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By CATIE WEGMAN
SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL | AUG 07, 2019 | 3:24 PM



nothingbut ADVICE

Nothing But Advice is the latest iPhone app to combat the mental health crisis - allowing Florida residents access to licensed counselors and therapists 24/7. (Photo/Courtesy)

Elise Gates always gives her cell number to her patients. The Fort Lauderdale licensed mental health counselor knows that sometimes people can't wait a week, or even an hour, to speak with someone when they're in distress – it can be dangerous for that person and those around them.

That's what prompted her to create Nothing But Advice, an app that provides an anonymous way for Florida residents to speak with a licensed mental health counselor through text, call or video chat anytime, any day, anywhere.

Available therapists make themselves "live" on the app, so users can see the list of professionals that are immediately accessible, view each counselor's bio and choose who they want to converse with. A 20-minute session costs \$40, and a 40-minute session costs \$80. The app is free to download for iPhone and Android devices.

Gates said over 300 licensed counselors statewide are accessible on the app, and hundreds more are in the process of getting paperwork approved.

"What we're doing is providing immediate, real-time access to qualified mental health professionals right then and there," she said. "So if someone is having an issue – let's say they just broke up with their boyfriend or girlfriend, or just lost their job – and they need to talk to someone, and they just want an unbiased, nonjudgmental perspective, they're able to connect with someone then and there."

The idea came to Gates about four years ago, she said, when one of her clients called, struggling to get out of bed and go to work. Gates talked her client through each step – getting up, dressed, fed, in the car and to her office.

"Everyone needs an Elise," the client said to Gates. And everybody can, she thought.

Access to mental health services is the biggest barrier to tackling the **nation's mental health crisis**, according to a 2018 study by Cohen Veterans Network and the National Council for Behavioral Health

About 56 percent of American adults have sought treatment for themselves or others, according to the study. And 38 percent, or 96 million people, have had to wait longer than a week for services, whether that be a psychiatrist, psychologist, therapist or counseling appointment. Why is it so hard to schedule an appointment? Gates blames the insurance industry.

Too often, she said, patients have to wait for insurance to be approved, and even longer to schedule an appointment. They also encounter therapists who aren't accepting new patients, or are no longer on insurance plans.

"At what point do you give up?" Gates asked "You have a situation where it's almost like these insurance companies are taking advantage of people that are vulnerable. You have a lot of mental health providers, but people cannot access them. It's impossible, and it's really disheartening. Because if you're somebody that is struggling, it takes a lot to pick up the phone and call for help."

Nothing But Advice sessions are not covered by insurance. But, she said she is currently in talks with a few insurance companies to include the app in coverage plans, but nothing has been confirmed.

Gates said there have been over 3,000 downloads since the app launched in April. Because of a user's ability to remain anonymous, she said it's hard to track exactly which age group is using the app but she estimates that people ages 18 to 35 are using it the most, because that range had previously reported they would use the app at least once a week.

And with high school and college students returning to the classroom this month,

Gates expects to see an increase in downloads.

"I've been getting a lot of college students that have approached me," she said. "They see that there's a problem. They see there is a high rate of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and they really feel that there aren't adequate services."

She added that many students face the fear of being stigmatized by peers and other obstacles. Students may not want to be seen walking into the counseling center, filling out dozens of forms, waiting to get an appointment, etc.

"You're jumping through a lot of hoops when you just want to talk to somebody," Gates said. "And you want to talk to them now. You don't want to wait two months or even deal with the stigma of walking into the counseling office."

She added that Nothing But Advice has about 80 “brand ambassadors interns” spreading the word on college campuses like Florida State University and University of Florida. Concerned parents sending their child off to college and friends who see that someone is struggling can also use the app, she said. Users can purchase minutes for someone else and send it to them by entering their cell phone number.

“You might not need it, but you might see that someone else does and you can send help to them,” she said. “That’s like a gift; it’s like ‘Wow, someone gets it.’ ”

Gates plans to launch the app nationwide but does not know when. She and her team are working on the best way to do so while ensuring there are enough resources to meet the demand of each state.