

Information technology and mental illness

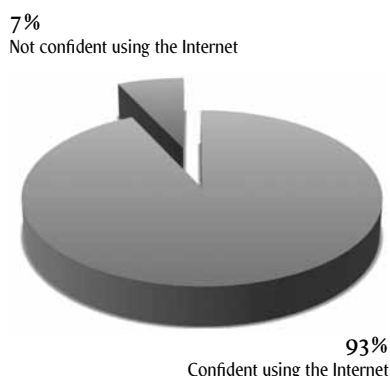
Many Australians with mental illness are enthusiastic users of information and communication technology – actively utilising the Internet and mobile technology to manage their lives, to help overcome isolation, and to seek information and online self-help treatments. Some also need support to take advantage of technology.

Are people with mental illness on the wrong side of the digital divide? Does the Internet discourage contact with friends and family? Does the mass of often-dubious mental health content on the web mean they are less likely to find accurate information and help?

This study aimed to find out . . . It was not focused on *whether* people have Internet access, but on *how they use it*.

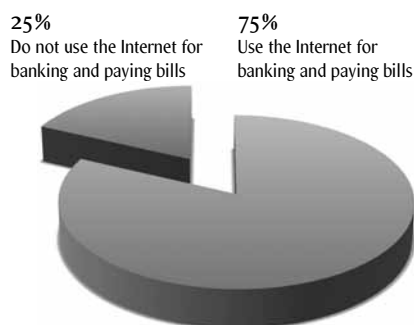
The survey was conducted in November-December 2011, using a convenience sample of 605 people who completed an anonymous online questionnaire. Most respondents were female (74%). Two-thirds (64%) lived in urban areas, and one-third (36%) in rural and remote areas. The most common diagnoses reported were depression (39%), bipolar disorder (21%), anxiety disorders (19%) and schizophrenia (9%). Ages were evenly distributed, with half of the respondents under 40, and half older.

How confident are people with mental illness about using the Internet?



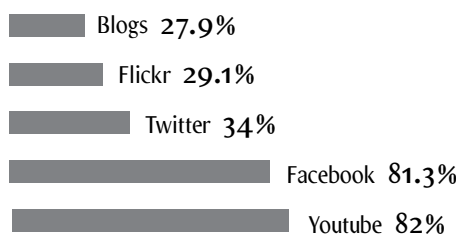
It is notable that almost all respondents (93%) reported that they were confident using the Internet. An even greater proportion (95.8%) had home Internet access: this is higher than for people with a disability overall (62%), and higher even than the general population (79%). Over a quarter (28%) also wanted training to use the Internet more effectively.

How much do people with mental illness use the Internet to manage their lives?



Three-quarters of those surveyed (75%) regularly used the Internet for banking and paying bills. The same proportion communicated with Centrelink or other government agencies online, and expressed a preference for doing so over paper forms or attending an office. Four out of five (82%) did shopping online. While fewer people with psychotic illnesses used the Internet, the proportion was still high. For example, two-thirds (66.7%) of respondents with schizophrenia did their banking online and used systems such as BPay and Paypal for bills.

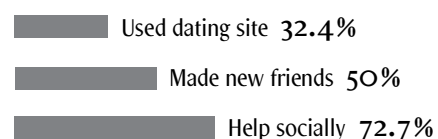
How much do people with mental illness use social media and mobile technology?



Respondents used social media at higher rates than most Australians.

Four out of five (81.3%) had a Facebook account (compared with around 50% for the general population). Other popular social applications used included Youtube (82%), Twitter (34%), Flickr and other photo-sharing services (29.1%), blogs (27.9%), and instant messaging (73.2%).

Respondents also reported that, overall, the Internet made it easier to maintain existing relationships and to make new ones.



Around one third (32.4%) had used RSVP or a similar dating website to meet people. Half of the respondents (50%) had made new friends via the Internet, and overall, the great majority (72.7%) agreed that social media helped them to stay in contact with friends and family.

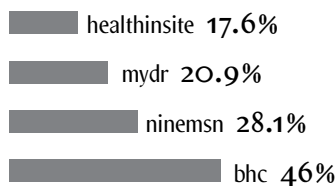
Approximately one in four (26.3%) had experienced some form of online bullying or unpleasant communication at some time.

Ownership of mobile phones among respondents was near universal (95.2%), in line with the general population. As with Internet access, mobiles are regarded as essential utilities. Around half (49.2%) of respondents owned Internet-enabled smartphones (such as iPhones or Android devices).

A fixed-line telephone was not regarded as essential in the same way. Approximately a quarter of respondents (23.7%) did not have a landline telephone. They may be perceived as redundant and an unnecessary expense, especially by those on lower incomes, or who are young and have grown up with a mobile phone as their primary communication device.

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How do people with a mental illness find information and support online?



Unsurprisingly, the Internet was the most common place to search for health information (62.3%), followed by health professionals (29.3%), and family or friend (4.3%).

The most popular health website (46%) was the Victorian Government's betterhealthchannel (bhc), followed by the ninemsn Health + Wellbeing site (28.1%) and mydr (20.9%). The Australian Government's healthinsite portal had been used by 17.6% of respondents. (Note: SANE Australia is a provider of mental health information for all of these sites.)

One third of respondents (31.8%) had used reputable online self-help programs (such as moodgym, e-couch, and anxietyonline). Of those who had used these online programs, the majority (67%) had found them helpful.

In summary

- The Internet is used enthusiastically by many people with a mental illness. They express confidence about their skills in this area, and are keen to learn more.
- The great majority of people with mental illness in this survey actively use the Internet in managing their finances, shopping, and engaging with government agencies, such as Centrelink.
- Social media and mobile technology are important to people with mental illness – helping to overcome isolation and loneliness by making it easier to stay in touch with family and friends and to meet new people.
- Many people with mental illness find the information they need through popular general health websites, rather than mental health-specific sites. Only a minority of respondents had used online self-help programs; those who had used them reported that they were helpful.

Recommendations

1 ACCESS FOR ALL

Use of information technology – especially access to the Internet – has become almost essential to running our lives and gaining employment. When people with a mental illness do not have this access, it contributes to further social exclusion. While the majority do have access and are confident using the Internet, those who do not are likely to have other disadvantages such as being homeless or in poor housing, unemployed, or living in remote areas.

It is important that this disadvantaged minority – 20% or more – are provided with access and help to perform basic tasks such as browsing for information and using email (for example through public libraries, day programs, and Disability Employment Services).

2 THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICE

Even though most people with mental illness use the Internet to help manage their lives, there are two small groups who do not – those who are unable to do so (because of disability or some other reason) and those who choose not to use it. It is important for government agencies, such as Centrelink, to always have available paper-based documents and face-to-face contact when communicating with clients: the Internet should never be the sole means of information-provision and contact.

3 SAFETY FIRST

The many positive attributes of social media and Internet communication are accompanied by risks of financial and personal exploitation as well as online bullying or abuse.

Day programs, PHaMs workers, and other services should provide systematic training in use of secure passwords, recognition of online scams, safety and privacy features of sites such as Facebook, and how to respond to abusive or threatening behaviour online. The cybersmart.gov.au website is a helpful resource, and needs more active promotion to people with a mental illness.

4 SELF-HELP PROGRAMS

Reliable online self-help programs are proven to be effective for people with depression or anxiety disorders. People who use them find the programs helpful, and appreciate that they are free, convenient, and confidential. Online self-help programs need far more active promotion – for example, through GP Divisions and Medicare Locals – so that all those who could benefit from them can have access.

SANE Australia

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness – through campaigning, education and research.

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