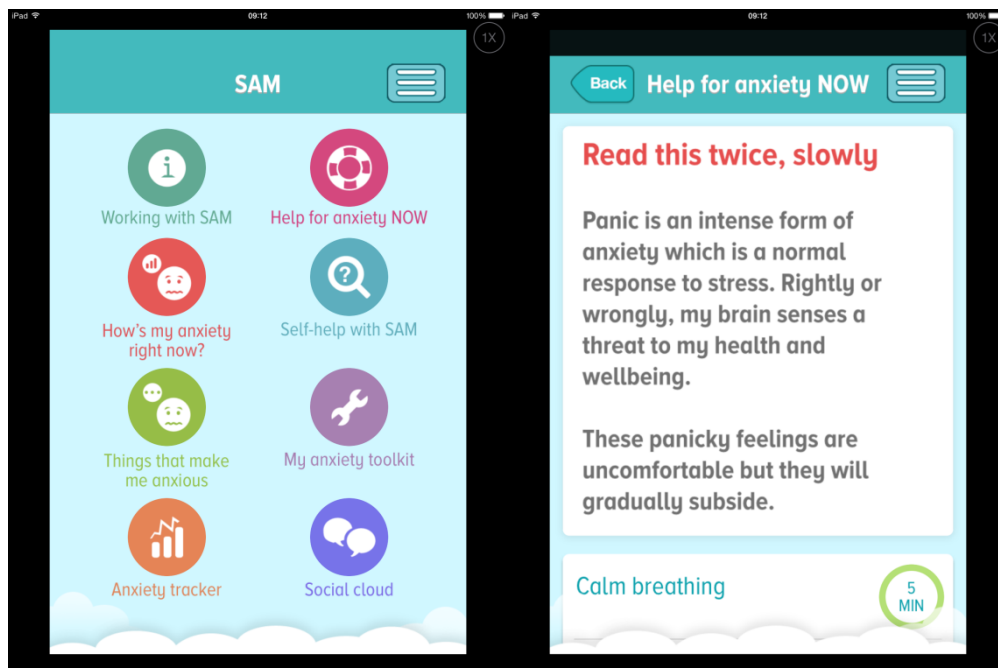


UWE: Self-help anxiety management (SAM) app providing life-changing support for students

Summary

A self-help anxiety management app developed at the University of the West of England (UWE) is helping students and people from all over the world to better manage and support their anxiety.

The app provides a platform of interactive, therapeutic and well-being activities and creates a very engaging and optimistic set of support materials, which students can use 24/7 at any time and any place.



Screen shot showing the SAM categories and an example screen shot of one of the activities

About UWE

The University of the West of England (UWE) is located near Bristol and has campuses at Glenside, St Matthias and a regional centre at Gloucester Docks, Gloucestershire as well as an associate faculty (Hartpury College) specialising in

animal behaviour and welfare, agricultural and sports related courses in Hartpury, Gloucestershire.

There are over 25,000 students and around 3000 academic staff.

The University is consistently ranked in the top 10 new universities in the country.

The challenge

The main challenge in the development of SAM was the organisation and project management of the whole process, which was overseen by a core team of experts from UWE, comprising of a counselling psychologist and ex-practitioner from the Department of Psychology, Phil Topham and two academic staff members from the Department of Computer Science and Creative Technologies (CSCT), Praminda Caleb-Solly and Paul Matthews. The team also worked with a Bristol-based application developer from a company called MyOxygen.

Development of the app was not just a simple process of hiring a software developer to design an app; it was a highly coordinated process that involved the team liaising with a number of UWE staff and healthcare professionals outside of the university in order to collate quality research into the types of activities and support systems required for an engaging app.

Another important factor in the development of the app was that neither the team nor the developer had experience of designing a self-help app before. This presented a considerable challenge in terms of producing something that would be a valuable asset to help people with anxiety.

Part of this process involved the team working closely with students suffering from anxiety to find out what they wanted from an app. This was an important aspect in order that the app was easy to understand and contain the appropriate self-help therapy and advice required.

The activity

At the start of the project the team conducted surveys of social anxiety in different learning situations through lectures, presentations, seminars and group work at UWE and Plymouth University. The results of which showed quite clearly that social anxiety was quite an issue for undergraduate students. (see: [Is social anxiety a hidden disability for university students?](#)) Following on from this initial research the computer science and creative technologies department suggested that an app may be a flexible, mobile solution.

The team then worked with students at the university who were involved in designing apps as part of their course and this culminated in the production of a prototype app.

Several of the students themselves had some social anxiety issues, so they were well placed to provide constructive advice about what they would like to have in the app.

