

Samaritans and Saffron Interactive, Samaritans Veterans App

Case Study for the Effective Use of Mobile Learning to Deliver Learning, Development and Wellbeing Management Skills

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Abstract—This is a case study detailing the 2022 IELA Bronze award winner for Mobile Learning Experience, the *Samaritans Veterans App*. This project was designed to support military service leavers and veterans in developing wellbeing management techniques and skills in order to facilitate a successful transition back into civilian life.

Keywords—mobile learning, mobile application, mental health, mental wellbeing, veterans, military service leavers, skills development, behavioural science, design-based thinking

1 Introduction

Samaritans' primary mission is to reduce the number of lives lost to suicide. Young men who have recently left the Armed Forces have a suicide risk up to three times higher [1] than the same age group in the general population. In addition, the UK branches of Samaritans receive around 10,000 contacts from the military community every year, with consistently over 70% of these being veterans.

Following a period of consultation with other relevant charities, research bodies and the UK's Ministry of Defence (MOD), Samaritans identified a gap in the emotional health support available to Armed Forces personnel. They sought to fill this gap by providing, amongst other solutions, a mobile app to promote awareness of emotional health and wellbeing amongst service leavers. The primary goal was to enable this group to utilise the application in developing the skills needed to manage their own emotional health during and after their transition to civilian life.

2 The project

Veterans undergo a complete change of lifestyle upon leaving the military. They are not just leaving their job; they are leaving a lifestyle, home, and community and,

in many cases, entering a world which may be very unfamiliar. Emotional health and wellbeing are still taboo subjects in many places across modern society. In the military especially, there remains a perception that struggling to cope is a sign of weakness or that others will see it as such.

In an environment where physical fitness, the ability to operate in high stress situations, and being a team player are so important, individuals can feel even more pressure to ‘just get on with it’ or ‘man up’ when struggling with their emotional wellbeing.

Service leavers as a group may therefore be ill-equipped not only to recognise poor emotional health but also to know how to access support when they need it and feel able to do so. The challenge was to reach this wide-ranging audience who, whilst they are more likely to need support in managing their emotional health, are less likely to ask for it.

3 Saffron’s approach

The long-term partnership between Samaritans and Saffron was integral in responding effectively to this complex challenge. A close working relationship and collaboration throughout the project was vital in ensuring the app was able to reach and support as many individuals as possible.

Saffron combined technological innovation, insights from behavioural science, and design-thinking principles with Samaritans’ nuanced understanding and insight into the veteran community to achieve far-reaching impact. The app was designed with direct involvement from veterans to ascertain real barriers and develop a personalised solution to address these. Coupling this with proven methodology enabled users to genuinely change behaviours, develop positive habits and better manage their mental wellbeing.

4 The user journey

The Samaritans Veterans app is a mobile-first application, able to be accessed on-demand 24/7 by Armed Forces personnel, veterans, and their families. Free to download and publicly available through all major operating systems, as well as through desktop browsers, the app was purpose-built to maximise accessibility and impact.

It was vital that the app also aligned with and could deliver the core vision, values and mission that underpin Samaritan’s work. The key aspects of the user experience include:

4.1 Emotional health ‘check-in’

On entering the app, the user is encouraged to reflect on their current well-being with a ‘check-in’ to help them track, understand, and respond to their own emotional health (see Figure 1). This simple Likert scale rating was designed to empower the learner

to investigate when they might be struggling and react accordingly. The user is then led through an initial diagnostic that encourages further self-reflection. The results of the diagnostic direct the user towards personalised relevant resources and pathways, offering direction and guidance whilst always putting ownership into the learner's hands as to how they progress.

