

# How Psychology Is Adapting To The World Of Tech

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With the increased use of online therapy and wellness-based mobile applications, the field of mental health is following in the path of physical health initiatives in the design of more accessible and convenient platforms. Online programs, such as [MassMen.org](#), allow users to remain anonymous — a feature that has never before been possible. This may encourage those less likely to seek help to address their mental health concerns. While these programs provide services through different platforms, to a different audience and from a greater distance than ever before, it remains to be seen how these services will transform the field of mental health.

The World Health Organization has declared the gap between those in need of mental health treatment and our capacity to meet this need a [significant, global problem](#). What effects have we seen so far from virtual therapy initiatives, and what positive (or

negative) outcomes can we expect as more communities take on this accessible, anonymous form of therapy?

One advantage of virtual treatment is that it occurs on a platform that has become comfortable and familiar to many: On average, children ages 8 to 18 spend [more than 7 hours per day online](#), and adults aren't far behind. Virtual options for mental health and wellness can be beneficial for reaching a larger spectrum of individuals in need. Studies have shown that, in some cases, virtual therapy can be [more efficient than traditional therapy](#). Higher outcome rates are likely propelled by the convenience and accessibility of the online platform: Once you connect with technology, you're able to utilize many resources.

Because these programs are online, they can be used through any device with an Internet connection, including a mobile phone. It is interesting to think about the implications this modality can have for a client experiencing emotional distress in real time. For example, imagine being able to access immediate resources and tips for short- and long-term management of distress.

As with traditional approaches to therapy, virtual mental health treatment has its downsides. Face-to-face interaction is essential for a therapist to [develop rapport with a client](#). Body language conveys important information about one's thoughts and emotions. Virtual therapy, while able to support visual components, still has its limits and may not offer the entire repertoire of emotional cues for a therapist to observe.

Another concern regarding some virtual mental health treatment is confidentiality. Sitting in a room with a therapist is an entirely different experience than communicating via the Internet to a potentially anonymous recipient. The rationale behind therapy initiatives such as MassMen.org is that the anonymity will make at-risk populations feel safe behind a screen. However, the news of hacking and failed security continues to make headlines, which could cause concern among those seeking treatment.

Cost also could become a factor. It is likely that insurance will eventually pay at appropriate rates for these services, but it may take time for companies to catch up with coverage as virtual therapy continues to develop in different communities and in various forms of intensity.

This uncertainty about the future of virtual therapy makes it all the more exciting to watch as this approach continues to grow and develop. Virtual therapy is evidence that the field of psychology continues to advance its development of effective treatments and supports increased access to mental health care.

My organization, [The Freedman Center at William James College](#), has partnered with Numedeon, Inc. to bring mental health and wellness to children through the WhyWellness project. Through a virtual learning environment called [Whyville](#), which embeds simulation-based learning in an engaging and safe collaborative gaming environment, WhyWellness helps children learn about mental health and wellness.

Children participate in various activities and role-playing games that act out challenges they face in their daily lives. The games mimic real-world situations and encourage the development of clinically relevant coping strategies. For example, the Wellness Center's most popular game, the Distressed Avatar, rewards users for selecting appropriate coping strategies to improve the avatar's distressing situation.

WhyWellness has been proven successful in reaching large numbers of youth from more than 160 countries, and approximately 20,000 users have participated in the Distressed Avatar since the launch of the WhyWellness Project in April of 2012. By increasing prevention efforts among children, WhyWellness aims to reduce the demand for mental health treatment, thereby closing the gap between treatment need and the capabilities of our society to meet this need. Moreover, the program fosters autonomy among children by equipping them with a strong coping and problem-solving skill set.

While the future of virtual therapy is still unknown, it has been found so far to change the way therapists and patients use technology. Hopefully, as more virtual therapy options emerge, more people will seek virtual and in-person treatment for their mental health concerns. By focusing on prevention and accessibility, these initiatives could improve our society's openness to discussing mental health and wellness.