

New app provides vets a tool for PTSD

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• By: Kristin Volk, ABC15.com

WASHINGTON - Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) now have a new mobile resource to help combat the disorders' many challenges.

The Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) have jointly developed the "PTSD Coach," a free smartphone application to help those with PTSD.

It allows users to track and manage symptoms, find support and get reliable information about PTSD. The app can also bring up personal photos or play music during times of distress.

Dr. Sonja Batten, of the Department of Veterans Affairs, says the app was specifically developed with veterans in mind.



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"We were able to build this app that provides accurate information that helps the veterans assess their symptom level: see whether things are going up or down over time," she explained.

Dr. Andy Santanello, a psychologist at the Baltimore VA Medical Center, uses this tool with his patients who have smartphones.

"One of the challenges is always when you're trying to treat someone in therapy, to get them to use the skills in real life," he said.

The app encourages users to practice coping mechanisms, progressive muscle relaxation and other essential tools to help relieve symptoms.

Arizona Navy veteran Kevin Ivory, who experienced three explosions one month in Iraq, has had PTSD since 2006. He says the condition is "an emotional roller coaster."

"It allows you to really figure out a way to help yourself outside of the doctor's office. It's proactive care. It's you being involved in your own treatment," he said.

Both doctors and patients agree that the app doesn't replace professional treatment.

"If you're seeing a therapist, you may only be seeing a therapist for one or two hours a week," said Batten, of Veterans Affairs. "The app provides something that people can access 24-hours a day, whenever they need it."

It also suggests users get professional help when they need it.

"If the symptoms are high enough, we direct [patients] to contact somebody immediately and give them contact numbers to dial immediately," Batten explained.

As of July 2011, the VA says the app, which launched in April, has been downloaded more than 14,000 times in 41 countries.

"There's a real potential in technologies like this to...help folks in treatment to really use the skills they're learning and bring them into real life," Santanello said.

The VA reports it treated more than 400,000 veterans for PTSD in 2010.

PTSD is an anxiety disorder. According to Santanello, symptoms include re-experiencing a traumatic event, avoidance, irritability, having difficulty concentrating and being overly watchful of your safety.

The free app is available now on iTunes (for the iPhone/iPad) and the Android Market (for Android devices). For those without a smartphone, visit the National Center for PTSD website for similar information.

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Ramona Maassen

They still believe that it is solely psychological - The symptoms are physical too! Compromised immune systems/IBS/fibromyalgia/ sleep apnea are what many PTSD warriors live with, have lived and struggled with for years. Now there is an app for smart phones. I am seething. The app is free but I know most vets can't afford a smart phone....never mind paying for the use of one! Yurg! We need more therapists, more peer to peer programs in our communities and someone to look at the bigger picture!

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