

When the waitlist for an appointment at University of California San Francisco's general psychiatric clinic stretched beyond a year, clinicians had to turn people away and refer them to a webpage lit with light blue links to online mental health resources.

Written guides, webinars and catalogs of apps grounded in evidence-based research line UCSF's vetted website. But popular virtual therapy apps like BetterHelp, Talkspace and Cerebral are nowhere to be found.

Mental health clinics across the country are continuing to see long wait lists, among other barriers to access, as the pandemic ushered in increased demand for mental health care.

Therapy apps are attempting to fill in the blanks. But some apps have come under fire for underpaying clinicians and failing to provide comprehensive support.

"A lot of the companies that are springing up are providing ready access but pretty thin levels of care," Matthew State, clinician and chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at UCSF, said.

Therapy apps naturally gained traction at the start of the pandemic by offering virtual and affordable therapy appointments. Apps like BetterHelp and Talkspace saw a spike in downloads.

BetterHelp app downloads grew 60% between January and April 2020. The app now boasts 2 million clients, according to their website.

Katie Playfair, a consultant for mental health technology companies and a therapist specializing in obsessive compulsive disorder, said her patients felt their care was "super rushed" when they used therapy apps.

Critics of the apps point to the discrepancy in pay for clinicians working on the apps in comparison to elsewhere in the field.

Playfair looked into the possibility of working for a therapy app herself five years ago.

She started the onboarding process, but she ultimately decided the compensation was "far too small," to make it worth her while.

Jeff Guenther, a therapist and co-owner of TherapyDen, a platform to connect people to mental health providers in their area, took to TikTok in 2021 to call out pay gaps on BetterHelp.

BetterHelp pays their therapist around \$30 an hour, a rate which fluctuates with the number of appointments a clinician takes on. Talkspace pays around \$20 an hour. The average pay in California for a private practice ranges from \$60 to \$120 per hour.

BetterHelp did not respond to a request for comment.

Guenther declined to comment because of a cease and desist he received from BetterHelp.

Playfair said therapy apps often employ therapists who are already working at their own practice, taking breaks from full time work, like on maternity leave, or in between jobs.

“I would say they are taking advantage of a vulnerable section of licensed mental health clinicians,” Playfair said.

She said apps should be looking into loan repayment programs, higher pay and other incentives to bring more practitioners into the field in the face of the shortage.

“We need clinicians,” Playfair said.