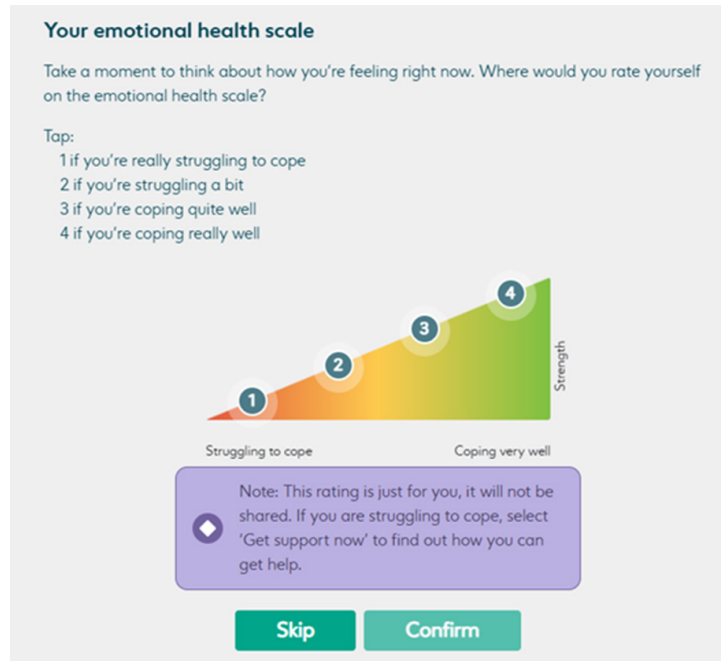


Fig. 1. The learner is presented with an emotional health scale and asked to reflect on their current mindset

4.2 Engaging content

The intuitive and engaging user experience is designed to provide a central hub for service leavers, offering 24/7 access to various resources and support (see Figure 2). This includes modules, videos, and podcasts, covering topics linked to wellbeing and mindfulness and providing quick practical exercises (see Figure 3) to give the user on-demand support when they need it most.

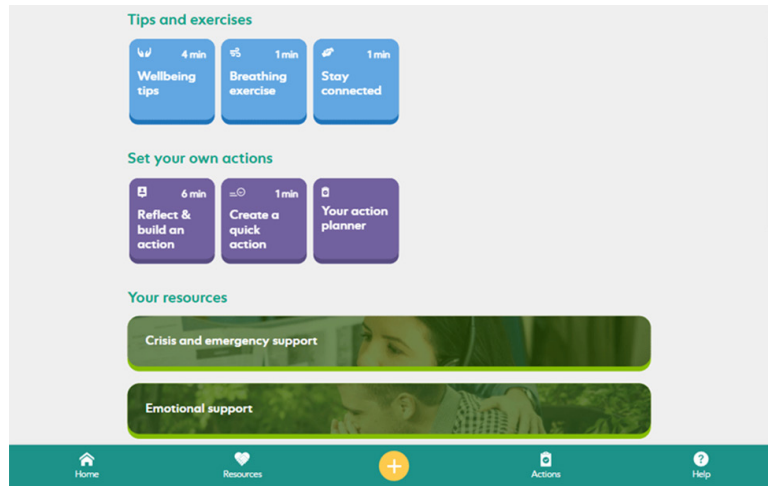


Fig. 2. The learner has a central homepage where they access all resources and useful information

