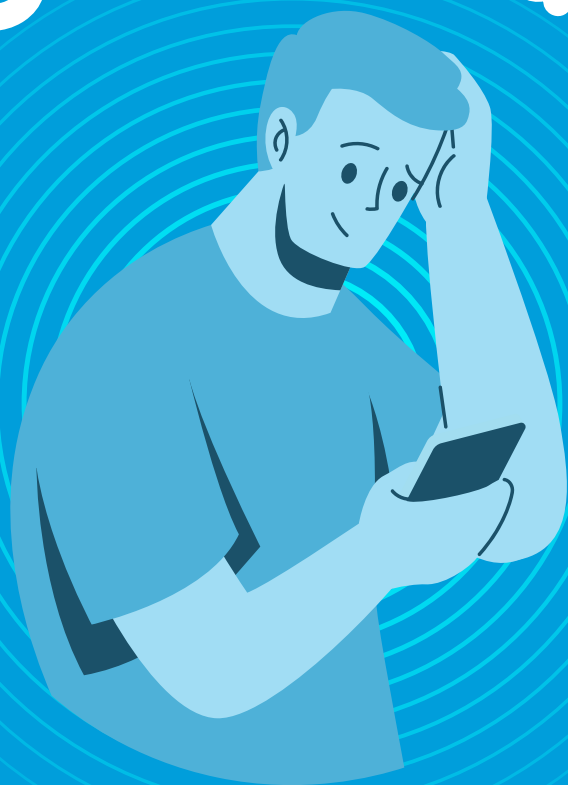


A Safe Space



Breaking the Stigma Around Mental Health Interventions

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*Our collective mental health has been at peril lately due to the global calamities of the past half-decade, including wars, the pandemic, climate change, and economic uncertainty. **SafeSpace (GhallKenn)** is an open-access, mobile-based, free digital application that aims to raise awareness of the dire need to look after our mental health and offers tools to support our journey.*

As humanity shifted back to new normalcy after shedding the months of compulsory home isolation, mental health issues were exacerbated due to sitting before screens to meet our friends and colleagues.

'One of the things that has definitely increased is attention deficit and hyperactivity symptoms,' says Dr Mary Joan Camilleri, Head of Counselling Services at UM. Recently, screening tests have been conducted for ADHD in the Maltese social fabric, and data confirms that cases have grown since the pandemic. 'If the older generation is suffering from anxiety, the younger generation has taken the anxiety level further. But attention deficit and hyperactivity can also be symptomatic of post-traumatic stress (not PTSD),' Camilleri says.

Post-traumatic stress and attention deficit and hyperactivity manifest similar symptoms. Often, people are not consciously aware of what their feelings actually mean. 'If I'm happy, my heart beats faster; if I'm anxious, my heart also beats faster. Then I, as a human being, have to interpret whether I'm happy or anxious,' Camilleri tells **THINK**. Similarly,

symptoms like forgetfulness and lack of concentration can be an offshoot of attention deficit hyperactivity, but also post-traumatic stress.

'If someone gets a high score on an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) test, the first thing we need to understand is whether the attention deficit hyperactivity symptoms are due to ADHD or post-traumatic stress. And COVID is likely to have left post-traumatic stress in many of us,' Camilleri adds.


ENTER SAFESPACE

SafeSpace (GhallKenn) emerged in 2022 as a tool to support mental health and prevent self-harm and suicide in young people in Malta within this fickle mental health environment. The Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at UM and the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society brought mental health professionals together to develop a potential tool to support youth's mental health and wellbeing.

