

# conversation

with Bill Howatt, Ph.D.,  
and Shandy McLean



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*Digital mental health tools have been growing in popularity, especially as plans and organizations navigate lockdowns and remote work arrangements that have kept employees apart during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these tools deliver mental health resources, programs and education through self-service access, but a notable gap exists in how to address the increasing risk of social isolation and loneliness among employees who are in need of human connections. The following conversation with Bill Howatt, Ph.D., founder and chief executive officer of Howatt HR, and Shandy McLean, vice president at Arete, provides insights into how organizations can use tools like apps to help employees build those connections and better address their mental health needs.*

**Dr. Howatt, what are some of the greatest needs you're seeing in terms of mental health—both for individual health needs and organizational benefit programs?**

For years, organizations have allocated dollars for reacting to employees' mental health needs. These investments are critical because they provide rapid access to mental health supports. COVID has shined a light on humans having a breaking point. Mental illness was a major challenge before COVID and will increase incrementally over the next five to ten years as the fallout from the pandemic settles in. The greatest need is for strategic investments into mental health prevention to improve employees' mental fitness. Mental fitness is not a one-and-done approach. Like any Plan-Do-Check-Act initiative, there is no goal line. Rather, the focus is on continuous improvement and evidence-based outcomes.

**Shandy, how can mental wellness apps respond to the current needs of Canadians?**

Digital tools are an important part of the mix of supports we should be offering to Canadians. Apps and online or virtual services—when part of a continuum of evidence-based supports from prevention to treatment—offer new ways for engaging people in their own mental health journey. Individuals can now facilitate self-learning and skill development, build so-

cial connections with others and, for those who need extra support, easily access professional support or therapy. However, because Canadians are not a homogenous group and people will engage with technology differently based on a number of factors (i.e., age, access to technology, concerns about privacy, personal experiences of what works best for them, etc.), a single app or website shouldn't be seen as a complete solution to these complex challenges. Instead, it should be embedded as part of a comprehensive mental health strategy.

**Dr. Howatt, could you explain ways in which a mental health app can create connections and develop appropriate skills among users while providing insights to organizations?**

Employers must first have context and understand what problem a potential mental health app is trying to solve. It makes no sense to assume all employees have the same challenge when it comes to mental health. One growing challenge that employers need to solve is the unintended consequences of having a large number of employees working remotely most of the time, making it difficult for them to build psychologically safe relationships in the workplace. An app that assists employees with understanding how to build and maintain social connections can help reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, reducing risks to mental health.

***Shandy, how can apps evolve or be customized for certain audiences and/or organizations?***

Apps should be built to evolve and may be customized to offer additional value for the user or the insurer/organization offering it to their members. Creating tailored utilization reporting, customizing in-app educational content for specific audiences or using digital touchpoints to connect members to other wellness benefits in their plans are just a few examples. It's also possible that an app initially designed for one audience can be successfully adapted to add value for a different audience or user group, but it's important to explore this kind of customization carefully and collaboratively. The decision-making process should include a review of evidence, engagement with the new audience to understand their lived experiences and needs, and the development of a new research framework to guide its implementation and evaluation. For example, we're interested in understanding how the mental wellness app we're currently offering to employees to address mental health risks from isolation and loneliness could be properly adapted for use by retirees. We'll begin carefully exploring the needs and nuances of this audience with researchers and the app developers as a possible offering for the future.

***Dr. Howatt, what challenges do organizations face in terms of access and usage rate for mental wellness apps? And how can organizations encourage employees to interact with an app?***

Employers must understand that an app is not a magic pill; employees still need to do something. My recommendation is to consider blended learning options. For example, have apps be part of a targeted eight-week course. The course can help create purpose and engagement by having employees

interact with a course facilitator who can frame the benefits for using the app as a monitoring and discovery tool between sessions and as a post-course resource. A target course example is that employees who are concerned about the quality of social connections, isolation and loneliness could be invited to a course where the app is introduced and positioned as a post-course support tool. Technology is wonderful, but we must remember that humans need humans. Research suggests that blending technology with human interaction and supports increases retention, learning and impact.

***Shandy, what would be some next steps for an organization looking to find a mental health app that can address the needs of its members/employees?***

Approach the selection process thoughtfully, considering your organizational needs and the needs of those you serve. When we started on this journey, we deliberately searched for a partner whose product was aligned with our own organizational mission of building resilience and, accordingly, could demonstrably increase (through research) the user's agency, knowledge, understanding, skill and confidence to preventively address unique risks to their mental health. It was also critical from an ethical standpoint that "no one was left behind"—Any digital mental health tool or app we selected needed to make it easy to access counselling through the app for those who needed it. Lastly, consider what will make your organization stand out in a marketplace oversaturated with common mental health apps and tools. While competitive pricing is always important, consider how a carefully designed mental health strategy that uniquely addresses new or emerging risks to mental health can position your organization as an attractive leader in this space.