meru health

The Benefits Administrator's Guide to Mental Health Solutions

A guide for
HR professionals

Employee mental health is in a state of crisis.

As a benefits administrator, you're aware that mental health needs are at an all-time high. Almost half of workers are now suffering from mental health issues, up from 39% in 2019 to 46% in 2020.[1] Untreated mental health issues are a silent threat to employers.

To meet the growing demand, more and more organizations are mobilizing to add mental health treatment to their employee benefits and health plans. Unfortunately, not all mental healthcare platforms are created equal. How can you know which ones are both effective and right for your workforce? Read on.

---
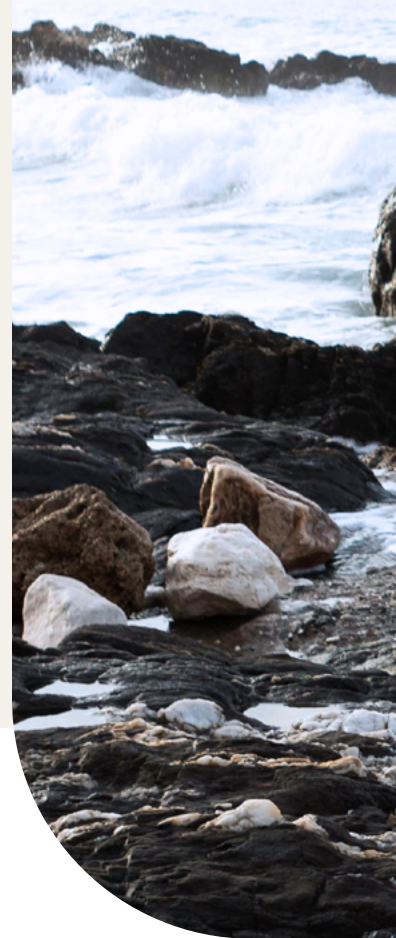
1. *Impact on Behavioral Health in the Workplace, 2020.*

52%

of employees are experiencing burnout

Indeed Employee Burnout Report, 2021.

Digital mental health solutions are popping up left and right.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, we currently have only 28% of the mental healthcare professionals required to meet the need in the United States. Unsurprisingly, a wave of digital startups has washed in to fill the void.

Some of these companies are trying to address the need with clinically sound offerings, but others are simply trying to take advantage of the need by slapping together apps and websites with little or no basis in patient outcomes.

To get your employees the effective mental healthcare they need, you're going to have to learn to separate the good from the bad. Here's how.

Key questions for evaluating digital mental health solutions:

1 Is the solution clinically validated?
(Outcomes & efficacy)

2 Does it offer anything beyond traditional care?
(Innovation & differentiation)

3 How are fees structured?
(Cost)

4 Will employees actually use it?
(Engagement)

Is the solution clinically validated?

While many—if not most—digital mental health solutions boast about engagement or claim that they offer evidence-based therapy, the truth is that **only 3% of mobile health apps are validated in clinical trials.** The good news: You don't have to dig very deep to figure out who is for real.
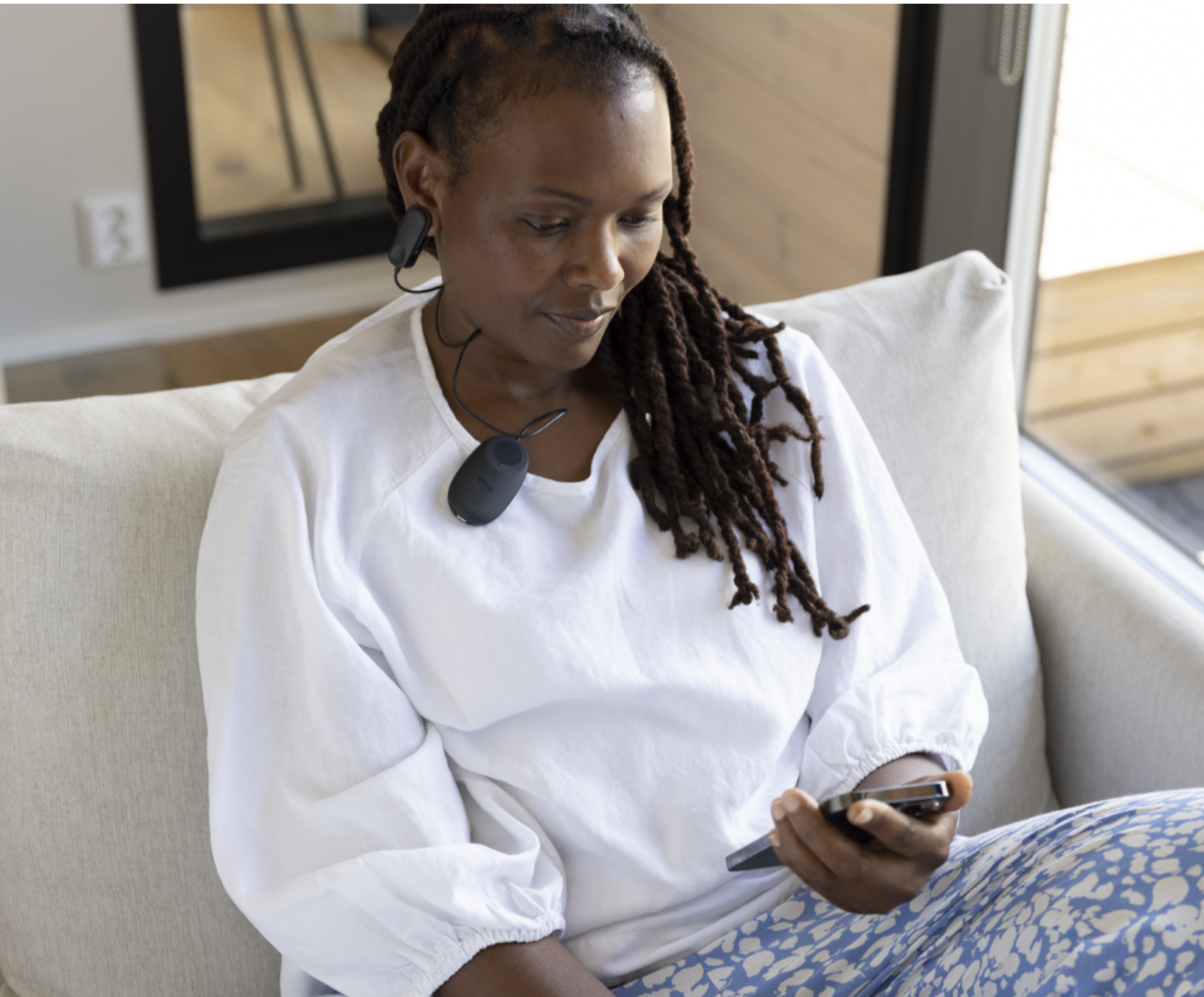
The questions to consider:

Are they measuring metrics tied to mental health outcomes?
For example, some solutions track clinically validated scales for measuring depression (like the PHQ-9) and generalized anxiety (like the GAD-7).

For employees like yours who have used their solution, what results have been shown in terms of symptom reduction over time, both short- and long-term?

Are they conducting clinical trials to show the efficacy of their solution?
If so, what kinds of trials? A randomized control trial can measure whether a person's recovery was due to their solution or another factor, like time.

Have they published their results in a peer-reviewed journal? Or do they have their manuscripts available?
Research supporting the broad intervention is not enough. For example, some solutions will point to general research on the efficacy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as an approach. Instead, research must support the actual product or specific service someone is trying to sell you, and it should be published in a recognized peer-reviewed journal. Published research goes through a rigorous screening process, ensuring that the analyses are accurate and conclusions are fair.

Solutions that aren't tracking mental health outcomes with statistically significant results may not make a meaningful difference in your employee mental health. And any solution without peer-reviewed research may not be scientifically sound.

50%

of U.S. employees suffer from work-related stress.

Gallup. State of the Global Workplace, 2022.

Is the solution innovating beyond the traditional care model?

"New" doesn't mean "novel." Just because a service is delivered digitally doesn't mean it's actually providing anything better than what's been offered for decades. In fact, some digital-first solutions use the perception of newness to get away with care models that are actually worse than what came before.

Solutions that fundamentally rethink care share some or all of the following:

→ **They reduce or even remove the reliance on care providers** by incorporating app-based interventions and self-guided lessons that have been clinically shown to deliver quality outcomes. This also reduces the strain on therapists, so they're available to treat those most in need.

→ **They employ artificial intelligence and/or machine learning** to free providers from administrative burdens and help route patients to appropriate care.

→ **They move beyond traditional talk therapy.** The most effective interventions from this latest wave of solutions are built for modern work styles and schedules. They also take a more holistic approach to mental health, with a focus on the mind-body connection via nutrition, exercise, sleep, and social interactions. (In other words, they're not just making a 150 year-old talk therapy model available in app form.)

With traditional talk therapy, patients continue to rely on one-to-one clinician support over time. How does the solution you're evaluating support your employees both in the short and long term? Short-term solutions may leave employees without the care they need. Innovative long-term innovative solutions empower employees with the knowledge and skills they need to handle the ups and downs of life.

Will your employees actually use it?

You don't want to pay for anything your employees won't use. Here are a few key ways you can determine whether your employees will actually use a solution:

→ **What are their engagement stats? How does that compare to others?**
There's a lot of obfuscation that happens here. Ask point blank: How many eligible employees sign up per year?

→ **Is it easy for employees to use?**
Can the mental health program be accessed via smartphone? Anytime?

→ **Can employees message a provider whenever they need support?**

→ **How will information about the solution reach everyone?**
Some digital mental health solutions take care of the promotion of the service to your employees. This ensures the offering stays on top of people's minds and has the potential to reduce stigma.

→ **How do they incorporate user feedback?**
Are they continuously tailoring their approach using real-world data, usage information, and employee feedback?

→ **Is there a licensed professional overseeing the treatment?**
Studies show that human feedback greatly reduces drop off rates.

→ **How much of your employee population can the solution support?**
Is the solution targeting a subclinical population? What range of symptom severity does it support? What are the risk and escalation protocols?

→ **How do they handle employee confidentiality and anonymity?**
59% of employees fear for their job security if they come forward with a mental health issue.[1] Additionally, employers worry about possible discrimination suits if affected employees are disciplined. Providing employees with anonymous access to digital mental health interventions that are strictly confidential is essential for getting everyone the treatment they need. If the offerings for mental health care are not fully confidential and easy to use privately, employees are less likely to use them.

1. *Businessolver. State of Workplace Empathy Executive Summary, 2022.* **13**

Digital mental health solutions expand much-needed access to mental care during this time when we face both a critical shortage and an unprecedented need.

It's often less costly than traditional face-to-face methods and meets employees where they are. Digital technology also allows human resource professionals to see true measurements of care effectiveness and engagement.

Use this guide to make sure you're asking the right questions when choosing among the many solutions. Getting clear on each offering's clinical validity and potential return on investment will improve both your employees' mental health and your bottom line.

meru health