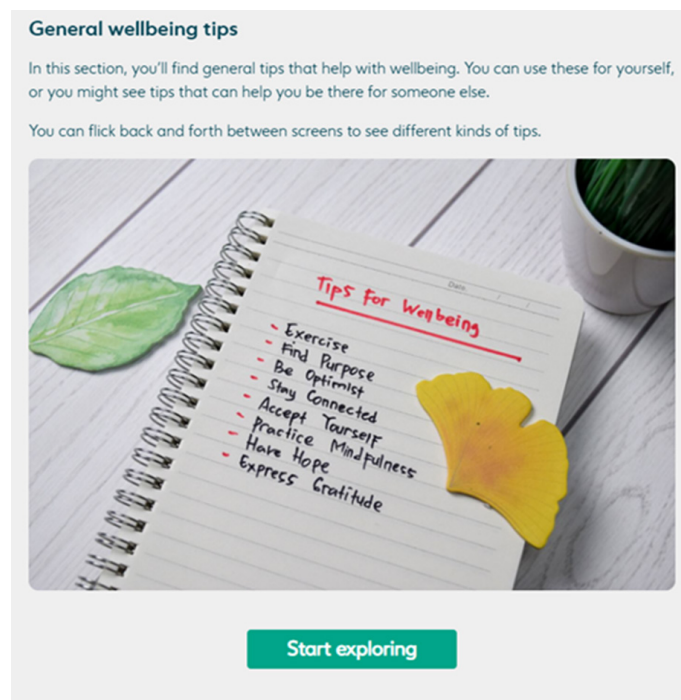


Fig. 3. Useful information is then presented through engaging bitesize modules and activities

4.3 Self-reflection and action plan

The in-built ability for users to actively reflect on their current situation, as well as their progress, is pivotal to the app's impact. Users can create and identify their own goals through a dynamic action plan, built around behavioural techniques, including the endowment effect (see Figure 4). This empowers them to take charge and work towards better supporting both their own wellbeing and that of others.

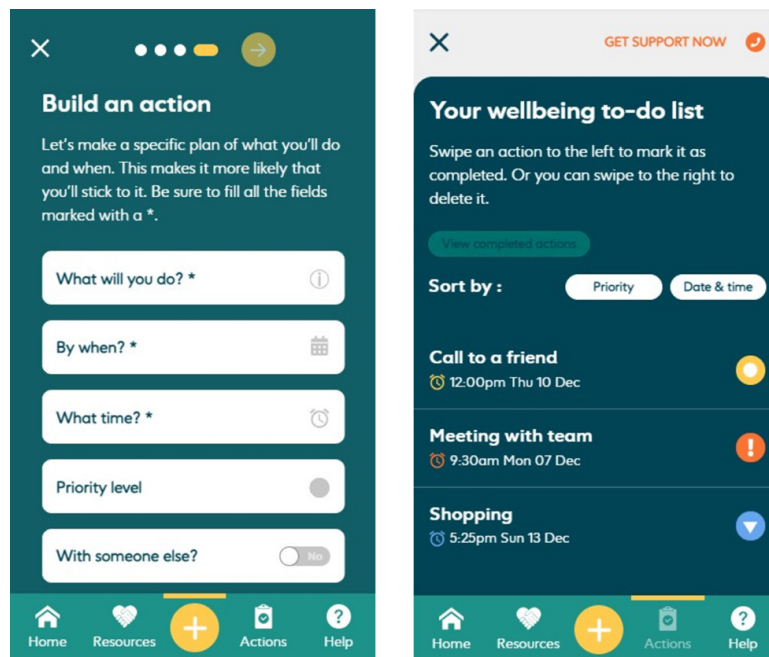


Fig. 4. The learner is able to create and track SMART actions with their wellbeing to-do list, directly within the app

4.4 Gamification and behavioural science

Light-touch gamification, such as badges and achievements that learners unlock by completing learning and achieving goals, boost engagement, and encourage user exploration (see Figure 5).

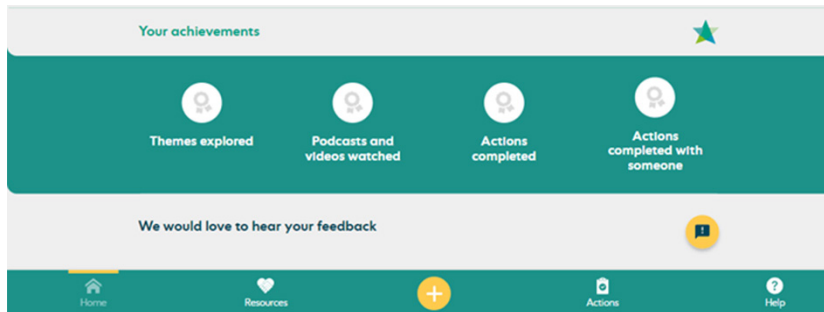


Fig. 5. Milestones and achievements are celebrated with badges throughout the learner’s wellbeing journey

