app is very helpful. You can do it at your own pace, it's very considerate."  
[participant J1]

"If it was more like artificial intelligence or there was more interactivity to it, then it might be more of a relationship."  
[participant B1]

## REFERENCES

Tong, F., Lederman, R., D'Alfonso, S., Berry, K., & Bucci, S. (2023). Conceptualizing the digital therapeutic alliance in the context of fully automated mental health apps: A thematic analysis. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*.