The prototype app was developed to include the following features:

- Monitoring and recording anxiety
- Detail the kind of physiological symptoms of anxiety experienced
- Worrying thoughts associated
- The types of avoidance behaviours as a result of anxiety

The prototype was then presented to students to try out for a couple of weeks so that the team could monitor and see what the students thought of the prototype app.

Following on from the successful trial of the prototype with students the team took the data to the university and they were presented with further funding to develop a full-scale working version, which they named SAM.

In terms of the process for the development of the app, this involved:

- Further research into other potentially similar apps
- Consultations outside the university with other healthcare professionals, such as psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors.
- Research into psychological therapies/self help
- Research into therapeutic content, using face-to-face methods as a template
- Advice provided by the computer science department into human computer interaction and usability
- Using fluid and easy to access content, easy to navigate and plain-speaking English
- Appointing a software developer to design and produce the app
- Providing that the app contains a credible, friendly, optimistic and relevant emphasis
- Employing lawyers, legal advisers, accountants, marketing and press professionals

“If people feel that they can’t engage with it and that it’s not friendly then they will quickly drop it and move on to something else, so a lot of work was spent working on developing the usability and the engagement-side of the app.” Phil Topham - Chartered Psychologist and Visiting Research Fellow, UWE

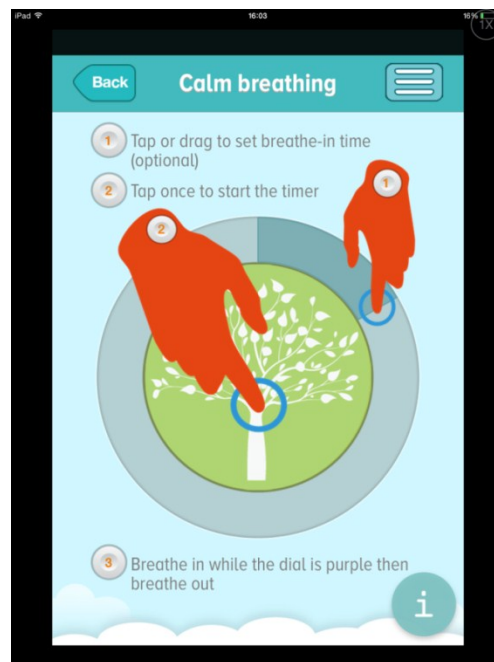
In terms of the app, there are a number of different options for users, which are clearly displayed and invite the user to explore further, these are:

- Working with SAM
- Help for anxiety NOW
- How’s my anxiety now?
- Self-help with SAM
- Things that make me anxious
- My anxiety toolkit
- Anxiety tracker
- Social cloud

Each section contains useful information, resources, examples and activities to help support students with their anxiety issues. For example, when selecting the 'Help for anxiety NOW' section, this opens up three further activities to help the user cope with panic, covering:

- Calm breathing
- Picture peace
- Change the focus

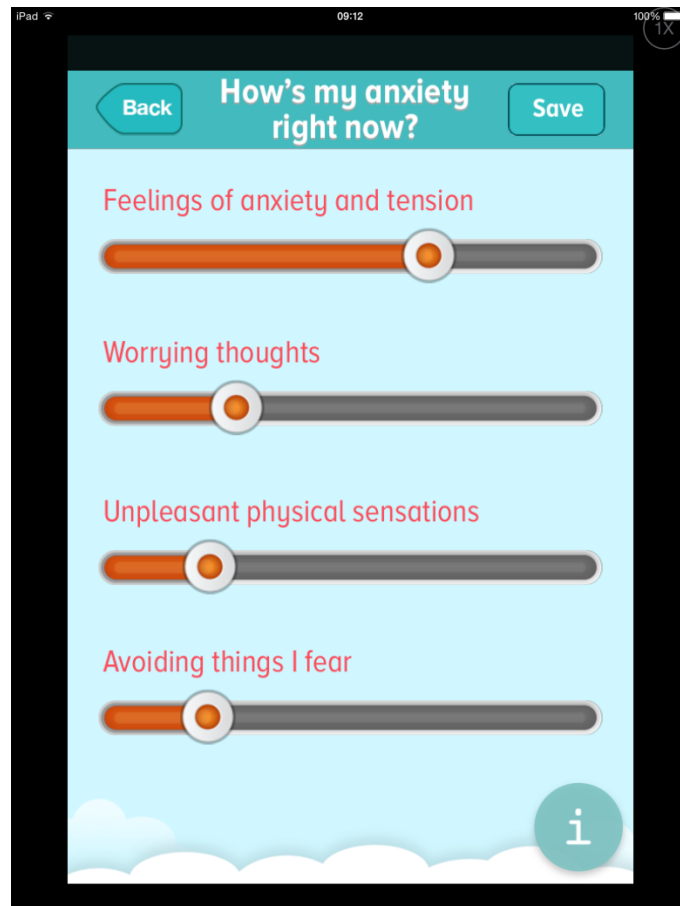
By selecting the information icon, the student will see detailed instructions on how the activity works, as shown below:



