

Accelerating Digital Mental Health: The Society of Digital Psychiatry's Three-Pronged Roadmap for Education, Digital Navigators, and AI.

John Torous, Kathryn Taylor Ledley, Carla Gorban, Gillian Strudwick, Julian Schwarz, Soumya Choudhary, Margaret Emerson, Michelle Patriquin, Allison Dempsey, Jason Bantjes, Laura Ospina Pinillos, Jennie Hornick, Shruti Kochhar

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Abstract

Digital mental health tools, including apps, virtual reality, and AI, show increasing evidence of benefit, yet their translation into routine clinical practice remains limited. To bridge this gap, the Society of Digital Psychiatry and JMIR Mental Health have launched an international initiative focused on clinician education, the training of Digital Navigators, and the development of standards for artificial intelligence to support equitable, safe, and evidence-based implementation. This multipronged approach aims to accelerate uptake, ensure ethical and effective use of emerging technologies, and expand access to high-quality mental health care worldwide.

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Original Manuscript

Accelerating Digital Mental Health: The Society of Digital Psychiatry's Three-Pronged Roadmap for Education, Digital Navigators, and AI.

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As research on digital mental health tools, such as apps, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, continues to expand and suggest benefits, clinical interest has also increased. Yet the gap between research and real-world implementation remains stark [1]. Towards bridging this divide, the Society of Digital Psychiatry and the Journal of Medical Internet Research (JMIR) Mental Health have developed a multipronged international approach to support training, implementation, and standards for digital mental health worldwide.

The potential of digital mental health tools has become a global focus, with mental health now

viewed as the single greatest health concern [2] with technology supporting this growing need [3]. With smartphone ownership now exceeding 90% in many countries and internet access improving across the world [4], technical barriers to digital mental health continue to fall. Although digital literacy barriers persist and are even greater for non-English speakers, they are now well recognized, with programs demonstrating the capacity to support even patients with serious mental illness, adolescents navigating developmental transitions, and older adults.

Notably, however, even when reimbursement is available [7], multiple reviews have confirmed that adoption of digital solutions—ranging from mobile applications to digital therapeutics and artificial intelligence—remains low among both patients and clinicians [5,6]. Patient self-help tools have also faced low engagement with data suggesting that some degree of clinical support is necessary [8,9], especially since the smartphone app market is non homogenous in providing privacy and efficacy information [10]. These challenges are not new, and landmark research by Bamul et al in 2019 demonstrated that user engagement with mental health apps is negligible after one week [11]. Ng et al in 2019 also revealed that a lack of consensus in measuring engagement and uptake of digital mental health tools precludes progress [12]. The literature also points to inequities between HICs and LMICs; for instance, despite the abundance of apps, only 14.5% are available in Spanish and none have undergone evaluation with Spanish-speaking users [13]. Moreover, digital competency - particularly patients' and clinicians' ability to effectively use and evaluate mental health apps - remains difficult to assess, as only few validated instruments are currently available [14,15]. Ben-Zeev et al. in 2015 called for the need for a technology coach to support integration and engagement [16]. Now in 2025, these challenges remain largely unsolved with engagement remaining low, standards non-existent, and the use of technology coaches, now referred to as Digital Navigators [17], still minimal.

While continued research will provide new solutions, additional approaches are necessary to ensure progress in digital mental health implementation can accelerate to meet the need for clinical care. The Society of Digital Psychiatry is implementing a three-pronged approach [Figure 1]. First, expand education to increase clinical uptake and engagement with digital tools. Secondly, provide training and support for Digital Navigators to facilitate broad implementation. Lastly, develop standards for artificial intelligence to catalyze progress by establishing clear benchmarks for success and guiding future innovation.

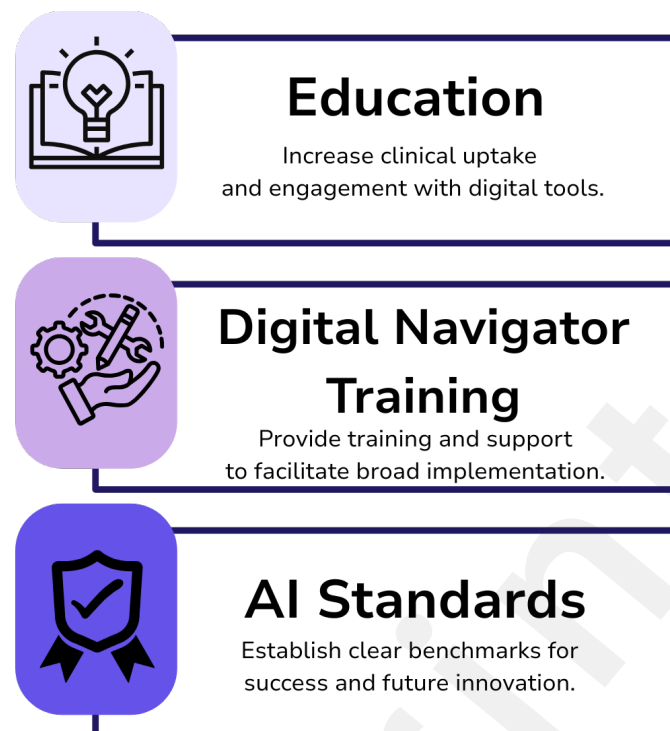


Figure 1: The Society of Digital Psychiatry's Three-Pronged Approach

The Society of Digital Psychiatry is dedicated to promoting clinician education in digital mental health. Today, many medical and nursing schools, peer specialist training programs, psychology and therapy degree programs, and other clinical training pathways do not cover digital mental health. Clinicians are understandably hesitant to recommend digital tools without adequate training or evidence-based guidance. Even when motivated to integrate technology, they frequently experience pressure to preserve existing workflows, resulting in technology being deprioritized. These challenges are compounded by the lack of clinic- and system-level infrastructures to facilitate effective implementation [18].