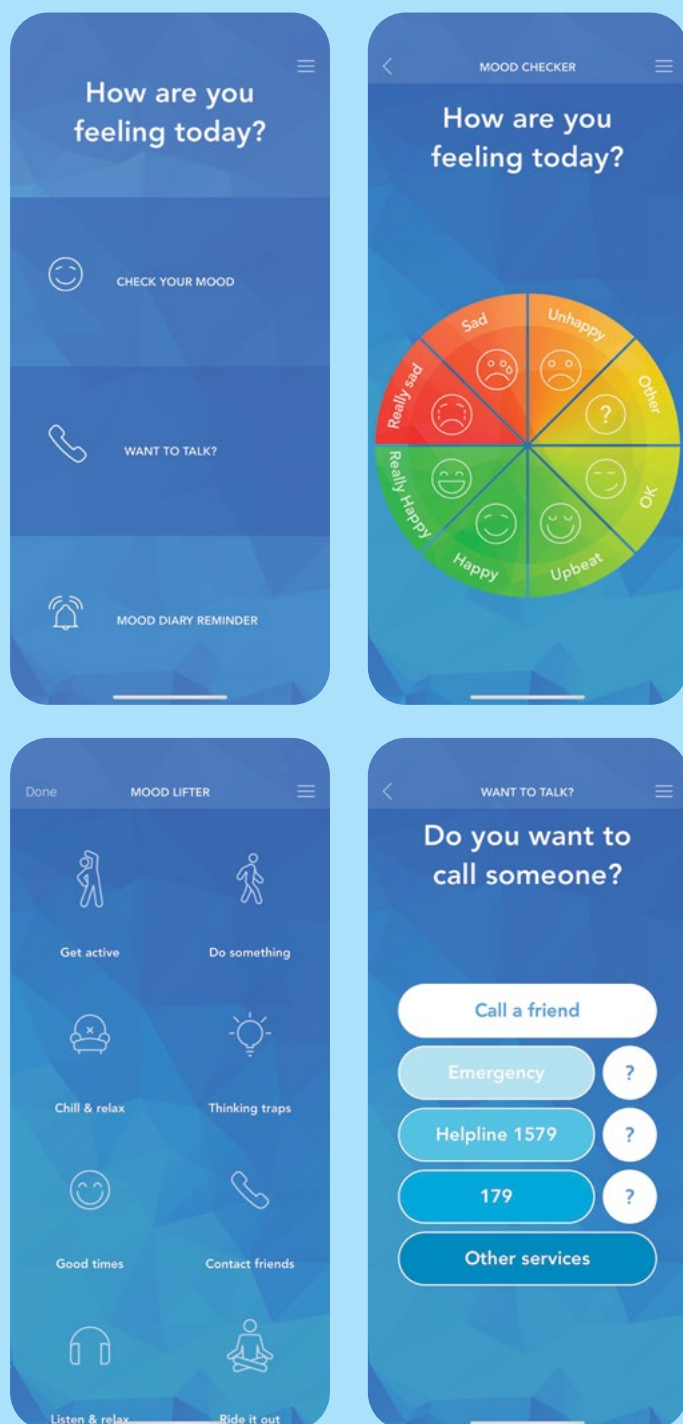
Prof. Alexiei Dingli (Department of AI, Faculty of ICT), who supported the project with his digital expertise, also noted that the pandemic left a lasting effect, especially on the youth. 'I feel the SafeSpace mobile

app is essential for nurturing overall wellbeing in Malta as it's targeting a population that's extremely vulnerable: teenagers and young adults,' says Dingli. 'Considering this environment was also where youths' mental health received a heavy blow, the SafeSpace app was introduced at the right time. It does what the name implies: provides a safe space. That's why we named it *GhallKenn* in Maltese; it's a place where you're protected and sheltered,' Dingli tells **THINK**.

People under 25 are digital natives, so the most obvious approach was to create a digital resource that's always in their pockets. 'We thought creating an app would be a useful tool where the youth in Malta can access information right at their fingertips on how to regulate their emotions, enhance their mood, and seek professional help. We looked around to see what was available, and that's how we found a UK-developed digital tool, BlueIce, whose software provides the foundation to SafeSpace,' says Prof. Carmel Cefai, professor of Psychology and Director of the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health.

The project team licensed BlueIce's platform, developed by MyOxygen in collaboration with the University 

SafeSpace app screenshots showing the main home screen, mood checker, mood lifter, and contact screen



of Bath and the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust in the UK, and adapted it linguistically and culturally to fit the expectations and needs of youth in Malta.

'Once the app was ready, we piloted it with young people in Malta to ensure the content was accessible and culturally appropriate. Later, we carried out a risk assessment exercise with both clinical and non-clinical groups to ensure the app carried no potential risks to the users,' Cefai adds.

