

Suicide prevention apps should not replace intervention: NTU Singapore

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Majority of the existing mobile apps for suicide prevention and depression management do not provide the full set of suicide prevention strategies recommended in international clinical guidelines.

Today, there are about 318,000 healthcare apps globally today on the Apple App store and Google Play. Of these, more than 10,000 are mental health apps.

In a new study led by the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), a team of researchers looked at 69 apps sourced through a systematic search on Apple's App Store and Google Play. 20 were depression management apps and 46 suicide prevention apps. The three remaining apps covered both conditions.



A new study by NTU found that existing mobile apps for suicide prevention and depression management do not provide the full set of suicide prevention strategies recommended in international clinical guidelines. Photo courtesy: NTU

Most of the apps surveyed in the study provided emergency contact information and direct access to a crisis helpline. However, less than one in ten provided the six suicide prevention strategies that are commonly recommended in international clinical guidelines.

The six strategies recommended by the International guidelines from the UK, US and the World Health Organisation (WHO) are: the tracking of mood and suicidal thoughts, development of a safety plan, recommendation of activities to deter suicidal thoughts, information and educational articles on signs of suicidality, access to support networks, and emergency counselling.

In addition, incorrect emergency telephone numbers were found in several apps available worldwide. Among the apps providing incorrect information were two that had been downloaded more than one million times each.

“Some patients may feel more at ease discussing their mental condition online than in person,” said Assoc Prof Car, who is Director of NTU’s Centre for Population Health Sciences. “They also consider the internet accessible, affordable and convenient. With the high rates of smartphone use around the world, health apps can be a crucial addition in the way users manage their health and wellbeing on a global scale.”

Wong Lai Chun, Senior Assistant Director at Samaritans of Singapore, a non-profit organisation focused on crisis intervention and suicide prevention, advised against over-reliance on mobile apps. “As suicide is a complex and multi-faceted issue, intervention should not be replaced by mobile applications but rather, act as a complement to the existing pool of resources,” she said, adding that the findings of the study are “worrying”.