



Can Digital CBT improve mental health in young adults in England?

A strategy for tackling anxiety and depression using a health promotion approach.



Key message : A health promotion strategy to address anxiety and depression.



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Population Health and Digital
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1. Background

Anxiety and depression are two of the biggest drivers of disability in young adults in England and are becoming more common and are putting significant strain on NHS Talking Therapies (NHS England, 2025). While face-to-face Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is the gold-standard psychological therapy, there are workforce constraints and long waiting times, limiting timely access (NICE, 2022). Digital Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (dCBT) is a scalable public health intervention that has the potential to scale up access to evidence-based interventions. But it must be sustained, supported by therapists, and have access to digital platforms that is equally accessible, which means that technological innovation is not an answer to mental health inequalities.



3. HEALTH PROMOTION PRINCIPLES (OTTAWA CHARTER)

Empowerment: DCBT enhances self-efficacy by teaching cognitive restructuring and problem-solving techniques, allowing people to take charge of their mental health. The concept of self-management, however, requires a certain level of digital and health literacy.

Equitable access: The online delivery enhances access for those who are unable or not able to attend face-to-face due to rural location or other work or caring responsibilities.

Participation: Interactive exercises, goal setting and mood monitoring encourage active patient involvement, improving adherence and behavioural ownership.

Prevention: Early digital interventions can help with secondary prevention by detecting signs of poor mental health before they escalate and can help avoid further demand for NHS services.



6. CONCLUSION:

Digital CBT is an evidence-based public health intervention that has the potential to enhance access to psychological support for youth who are suffering from anxiety and depression. Through the principles of the Ottawa Charter and the COM-B behaviour change framework, dCBT promotes empowerment, participation and early intervention. However, there is a growing body of evidence that digital delivery isn't necessarily more effective and should be used alongside rather than in place of therapist-led delivery. There is a need to persistently invest in digital inclusion, clinician support and evidence informed implementation across NHS services to ensure equitable mental health outcomes.

7. REFERENCE

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2. Public Health Need

This is because **1 in 4 young adults** has symptoms of **anxiety or depression** (Mental Health Foundation 2023).

Poor educational outcomes, unemployment and long term disability are risks associated with delayed access to treatment.

As services expand, NHS Talking Therapies continue to have their needs grow (NHS England, 2025).

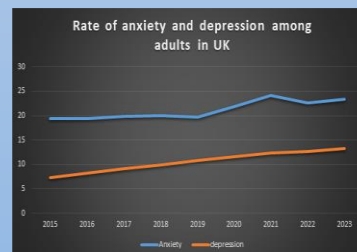
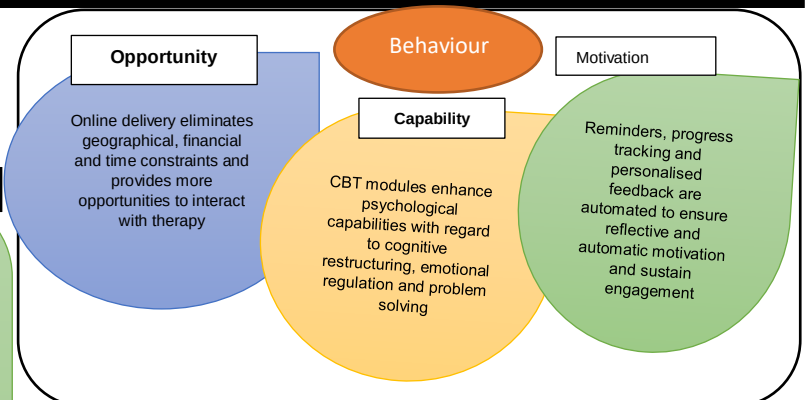


Figure 1 : Line Graph shows the level of anxiety and depression among adult in UK from 2019 to 2023 (ONS;2023, NHS England;2025)

❖ Public Health Impact:

Reduced productivity, Poor quality of life, Widening health inequalities

4. Behaviour change theory (COM-B Model)



4. Expected Outcomes

- ✓ Implementation of Digital CBT within NHS Talking Therapies is expected to:
- ✓ Improve early access to evidence-based psychological interventions.
- ✓ Increase self-management and mental health literacy.
- ✓ Reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- ✓ Improve treatment capacity and efficiency.
- ✓ Support secondary prevention through early intervention.

5. Policy Implications:

Digital CBT directly contributes to:

- ✓ The NHS Long Term Plan.NHS LT Plan.
 - ✓ NHS Talking Therapies Programme
 - ✓ NICE Guideline NG222
 - ✓ WHO Mental Health Action Plan
 - ✓ UK Digital Inclusion Strategy
- Future implementation should prioritise blended care pathways, investment in digital inclusion and robust governance to maximise effectiveness while reducing health inequalities.

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