



The Virtual Hope Box

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A recent study found that a smartphone app was more effective than print materials at improving veterans' ability to cope with unpleasant emotions and thoughts. The veterans in the study were in mental health treatment and had recently reported suicidal ideation. The app, called the Virtual Hope Box (VHB), is modeled on a cognitive behavioral therapy technique that uses a physical box containing things that remind patients of positive experiences, reasons for living, people who care about them, or coping resources.

Study participants were randomly assigned to a control group that received treatment as usual plus supplemental print materials, or an intervention group that received treatment as usual plus the VHB. Those assigned to the intervention group reported that the app was somewhat or very helpful (84%) and that they would be somewhat or very likely to use it again (87%) or recommend it to others (90%). The most frequent reasons for using the app were to cope with distress, overwhelming emotions, and thoughts of hurting themselves as well as for relaxation, distraction, or inspiration.

The app did not have any significant advantage over print materials in reducing suicidal ideation or increasing reasons for living. The authors of the study concluded that the VHB may be an important way to improve patient coping by making an existing cognitive behavioral therapy technique more convenient and accessible.

Bush, N. E., Smolenski, D. J., Denneson, L. M., Williams, H. B., Thomas, E. K., & Dobscha, S. K. (2017). A Virtual Hope Box: Randomized controlled trial of a smartphone app for emotional regulation and coping with distress. *Psychiatric Services*, 68(4), 330–336.

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