

BoosterBuddy



Introducing *BoosterBuddy*, a mobile app designed by youth to improve their mental health.

“One of the best options is the daily check-in; so often people are by themselves and don’t have someone to say ‘hey, how are you doing today?’ It gives that sense of companionship.”

– Emma, youth design team

Mike G., like many young people, lives with mental illness. Sometimes he finds it hard to get started on his day or to keep track of his appointments and medications. Sometimes he feels overwhelmed by his thoughts. What Mike needs is something to help him manage his illness—a tool that would encourage him to get going in the morning, help him remember what he’s supposed to do and give him suggestions of how to cope with his negative feelings or thoughts. What Mike needs is a buddy—BoosterBuddy.

BoosterBuddy is a new app developed by Island Health’s Mental Health and Substance Use Services (MHSU) team to help young people with mental illness self-manage their symptoms. But this is an app with a difference. Designed by youth for youth, BoosterBuddy uses the power of video game design elements and applies them to everyday life to encourage healthy behaviours while keeping users engaged.

“People coping with these illnesses often have trouble staying on task or keeping track of their daily life,” says Lauren Fox, Island Health MHSU Therapist. “BoosterBuddy is designed to give them the motivation to get started on their day and to provide strategies and encouragement to look after themselves.”

Getting started in the app business

So how did Island Health get into the app development business? “We know that self-care is important in managing many of these illnesses,” says Fox. “We also know that the best resources are the ones that are easily accessible. Given that many youth have smartphones, creating an app they could access from their phone was the ideal solution.”

Developing an app is a complex and expensive undertaking. Victoria Hospitals Foundation introduced Coast Capital Savings to this project, and their generous donation provided the funding to develop BoosterBuddy.

“Coast Capital Savings is committed to helping build a richer future for youth in our communities by investing in programs that foster strong mental health,” says Lewis Anciano, Vice President of People at Coast Capital Savings. “Through supporting initiatives like Island Health’s new BoosterBuddy app, more young people will have the tools they require to positively address mental health issues, like stress and depression, that may be preventing them from pursuing the rich, fulfilling lives they desire. We commend the staff at Island Health Mental Health and Substance



Use Services and the youth design team involved in bringing this innovative resource to life.”

With funding in place, Island Health’s MHSU team was able to embark on a process to develop an app that would help young people improve their mental health and overall wellness.

Youth helping youth

“We wanted to create an app that young people would want to use. We knew from our research that materials created solely by educators and clinicians are generally not youth-friendly and, in fact, are least likely to be used by the intended audience,” says Fox. “So we formed a team of young people with experience of mental illness, their peers and their family members to work with us.”

The youth design team members, award-winning app development company Robots & Pencils and expert clinicians from across Island Health came together to start building an app that would not only help young people cope with their mental illness, but would also provide support. “We really wanted something that would give users a

continued from page 11

sense of hope and progress,” says Fox. “We wanted to come up with something that would spark people to engage in everyday activities and be encouraged to keep going.”

About a dozen youth participated in the development, working together over a number of months to brainstorm, improve the app, and test it. “The process was amazing,” says Sarah, one of the members of the youth design team. “We had the opportunity to refine the app every step of the way. The developers really listened to us. They asked what we thought it needed, what we thought it should do and how we felt about the buddies, so it really was created with the user in mind.”

So how does BoosterBuddy work? Users choose one of three available characters to be their buddy. Each day, in order to “wake up” their buddy, users have to complete quests, or tasks. These quests are designed to help the user get started on his or her day—the level of difficulty of each quest is based on how the user is feeling that day: good, not great, struggling or crisis.

Quests might be something as easy as, “think of a vegetable you would like to eat,” or as hard as, “make a meal plan and write a grocery list.” Other scenarios include easy: “take a shower,” versus hard: “do the laundry”; easy: “do some stretches,” versus hard: “go for a walk”; or easy: “think of one person to call or text,” versus hard: “invite a friend or family member to get together for coffee.” Once the quests are completed, the buddy engages his user with words of encouragement and the user earns points, which he or she can use to

personalize the buddy, choosing from a wide range of accessories.

The calendar feature allows users to easily manage appointments and track their progress. The app also features a section of coping strategies for dealing with everything from anxiety to hearing voices and a library of encouraging quotes.

“The idea for this innovative app came out of emerging research that supports person-centred care,” says Dr. Abraham Rudnick, Medical Director of MHSU Services. “It is also socially and fiscally responsible, enabling the patient to take some control of their illness rather than being completely dependent on health care professionals. It is truly on the leading edge of self-management treatments.”

BoosterBuddy is available worldwide, at no charge. It is available for download from Google Play or the Apple App Store. Although designed for young people, “the app is beneficial for people of all ages,” says Fox. “It’s a tool for people who sometimes have a hard time getting motivated—and let’s face it, that can be any of us.”

As for Mike G., he says, “BoosterBuddy really is a buddy; I like it when he catches me off-guard with something nice to say. The scheduling takes care of the stress of getting things done—it’s a good way to start the day. I appreciate the coping strategies for times I need them—I’m very grateful to have BoosterBuddy in my life.” ♦



Check out a video demonstration of the BoosterBuddy at: www.youtube.com/VanIslandHealth



“I like the calendar—it tracks how you are doing every day so you can monitor your progress over time.”

– Adam, youth design team

“The youth design team love the app and really connected to it...I think others will as well.”

– Lisa, family member design team

“The youth perspective is really important for this app; they are the ones using it.”

– Ryan, youth design team

“I liked the coping strategies the most; it’s like a big list of suggestions for ways to handle stuff.”

– Jason, youth design team

Youth Mental Health

It is estimated that 10–20% of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder—the single most disabling group of disorders worldwide.



The total number of 12–19-year-olds in Canada at risk for developing depression is a staggering 3.2 million.

Today, approximately 5% of male youth and 12% of female youth, ages 12 to 19, have experienced a major depressive episode.

Suicide is among the leading causes of death in 15–24-year-old Canadians, second only to accidents. 4,000 people die prematurely each year by suicide.

Schizophrenia is youth's greatest disabler as it strikes most often in the 16–30 age group, affecting an estimated one person in 100.

Source: the Canadian Mental Health Association (www.cmha.ca).