


Chapter 1

Bridging Gaps in Pain Management by Tackling Chronic Pain Stigma Through mHealth

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ABSTRACT

Chronic pain affects millions globally, with stigma compounding the physical burden. This social and psychological challenge isolates patients, hinders care, and worsens outcomes. StigmApp is a groundbreaking mobile health application designed to combat the stigma associated with chronic pain. Combining behavioral science, healthcare, and technology, it offers educational resources, fosters community connections, and integrates stigma-reducing strategies into pain management. Users praised its ease of use and impact on health and social well-being. StigmApp showcases the potential of mHealth technology to not only address physical symptoms but also dismantle the barriers of stigma in chronic pain management. This chapter explores the collaborative approach behind the app's development and the preliminary outcomes of its implementation. Additionally, it discusses how mHealth can serve as a tool for broader public health challenges where stigma is a significant barrier to treatment and support.

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INTRODUCTION

Chronic Pain as a Global Health Issue

Chronic pain affects approximately 20% of adults globally, with higher rates in certain populations and regions (Rice et al., 2016). Defined as pain lasting more than three months, chronic pain encompasses a wide range of conditions, including musculoskeletal disorders, neuropathic pain, fibromyalgia, and migraine. This health issue carries not only a physical burden but also a profound psychological and socioeconomic impact. The healthcare costs associated with chronic pain are substantial, with direct and indirect costs estimated to reach up to \$635 billion annually in the United States alone (Pitcher et al., 2019). This estimate includes healthcare expenditures, lost productivity, disability benefits, and other economic consequences, underscoring chronic pain's far-reaching impact on both individuals and societies.

In addition to the economic burden, the personal toll of chronic pain is profound. Patients often experience a diminished quality of life, compromised daily functioning, and an increased risk of mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety (Cohen et al., 2021). Research has highlighted the complex bidirectional relationship between chronic pain and psychological health, where pain exacerbates mental health symptoms, and psychological distress, in turn, intensifies pain perception. Bair et al. (2003) provides evidence on the bidirectional relationship between pain and psychological distress, showing that chronic pain often coexists with mental health symptoms, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Malet et al. (2016) discuss shared neural pathways between chronic pain and psychiatric symptoms, explaining how pain and psychological distress can mutually exacerbate each other. Chronic pain affects social relationships, work performance, and personal identity, leaving individuals isolated and struggling to maintain regular activities. These factors illustrate the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses not only the physical but also the psychological and social dimensions of chronic pain.

The Role of Stigma in Chronic Pain

Stigma is a significant but often overlooked issue in chronic pain management. Many individuals with chronic pain report experiencing **public stigma**, which manifests as societal biases that view chronic pain patients as exaggerating their symptoms or lacking motivation. This stigma can extend into healthcare settings, where patients are sometimes met with skepticism or perceived as “drug-seeking” when seeking pain relief (Cosio & Demyan, 2021). Such judgments can lead to

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