SafeSpace allows users to monitor their thoughts and moods using a digital journal. It also helps users with tips on regulating their feelings and reducing distress through a personalised toolbox. The digital tool also brings users' attention to local support services available for young people seeking help when in distress, such as emergency services, the new Helpline 1579, Support Line 179, and Kellimni.com.

THE STIGMA IS PRESENT

Unfortunately, public opinion still stigmatises mental illness and seeking help from mental health professionals. 'The stigma is the biggest problem in improving mental health issues. That's why the SafeSpace app is completely anonymous – it doesn't collect information about users. But stigma is an issue, and we must work on overcoming it. We have to speak about it more,' Dingli adds.

SafeSpace is a great tool if we know how to use it. To learn how to benefit from mood charting and similar tools, we must openly speak about mental health issues and break the stigma.

Gandhi once said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world.' Your columnist suffers from anxiety and

resorted to severe nail biting from early childhood to cope with stress. But after starting therapy three years ago at the age of 33, a lifelong self-harming exercise was curbed and remains at bay today. Mind you, in stressful situations, the urge is there. It is always there. But it is fine – regularly seeing a therapist is the key to dealing with our issues. Just as our teeth benefit from annual check-ups, our mental health yearns for regularly scheduled therapy so we can talk it all out and better understand the chaotic world around – and inside – us.

RAISING AWARENESS TO BREAK THE STIGMA

SafeSpace is contributing to raising awareness of mental health by making it easier to seek help when necessary. Since the mobile app launched, mental health professionals in Malta are increasingly using it in their sessions, helping patients track their moods and better understand themselves.

‘The mood charting and the mindfulness part of the app are very useful – these are tools people can use on the preventative level,’ Camilleri says. We rarely speak about our emotions, and as a result, we might feel a certain way but not understand why. Mood tracking and journaling can help.

Benjamin Franklin journalled twice daily: in the morning and in the evening. He was reflective and strategic about his self-development, meticulously recording his progress. He is known as a pioneer in the art of introspection. But today, in a world where digital noise sweeps us off our feet with flashy videos, introspection is a skill that we need to learn.

‘Benjamin Franklin was self-aware, self-disciplined – he thought about


being a good man. But we can’t expect a young person to be that mindful today if we haven’t taught them critical self-reflexivity. They’ll feel stressed and pressured. They’ve never been asked to self-manage because the message has been: be a good girl; be a good boy. Why on earth would they want to be aware of their feelings, especially if those feelings are negative?’ Camilleri says.

Digital tools such as SafeSpace can help us introspect, and the tool has the potential to improve further. But what needs to be done?

‘First of all, we would like to raise awareness about the app so more young people start using it as a self-help tool to take care of their mental health and seek help when needed. Secondly, we would like to see the app used more in mental health services for young people as part of the interventions for the clients. The University Counselling Services are already seeking to make use of the app with its clients and integrate it within the university support systems,’ Cefai says.

‘Thirdly, we would like to research how we can enhance its use and, more importantly, evaluate its effectiveness in improving mental health and wellbeing; this is the next project we have in mind.’ Finally, taking the app a step further, although it is primarily aimed at youth, Cefai notes that its mood tracking, self-help interventions, and referral to appropriate help services are perfectly suitable for adults. However, the app would need to be adapted to an adult audience.

‘The app is based on evidence-based psychological interventions and has been developed with the

young people themselves. We piloted and tested it with youth. It is freely accessible to young people on their mobiles. We hope it’ll be embraced by a wider audience, so we can be a step forward on the road leading to higher self-awareness and emotional wellbeing and mental health, reducing stigma and encouraging young people to take care of their mental health and seek professional help when needed,’ Cefai concludes. SafeSpace (GħallKenn) is available free of charge on iOS and Android phones in both English and Maltese. 

If you or someone in your environment is struggling with mental health issues or experiencing thoughts of suicide, take action! Reach out to trained professionals for support and guidance. If you need help, call Support Line 179 or visit kellimni.com.

Download the SafeSpace (GħallKenn) app here:



 **Download on the App Store**