JMIR Mental Health serves as the official journal of the Society for Digital Psychiatry (SODP), embodying its shared mission to advance and disseminate cutting-edge research in digital mental health. So in response to these challenges, the journal and society jointly host a monthly webinar series that highlights emerging innovations and diverse perspectives from invited speakers, featuring experts in digital psychiatry, internet interventions, cutting-edge technologies, mental health policy, ethics, etc. (<https://www.sodpsych.com/webinars-1>). Guests are thoughtfully selected based on their real-world work and ability to present up-to-date content. This series is designed to spotlight rigorous, critical, and forward-looking research that explores how and why new digital mental health tools and technologies work, their limitations, and their place within broader care models. This collaborative effort not only extends the reach of this research to a global audience but also enhances the society's visibility and representation at major conferences, including the American Psychiatric Association (APA) annual meeting. These events provide a crucial platform for authors, editors, reviewers, and readers to engage with both *JMIR Mental Health* and SODP, learn about their initiatives, and contribute to the broader movement for evidence-based, peer-reviewed research. Complementary outreach activities, such as participation in the APA's Mental Health Innovation Zone and the publication of post-event blogs, further extend the journal and society's reach, ensuring their work bridges the gap between research and clinical implementation. The recordings from these monthly webinars are subsequently repurposed into evergreen video content and made available asynchronously on YouTube and other social media platforms, including LinkedIn, X, Facebook, and

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A similar approach is applied to the annual symposium, with each session produced and promoted individually to transform valuable knowledge into lasting, accessible educational resources. Furthermore, a quarterly newsletter co-published by JMIR Mental Health and the SODP provides insights into emerging trends and developments in digital mental health, featuring highlighted books, recent webinar recordings, upcoming industry events, and a quarterly question-and-answer section. This newsletter serves as a free, credible resource for the community, ensuring they remain informed about advances in the field. As an immediate next step, the Society of Digital Psychiatry will formally support the training and educational goals of clinicians and researchers through collaboration on core curriculum with major educational bodies and providing a structured training plan for researchers, which is often required when applying for career development awards.

The Society of Digital Psychiatry is also committed to advancing the safe and effective application of artificial intelligence to improve and expand mental health care. As Artificial Intelligence (AI) and large language models become increasingly powerful and capable of enhancing aspects of clinical care, the need for clear benchmarks and standards is crucial [19]. Without effective ways to evaluate the risks and benefits of artificial intelligence in mental health, the field will be unable to self-regulate and pursue the most promising advances. Today, there are over 50 frameworks to evaluate artificial intelligence, yet none of them are actionable and able to guide care considerations or research advances [20-84]. Leveraging the diversity and global reach of the Society of Digital Psychiatry, we will propose clear and actionable recommendations that will improve transparency, understanding, and collaboration in the mental health artificial intelligence space. We will also support the creation of benchmarking tools, through the mindBenchAI initiative, that will enable any artificial intelligence program to score against a representative, comprehensive, and rigorous battery of cases.

Ultimately, the Society of Digital Psychiatry is dedicated to promoting the growth of Digital Navigator roles. Digital Navigators are currently conceptualized as human support coaches who can assist with digital access/equity, patient engagement, and the clinical integration of any digital health technology, are increasingly in demand [85-92]. Yet foundational and scalable training, let alone certification and support for the role, is missing. The Society of Digital Psychiatry will share leading examples of Digital Navigator programs worldwide to offer training and support to any team seeking to introduce the role. While each team will need to customize the role for their unique clinical setting and technology use case, there are core skills and competencies that the Society of Digital Psychiatry will support to ensure consistent base training, fidelity to that training, and access to new training/skills as the field evolves while also exploring how best to adapt the Digital Navigator role into diverse health systems across the globe.

Education, standards, and Digital Navigator training are not a panacea that negates the need for more research. Instead, each of these three efforts can support new research advances by ensuring it reaches clinicians quickly through education, is transparent in its risks/benefits through standards, and is ready to be implemented through Digital Navigators. Thus, the ongoing partnership between the Society of Digital Psychiatry and JMIR Mental Health provides an ideal platform to ensure that the best research informs the society's efforts and the society's efforts advance that research towards its goal of supporting care.

With this renewed focus, it is essential to note that the Society of Digital Psychiatry's name refers to the goal to support digital tools, including but not limited to therapy-based and all patients, including those with severe mental illness. Such a goal requires an inclusive team, and the society's

educational focus already reflects this, as well as our leadership team representing different roles, professions, and voices from across the world. Looking ahead, the society is also committed to ensuring these efforts are relevant and actionable across the Global South; by supporting culturally adapted AI standards, scalable Digital Navigator training tailored for LMIC contexts, and fostering equitable research and policy partnerships worldwide.

Membership today stands at just over 300 interprofessional members and remains open, with applicable access at <https://www.sodpsych.com/>. We hope you will join us in supporting the acceleration of digital mental health towards improving outcomes for all patients today and preventing these illnesses for people tomorrow.

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