Screenshot showing the instructions on how to engage in the activity

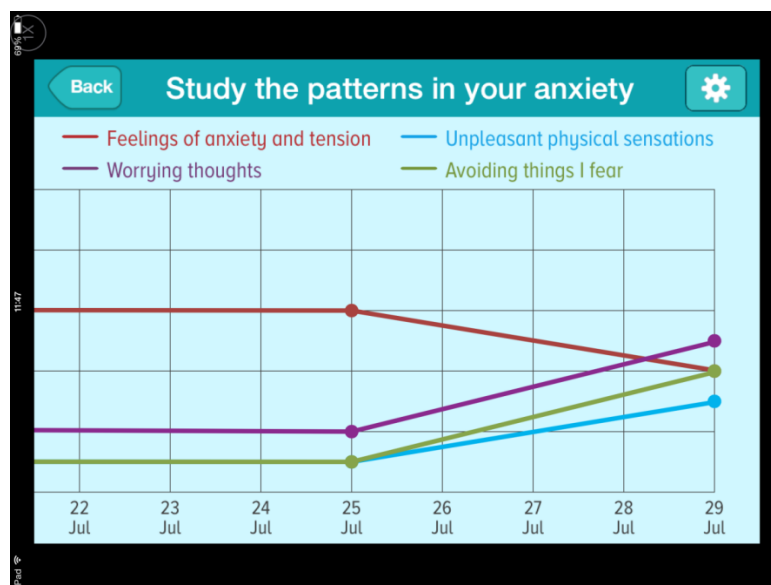
The app can also record how a student or person is feeling at the present time, through the 'How's my anxiety right now' section. Within this area are four sliding bars that can be used to determine the levels of anxiety in different forms, covering:

- Feelings of anxiety and tension
- Worrying thoughts
- Unpleasant physical sensations
- Avoiding things I fear



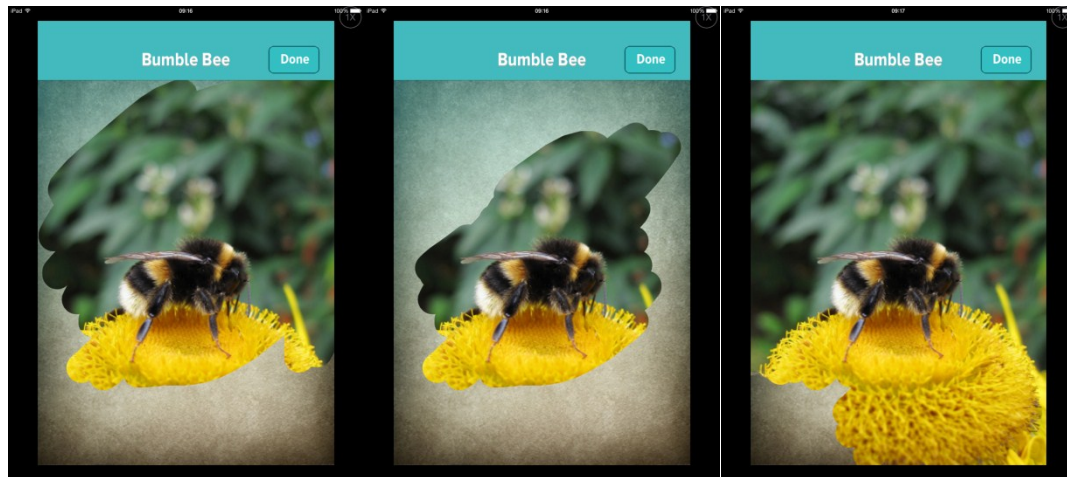
Screenshot showing the levels that can be adjusted in the SAM app

These can then be saved each day to track the anxiety of the individual and accessed using the anxiety tracker, which shows a detailed chart, tracking the anxiety over the period of hours, days, weeks or months.



Screenshot showing the patterns of anxiety recorded over time

Self-help with SAM provides the students with detailed information about therapeutic and relaxation methodologies that can be considered with anxiety. This section additionally includes activities that can help promote and stimulate peaceful thoughts and provide a way to relax, such as with the 'picture peace' activity, which is a simple, but effective way of helping to calm the mind through interacting with the screen to reveal the picture, as demonstrated below:



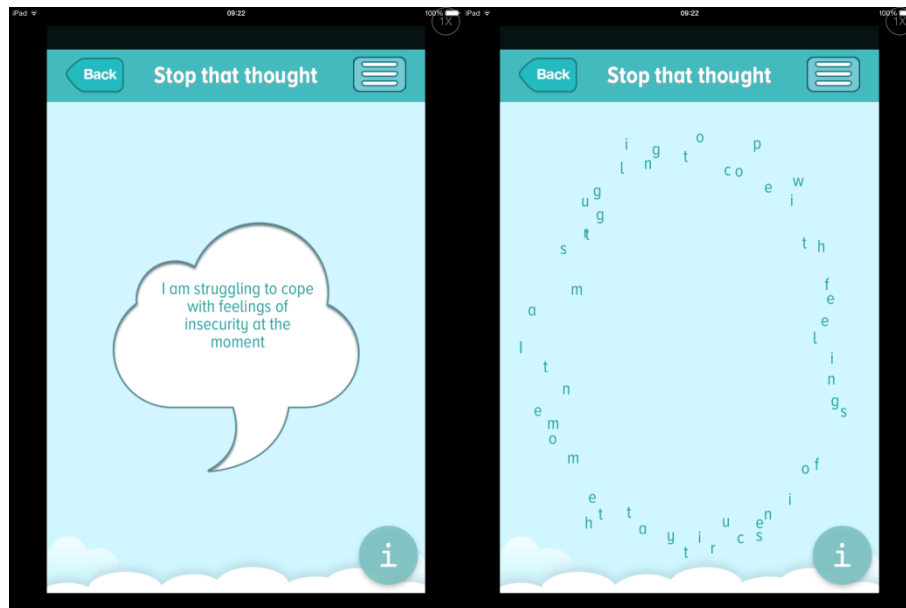
Screenshot showing the picture peace activity in SAM

The activities and exercises can all be rated within the app as well as added to the 'My anxiety toolkit' area, which saves specific exercises or activities so that the student can access their favourite ones quickly.

SAM has an area for recording anxiety and linking this to a task, which populates an entry into the outlook calendar on the tablet or smart device and a reminder can additionally be added.

There are also interactive activities such as 'It's only a thought' which allows the student to enter their worrying thoughts and then these can be tapped to watch them float away as clouds.

Worrying thoughts can be exploded away using the 'Stop that thought' activity, which allows the student to type their thoughts into a word bubble and then watch them explode into tiny letters that disappear from the screen.



Screenshot showing the 'Stop that thought' activity and interactivity

There is also a social cloud area, which requires registration to sign up to and this allows sufferers of anxiety to communicate with each other and share their experiences for additional peer support.

The outcomes

SAM has had excellent feedback from users that have downloaded the app and early signs suggest that this app is already a big hit, receiving mostly 4-5 star ratings.

It also features on the NHS website and many other websites that highlight the app as being one of the top apps for anxiety self-help.

Some of the comments from people that have downloaded the app have been extremely positive.

“Life Changing- This app is truly the best app I’ve ever downloaded. Its techniques are very helpful and work very well. You could even save them in case you want to try them. What I like best about this app is the “Social Cloud”. The other users on the Social Cloud are very sympathetic and understanding. They got me through so much. Get this app. Now.”

“I love it!!! – Up until now I’ve literally had no idea where to start with my anxiety. This app has saved me during two panic attacks already and during several situations in which I was beginning to get too stressed out and revved up. Thank you.”

The university is now starting an evaluation on the use of SAM specifically within student services to find out exactly how the students are using the app.

“I think that SAM can be useful for people and of course it means that we can make available self-help for anxiety to many thousands more people than we can access in one-to-one therapy.” Phil Topham - Chartered Psychologist and Visiting Research Fellow, UWE



Phil Topham, Chartered Psychologist and Visiting Research Fellow, UWE

The impact

The true benefits of this app are that people from all over the world are able to seek help and support from SAM for their anxiety. Whilst the app is not a replacement for face-to-face therapy, it does offer a 24/7 mobile solution for people. That alone is a fantastic example of how technology can be used in a positive and helpful way, very much like having a pocket therapist at any time and any place.

As of July 2014, SAM has been downloaded over 110,000 times and it is also in the top 100 health and fitness charts across 43 countries.

“I think that for some people it will mean that they will never need a face-to-face because they can sort out their problems with the help of SAM and for other people if they have a positive experience of using SAM it may make them more likely to consider face-to-face therapy when before they wouldn't have even have thought of it.” Phil Topham - Chartered Psychologist and Visiting Research Fellow, UWE

Lessons Learned

There were many project recommendations following the launch of the app, such as ensuring that there are clear and justified reasons for having an app and to consult widely on what the app is going to do and the rationale behind it.

It is also important to have good communications throughout the project and plan for setbacks and use a developer who has experience of prototyping apps.

“Very important to keep people on-board all the way through the project and to test out its usability as you go along, so usability is really central to the work that we did.”

Phil Topham - Chartered Psychologist and Visiting Research Fellow, UWE

Useful links

[UWE](#)

[SAM](#)

[Jisc RSC South West](#)

[AnxietyUK](#)

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