

Self-Care for the Selfie Generation: How Technology Can Teach Coping Skills

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My office couch has become the location of many meltdowns — missed exams, relationship break-ups, roommate conversations gone awry, and even a few family drama moments. Though this is to be expected — I do, after all, come from a counseling background and work in the Dean of Students office (the office where many problems seem to begin or end!). However, the new factor affecting this work over the last few years has been technology. I've received screenshots of Snapchats, play by play of email chains with professors, and the occasional text message rundown of a misinterpreted emoji.

Our students use technology on a regular basis to communicate, to explore their world, and to interpret their experience through video, images, and 280 character messages. Their phones are an extension of their bodies and a security blanket, while also bringing on stress, an overwhelming amount of information, and an endless number of distractions that keep them from engaging with the “real world.” While I have hosted “unplugged” events and talked about the benefits of face to face communication, I've also presented on the nuances of emojis and how they can help with emotional intelligence, as well as my most popular presentation — “Ther-app-y,” or using apps on phones to promote positive mental health.

I wanted to share some of my most frequently downloaded apps and highlight their features, along with some options that are helpful for higher education professionals as well. While encouraging our students to practice self-care, we are often more effective when we can give our own reviews of apps and share how we put different techniques into practice.

Let's start with some mindfulness and relaxation apps. *Calm* is one of the forerunners on relaxation and offers downloadable apps for Apple and Android devices, as well as website features through calm.com. There is a subscription option if you want to unlock the full library, but the free content is a great introduction and includes several “7 Day” series focusing on stress, anxiety, meditation, gratitude, and self-esteem. Pro-tip: many of my colleagues put calm.com in the background of their browser for some relaxing ambient noise during the day.

Next is Headspace — the most comprehensive introduction to meditation out there. Also available on iTunes and Google Play, Headspace features a free ten-day crash course on meditation which teaches the basic skills and creates a foundation for mindfulness training.

Once in the app, you can find other meditations focused on sleep, work, attention, and even one for kids.

I call [Relax Melodies](#) my customizable sound machine, and it's great for studying, sleeping, or anytime you need to take a breather. You can layer a unique combination of sounds to create your own preferences, and they have started offering guided meditation recordings as well, including body scans and progressive muscle relaxation.

If you have a student who especially wants to address anxiety or stress, two of my favorite apps can be used in conjunction. Check out [Self-Help for Anxiety Management](#) and [Mindshift](#) — both help to define anxiety, address negative thinking patterns, and provide check-in tools that help students track their anxiety or stress responses.

For panic or anxiety attacks, *Breathe2Relax* is an awesome app available for [Apple](#) and [Android](#) devices that incorporates audio and visual cues for deep breathing exercises. Students can customize the length of the breath, as well as background scene and audio to create their own personalized breathing routine. This is just one of many apps that was created by the National Center for Telehealth and Technology, or T2, which is a subsidiary of the Department of Defense. The majority of their apps have been designed for use by active or retired military, but have great cross-over application to the college population and have remained up-to-date with the ongoing focus on mental health. Check out *Mood Tracker* (via [Apple](#) or [Android](#)) and *Virtual Hope Box* (via [Apple](#) or [Android](#)) for some other options by this developer!

Finally, we know depression and negative thoughts can be overwhelming to students, and there are two apps that address those concerns and use common therapeutic techniques to help. [MoodTools](#) is a free app on both platforms that incorporates journaling, embedded videos, and a depression questionnaire to connect students to helpful coping strategies and resources. I've also found *What's Up?* (via [Apple](#) or [Android](#)) is a great overview of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) techniques. Both of these approaches include reframing negative thinking patterns and using “grounding techniques” to keep students rooted in the present moment.

Of course, none of these apps or websites are intended to replace ongoing treatment with a mental health professional in situations where that is appropriate or needed. However, in the right context these apps can provide a wonderful supplement for students seeking additional practice outside of therapy and help to educate others on useful skills for practice. Any efforts

that break the stigma of seeking help for mental health needs are always welcomed on college campuses where we know many students will avoid support services because of potential embarrassment or shame. Feel free to share these with your students and chapters and let us know how you incorporate them into your educational programs this year!

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Lauren Thorn is an associate dean in the Dean of Students Office at East Carolina University, providing student-centered support as well as programming around resiliency and civility on campus. She is a proud ECU alumna, a licensed clinical social worker, and has a passion for raising awareness of mental health needs of college students while reducing stigma around counseling and other wellness related services. Prior to working in the Dean of Students office, Lauren was a staff counselor and outreach coordinator in the Center for Counseling and Student Development at ECU, and has also worked in the community as a school social worker and outpatient therapist. In her free time, Lauren enjoys spending time with her husband and two children, volunteering with the local Junior League, and being creative through art, photography, and music.