



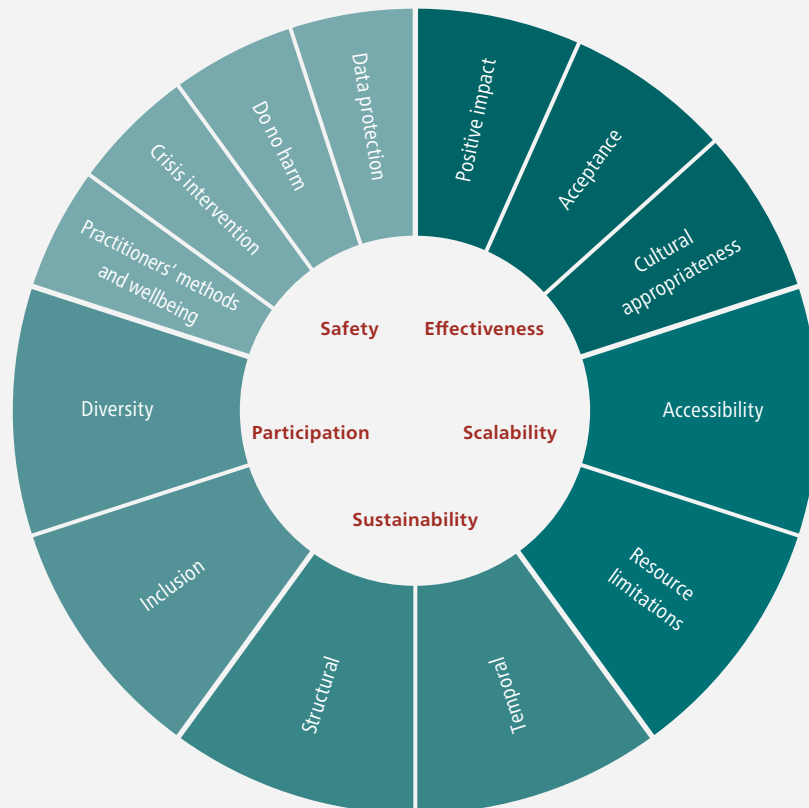
What are the opportunities and challenges of digital MHPSS?

Digital MHPSS interventions involve opportunities and benefits, like the potential to increase reach and provide equitable access to care. But they also harbour challenges and risks, like excluding those with a low educational level or a low degree of technical literacy¹.

Thus, when using digital solutions, it is important to remember that there are obvious inequalities related to technology that must be taken into consideration. One is Internet access, as in 2023 the average percentage of Internet users in European countries was 91%, compared to 37% in the African region². Challenges and

opportunities thus need to be balanced when developing and providing digital MHPSS interventions.

In the 2022 report on *Digital Mental Health and Psychosocial Support: Challenges and Best Practices*, commissioned by the IFRC and the Swiss Red Cross, the authors from the London School of Economics presented the following framework for assessing opportunities and challenges with digital MHPSS. For another analysis, plotted into the levels of the MHPSS pyramid, see Chapter 6 in the UNHCR report on digital MHPSS for displaced and stateless individuals³.



Safety, effectiveness, scalability, sustainability, participation (SESSP) – an analytical framework for assessing digital MHPSS good practices



Advantages of digital MHPSS

Using digital methods can help us reach more people and be more inclusive in the growing MHPSS field. The increased availability of Internet and mobile technologies, coupled with the potential effectiveness of low-intensity psychological interventions, provides opportunities to offer MHPSS services to a wide range of individuals.

The spectrum of digital psychological and psychosocial support is considered to offer the following advantages:

Safety

Digital interventions prevent experiences of stigmatization and reduce barriers to seeking psychological and psychosocial help by enabling anonymous, non-public and secure use.

Scalability

With digital interventions, MHPSS efforts can be diversified, and larger parts of the population can be reached with fewer human and financial resources, using task-shifting and sharing digital content across National Societies. Digital interventions have the potential to improve access for geographically remote areas as they can be provided without visiting a hospital or a clinic and can reduce barriers such as transportation costs, lack of free time or lack of childcare⁵.

Sustainability & participation

With digital technologies, broad-scale interventions that allow representation and community participation can be created. Content and design can be continuously adapted and contextualized to the needs of the target group with a participatory approach and be delivered to the users through appropriate channels. Once the technology is in place, the variable costs of digital interventions are low.

Effectiveness

Over 20 years of research show that technology-empowered and Internet-based mental health services are an effective, resource-efficient alternative to face-to-face approaches with similar outcomes. Combined with face-to-face sessions in blended/hybrid formats, they add value to existing interventions.



Challenges with digital MHPSS

Besides these advantages, there are, however, also critical aspects that need to be taken into account when considering digital pathways to MHPSS.

Safety

Digital MHPSS interventions may fall short in delivering effective crisis care and can cause unintended harm to users when misused. Concerns about the infringement of privacy, when one device is shared in the family, or about a violation of data protection have been expressed when it comes to the use of new technologies, which can lead to lower use because of fear of stigma and can thus be an obstacle for reach in marginalized groups.

Scalability

Access to digital services can be limited due to structural, social, individual and technological barriers, such as a lack of Internet coverage or devices, and the lack of sufficient privacy in settings where mental health issues are highly stigmatized.

Further, the use of digital MHPSS services often also requires a high level of motivation, a relatively high level of digital literacy and affinity, and sufficient reading/writing skills on the part of the users.

Sustainability & participation

A lack of structural embedment of the digital MHPSS service in the existing healthcare system can hinder long-term, sustainable implementation.

Also not to be underestimated are the time, resources, patience and flexibility required for the development of a contextually appropriate and needs-based digital MHPSS service, since many different stakeholders and target group representatives need to participate and be actively involved. Added to this, interventions that are app- or web-based require regular revision to improve the user experience, to keep the information up to date and to comply with changing regulations. This includes long-term, ongoing staff time and thus financing.

Effectiveness

Evidence is mainly related to specialized digital mental health interventions in the top layers of the MHPSS-pyramid, while there is a gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of digital basic psychosocial support in the lower layers. Moreover, evidence is often produced from a Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) perspective. The effectiveness of digital solutions can be restricted due to a lack of relevance, a misfit with the target group's life context and the setting in which it is implemented. More information about the evidence for digital interventions can be found in the factsheet [When, where and for whom is digital MHPSS suitable?](#)



Sources/references

¹ Neidhardt, C., Palacios Mateo, S., Schmidt-Gödelitz, F. & Tsang, L. (2022). Digital Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS): Challenges and Best Practices. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

² International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Internet use (2024) Retrieved from : <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2023/10/10/ff23-internet-use/>

³ Raftree L. Designing Safe Digital Mental Health and Psycho–Social Support (MHPSS) for Displaced and Stateless Adolescents. UNHCR Innovation Services; 2023 Jan.