

The Rise of Mental Health Technology

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It's safe to say that most of us have experienced a strain on our mental health over the past year. Many of us have little to no change of scenery from day to day, and the windows to the outside world are often filled with distress over which we feel little control. We often experience a lack of sleep or exercise, and some of us are even dealing with a loss of job security or health. It may feel overwhelming to begin traditional therapy at this point, but many of us need mental health support now more than ever.

For over a decade, Michael Levin and Michael Twohig, psychology professors in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, have studied how online and remote health interventions can be used by patients to alleviate mental health suffering. Read on as they answer questions about managing stressful circumstances, a new self-guided treatment option, and the pros and cons of therapy via telehealth.



Dr. Mike Levin:
Managing Stress and Finding Connection

How can we alleviate mental distress during the pandemic?

First, recognize that feeling distress is a signal telling us things are not right. Think of it like a fire alarm: when the fire alarm goes off, you don't blame the alarm—instead, you look for the cause. We need to treat our mental health the same way. Our alarm is going off because something is wrong, so this is actually good news—it means the system is functioning properly.

After we realize that our signal is working well and that we are sad or anxious or afraid, what's our next step?

Practice normalizing that reaction, and then re-engage with the things that are meaningful to me in a way that's safe. Think to yourself, "Okay, it makes sense I feel afraid and anxious." Don't push those feelings away; focusing on making thoughts and feelings go away is not productive. Bring them with you as you come back to meaningful things that you want to reconnect with.

Given current circumstances, you may have to find a different way to create what is meaningful to you. For example, identify what is meaningful to you about social interactions and figure out a new way to bring that into your life safely. What is a new way to get to "curiosity" or "invention" or "adventure" or "connection?" Have really curious, creative conversations and connect with people.

Are Zoom calls helpful in connecting with others?

In the right circumstances, video calls can be just what we need, especially if it's a call with our therapist. But many of us are experiencing Zoom fatigue. It can feel invasive because we have to deal with impression management (the way we come across and look). It can be helpful to turn your camera off and to make sure others in your group feel permission to turn theirs off. It is a cause of burnout for many people. As humans, we lose the variability we need when we see the same platform day after day—the same chair, the same screen. Humans need variety.

Why are remote meetings so much different from in-person interactions?

Think about how different it is to meet in person. With in-person interactions, we don't all arrive at the same time, so we naturally connect and socialize and goof off a little. With Zoom, we lose those small but critical moments of interaction. In Zoom meetings, there is no chit-chat or small talk in little groups. There is a hard beginning, a hard ending, and only one person talks at a time. We are not used to this, and these new environments are not giving us what we need. Mental burn out during a pandemic is a common and serious issue. Be mindful of this, and

work to improve things for your groups. Meet with people you enjoy talking to, and save time to chat or have social moments at the beginning or end of meetings.

Why aren't we getting used to this new way of communicating?

During this pandemic, most of us have become more isolated, and we are constantly feeling unsafe. Our world has changed and is no longer set up in the way it's supposed to be. Interestingly, our minds evolved to keep us safe, not to keep us happy and content and living a meaningful life. Because our minds are very skilled at finding danger, sometimes we get stuck when we feel sad and anxious, because sadness and anxiety seem dangerous to us. If we always focus on getting used to it, not stressing, and being happy, that won't lead to success. When the internal cues are telling us something isn't right, we need to normalize it. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) helps us practice that.

ACT Guide: A Self-Guided Mental Health Tool

What is ACT Guide at USU, and how can it improve mental health?

ACT is an evidence-based treatment that has been found to be effective for a wide range of mental health concerns in over 300 clinical trials. ACT Guide is a self-paced web app that teaches basic ACT skills. Since the launch of the pilot program last year, it has been found to improve students' mental health, including issues such as anxiety, depression, academic concerns, and overall flourishing in life.

The program we created includes 12 self-guided sessions that give you tools to help your mind to be more open, aware, and active. Honestly, we are all experiencing strain on our mental health right now, and this guide can give us a boost in addition to helping with targeted problems.