4.5 Cultivating community

The app also provides access to live volunteer and peer support, as well as opportunities to connect and make links with the wider veteran community (see Figure 6). The app helps to cultivate a sense of community for veterans who may have felt isolated after leaving the Forces. Users are encouraged to reach out and make links with others throughout their journey facilitated by the app. They are also encouraged to collaborate and incorporate their network within their action and goal planning and are rewarded with higher points and badges for incorporating other people in their action plan. This encourages community building and socialisation—a key element of re-entering civilian life.

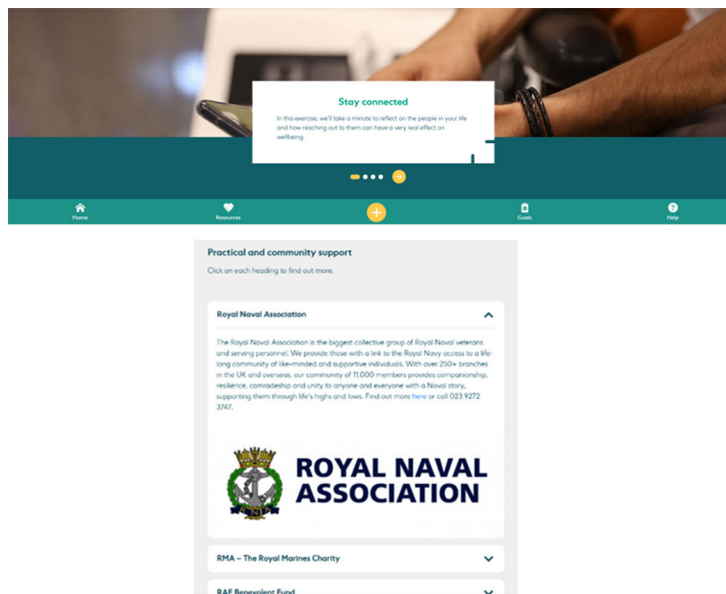


Fig. 6. The app provides guidance to encourage engagement with the community, alongside practical links and resources to access relevant networks

5 The results

Since its launch, the Veterans App has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from service leaver users, as well as the wider Armed Forces community:

“The Samaritans Veterans App will help ensure that all those who have served can access mental health and wellbeing support if they need it.”

– *Minister for Defence People and Veterans,
Leo Docherty Member of Parliament*

“The app will allow veterans to manage everyday tasks through a range of tools. Regardless of when you served. I urge all veterans to download the app to support their day-to-day wellbeing.”

– *Former Lance Corporal, Royal Marines*

“The new Samaritans Veterans app provides a practical way for those leaving the military and veterans to look after their own emotional health and that of their families, as well as support each other through a period of real upheaval in their lives.”

– *Samaritans Military Programme Manager*

“This app is what I’ve been waiting for! Found the podcasts and videos from ex-AF members inspiring and hope more of these will be developed in this app. The well-being activities are positive for me, and I find they help me relax, when needed. Overall, this app has helped me at a time when I needed it.”

– *User feedback, App store review*

“Really quick and simple to use app to support your transition out of the Armed Forces, with easy-to-follow ideas and advice on how to keep a healthy mindset through a potentially stressful time. Also has lots of guidance on resources that are available for anything from mental health support, housing, and building new connections outside of the forces.”

– *User feedback, App store review*

The Samaritans app also has a dedicated pocket guide and has been able to integrate successfully into the military infrastructure. So far, the app has been able to support more than 3,475 Veterans to develop better wellbeing management techniques and transition back into civilian life.

6 Reference

- [1] Samaritans data shows that veteran callers are almost twice as likely to report suicidal ideation compared to callers from the general population (Samaritans e-Log July 2018–June 2021).

7 Author

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