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Changing face of mental health assistance in Asia

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Mental health assistance has not always been so accessible in Asia



The Asian mental health industry is still relatively new, largely due to barriers like stigma and limited access to care. However, there are several startups that have made major strides in addressing those challenges and attracting investor attention. We shall take a look at a few companies that reinforce the idea that life can be challenging, and that it's normal to sometimes seek mental health support.

Mental health assistance was not always so accessible in Asian countries, particularly in more remote areas with few trained providers. That's starting to change, as few startups are playing a substantial part in making that happen.

Additionally, since these businesses significantly expand access to care, people who need help don't have to work very hard to find it. Feeling better takes commitment, but starting the process can be as easy as logging in to a portal or app.

Intellect

Intellect is a Singapore-based startup that aims to use technology to improve mental healthcare. It has both a consumer-facing and enterprise segment. At the end of 2020, the company announced that it had 1 million users and closed its seed-

funding round.

The product for consumers centers around taking people through themed modules that teach them how to address undesirable behaviours, work habits, or mental health issues, such as anxiety. Then, the enterprise-level offering makes it easier for employers to provide mental health benefits for their workers while increasing utilisation rates.

The company is working with universities in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Singapore to conduct clinical research studies. It'll use the seed- round funding to finance those efforts and further its expansion in Asian markets.

ThoughtFull

ThoughtFull is another Singapore-based mental health startup that uses digital resources and strategies to improve outcomes via various themed ventures. For example, ThoughtFull Education is a consulting arm that partners with organizations such as colleges to provide interactive programmes about mental health literacy.

Another endeavour gaining attention is ThoughtFullChat. While using it, people pay a flat monthly fee to text with certified mental health professionals at any time. Those experts also engage with users once per weekday to coach them towards their goals.

According to Joan Low, the company's 32-year- old founder, most people will try to make time between their Zoom meetings to exercise and build physical resilience, for example, but they may not do that for their emotional well-being and psychological resilience. However, if staying mentally healthy is as easy as launching a smartphone app, that could change soon.

MindFi

In the US, many employers experience cost savings by switching from fully insured to self-insured employee coverage. Similarly, company leaders view better health insurance benefits as instrumental in attracting employees. The same trends show up in Singapore, too.

For example, across 2018 and 2019, self-funded maternity care jumped from 16 to 37 per cent. Additionally, Singaporean employers have started taking a more holistic approach to keeping employees well, which often means focusing on mental health.

MindFi is a startup to help them do that. It provides a meditation app geared for workplaces. CEO Bjorn Lee launched the company after experiencing stress-induced chest pains at 29 and finding that meditation helped him get back on track.

The early days of the coronavirus pandemic led to a 250 per cent boost in the app's user base. Lee also mentioned an increase in the number of companies signing up for the offering.

The app's content understands the needs of new meditators or people with busy schedules. Some meditation sessions are only one minute long, making them suitable for people who want to start a healthy habit gradually.

Ooca

Normalising mental health struggles is a significant part of helping people feel open about seeking help if they need it. That's the goal of Ooca, a Thai startup that features a headline reading, "It's okay. Let's talk" on its homepage. Besides assuring visitors that there's no shame in seeking help, the company makes that assistance available from a person's home.

Telehealth was one of the most prominent trends in 2020, spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote visits rose by 50 per cent in the first quarter of the year. They continued climbing from there, and now people are well-accustomed to seeing a doctor through the internet.

Ooca enables people to book appointments with psychiatrists and psychologists via a telehealth service, making it easy for them to fit sessions into their schedules. The company started in 2017 after its then-30-year-old founder experienced mental healthcare access struggles first-hand. By late 2019, about 60,000 people had used the app.

In 2020, it expanded to six other markets — including Germany, the United States, and Japan— specifically to serve Thai expatriates living elsewhere. Statistics indicate that more than 1.6 million Thais reside outside of Thailand.

Safe Space

Finding a therapist who's a good fit for a patient isn't always easy. However, Safe Space aims to make it easier with a matching algorithm that gives real-time results based on a user's responses to an online questionnaire. People can get individual, couples, or family counselling from home. There's an option to purchase therapy sessions for someone else, too.

The startup raised $250,000 in a seed round during 2020. Business leaders will use that money to expand across the Asia-Pacific region, plus broaden its corporate program that operates on a freemium model. Safe Space also partnered with the Ngee Ann Polytechnic educational institution to create and launch an online course that helps people build mental resilience by strengthening their growth mindsets.

Moreover, the company got recognised on the Best In Singapore website's marriage counselling category in 2020.

Mindpeers

Mindpeers caters to both individuals and workplaces, providing one-on-one remote therapy sessions. People can sort through a directory of therapists who make themselves available on the site and immediately see when they have appointments.

Since its launch in January 2020, the company has attracted 15 corporate clients and more than 5,000 individuals. Additionally, the startup raised $200,000 in a pre-seed round that included investors from Indonesia, Singapore, India, and the United States.

Besides helping people with identified mental health challenges, Mindpeers puts a significant focus on self-care. Once someone signs up individually or through their workplace, they get access to a personalised dashboard that gives daily recommendations for staying mentally healthy.

The company also equates mental health with physical health, reminding people how it's commonplace to train one's body at the gym. It urges people to see mental health similarly, setting aside time for mind fitness and well-being and getting into a healthy habit as they do.

Wysa

Wysa is a startup based on the idea that mental health help should be as accessible as typing to a chatbot. That's an activity many people are familiar with already, which could make them more willing to reach out without feeling nervous or embarrassed. Those engaging with the Wysa chatbot communicate with a friendly penguin.

The company's research also shows that this therapy method is impressively efficient. For example, people can complete a cognitive behavioural therapy exercise in about 10 minutes with Wysa, but doing it through office visits would take three appointments. The artificial intelligence algorithms working in the background also recognise more than 70 emotional subtypes that a person might display during a chat session.

Although the app was developed and launched in India, it has a global reach. In the spring of 2021, Wysa announced a $5.5 million Series A financing round. It also highlighted how the well-reviewed chatbot had guided people through more than 100 million conversations so far. Plus, more than three-quarters of users have more than five sessions, which indicates they like the experience and want it to continue.

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