Can you give me an example of what I might learn with ACT guide?

One skill you might learn is how to acknowledge worries and negative feelings without being pushed around by them. Our minds are like an overeager assistant, trying to help us by constantly planning, evaluating, and trying to make us safe. They are always handing us notes and telling us what to worry about. When we keep getting notes about a persistent threat, we shouldn't deny or ignore it, but we can better respond to the danger when we don't let ourselves be pushed around by those worries. Your assistant is trying to help you, and you can't fire them

because they're part of you. Notice and acknowledge that what this assistant thinks and feels makes sense. Acknowledge the note. Say, "thanks for trying to keep me safe!" And then go on with your day. Sometimes we fight with our assistant rather than simply taking the note and moving on. Remember that you are the boss, and you can choose what to do with those notes.

Who uses this program? Is it affordable?

ACT Guide has been accessed by over 1,600 people worldwide since it was released last year. It's been so successful that we just started a pilot test version for adolescents for 12-17 that does require parental consent. We're seeing a notable portion of people who haven't sought services before.

You can purchase access to ACT Guide for \$10, which directly supports the program's hosting and development. The program is free for USU students.

[Learn more or sign up for ACT Guide](#)



Dr. Mike

Twohig: Expanding Options and Continuing Care with Telehealth

What is telehealth?

Basically, it is remote therapy where you are on a secure Zoom call with your therapist.

How has the pandemic impacted telehealth?

When COVID-19 hit Utah, the whole state had to immediately shift to telehealth. At the Sorenson Center, we previously had two telehealth suites, but the pandemic forced us to start doing it on a large scale. We quickly added 10 additional telehealth suites in the building and also created the ability to do telehealth offsite.

Both therapists and clients were a little cautious about whether telehealth would work—it was an unknown. But now, I believe many clients are going to keep doing it that way. It solves many access problems, and you don't have the inconvenience clients felt often driving in from Salt Lake City or Provo. We knew we needed to go this way eventually, but we are very grateful we were able to move to that so quickly in response to the pandemic.

What are the specific benefits of telehealth?

Telehealth is a good way for people in remote, underserved regions or those with mobility constraints to get care they need. There is no commute time, no parking, and it allows you to see anyone in the state with internet access and during a time that works for you. When you start and end the session, you are conveniently at your house.

Is it better to have therapy in person?

Evidence is strong that you get the same level of care with telehealth. I did many years of in-person therapy and many years of only telehealth; in terms of quality and offering helping services, studies say they have the same outcomes. There are even added benefits in terms of convenience.

Have you seen an increase in clients seeking telehealth?

Our general behavioral health clinic, which is now mostly telehealth, has seen a huge increase.

Therapy never slowed down during COVID-19 —my lists are longer than they used to be. We are actually able to provide more services than we could pre-COVID-19. It's been a great success during the pandemic, and it's going to change the way we work.

Do you think people will return to in-person therapy when the pandemic abates?

I know many patients and clinicians who won't to go back to being in person. Most clients are really satisfied with

telehealth as they realized it works better for them. There are so many advantages, and we want to expand even further—to do outreach and deliver to remote, rural parts of the state.

What kind of telehealth is offered specifically through the Sorenson Center? Who can get help?

In the behavioral health clinic at the Sorenson Center, we have all different levels of specialty therapists. Because the Sorenson Center is a community clinic, anyone can get services here, and that includes students. We can work on a sliding scale or with your insurance, depending on who your therapist is.

Is telehealth secure?

We use a HIPPA-compliant version of Zoom and professional Zoom accounts that have encryption, and our therapists go through the USU server, which has another level of security. Data is only stored on USU devices that are safe and secure.

Can clients still get in-person services?

Right now, our clients can choose if they want telehealth or in-person services. You pass through a screening table at the Sorenson Center, as you can't enter the clinic if you have been exposed or have symptoms. If someone prefers to be in person, we're doing it as safely as possible, wearing masks and staying farther apart.

Learn more about the services offered at the [Sorenson Center for Clinical Excellence](#).