Help@Hand Evaluation
City of Berkeley Mental Health Division

Prepared by
Rachel Maas, MPH, Senior Associate
Hatchuel Tabernik and Associates

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Background

In 2019, the City of Berkeley, Health, Housing and Community Services Department, Mental Health Division received local and State approvals to allocate $462,916 of Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) Innovations (INN) funds to participate in the Technology Suite Project. The City of Berkeley INN Technology Suite Project (later renamed to Help@Hand) was part of a broader statewide collaborative, administered through the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA), to bring technology-based mental health services and solutions to California residents. The focus of the Help@Hand project was to provide discreet, low-threshold mental health support to local residents while reducing stigma and barriers to mental healthcare. Through this project, the City of Berkeley, Mental Health Division offered free subscriptions on a limited basis to two mental health Apps, myStrength and Headspace, to individuals living, working, or attending school in Berkeley. Free subscriptions for both Apps launched on October 1, 2021.

Evaluation Methods

The City of Berkeley, Mental Health Division partnered with Hatchuel Tabernik and Associates (HTA) Consulting to conduct a local evaluation of the Berkeley Help@Hand project. The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. Who did the project reach?
    a. *Who used codes/downloaded the Apps offered? Were there any differences by subpopulations?*
    b. *Did they subsequently access the Apps? Were there any differences by subpopulations (ex. age, gender, education, sexuality, income)?*
2. What was the impact on App users' mental health?
    a. *Was there a change in stigma around mental health and help-seeking?*
    b. *Was there a change in users' sense of belonging and purpose? Was there a change in users' sense of isolation and social connectedness?*
    c. *Was there a change in users' nervousness, restlessness, depression, or sense of self-worth?*
    d. *Was there a change in users' quality of life (e.g., sleep, physical activity, employment, school involvement)?*
3. What was the impact on App users from specific target populations?
    a. *Are there differential impacts by age (specifically youth and Transition Age Youth (TAY), and older adults), race/ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status?*

To answer these questions, HTA utilized a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative data was collected by conducting focus groups and interviews with Berkeley Help@Hand App users, and quantitative data was collected through each App as well as through pre-post surveys administered to Headspace users by statewide evaluators at University of California, Irvine (UCI).

Key Evaluation Findings

- Over the course of the project, 7,328 individuals registered for Headspace subscriptions via Berkeley Help@Hand; 1,720 individuals registered for myStrength subscriptions
- Based on the data available, Help@Hand participants were Racially/ethnically representative of the City of Berkeley, which suggests that there was equitable outreach about the program to different racial/ethnic groups.

- For both Headspace and myStrength, users were more likely to be women and to between the ages of 26-59 years old
- In terms of App use, the data suggests the majority of people who registered either a myStrength or Headspace account used the App less than a handful of times. However, a considerable portion of individuals were active users, using the Apps several times a week or more.
- App data, focus group and interview findings, and UCI Headspace Survey data all indicated that the top reasons for using the App were to address anxiety, stress, and sleep issues.
- Overall, focus group and interview participants reported that the Apps helped them reduce their anxiety and stress levels, improve their sleep, and show up to work or school in a healthier way.
- Overall, UCI Headspace Survey respondents had positive reviews of the App and generally agreed that it improved their mental health and wellness

Recommendations for Future Programming

- Berkeley Help@Hand focus group and interview participants emphasized the importance of keeping subscriptions no-cost in any future iterations of the program, as they felt even a small monthly fee would dissuade potential users. UCI Headspace Survey results further supported this sentiment.
- It is important to point out that while Headspace and myStrength users represented in this evaluation had favorable reviews of the both Apps and the impact of the Apps on their mental health and wellbeing, the users who participated in the Help@Hand surveys, focus groups, and interviews also represent a subset of particularly active Help@Hand users. The majority of users who registered for subscriptions through Help@Hand did not engage with myStrength or Headspace to the same extent as the average survey, focus group, or interview participant. Future iterations of the program might consider how to maintain subscriptions for 'active' users while canceling 'inactive' accounts in order to contain expenses.

Background

In 2019, the City of Berkeley, Health, Housing and Community Services Department, Mental Health Division received local and State approvals to allocate $462,916 of Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) Innovations (INN) funds to participate in the Technology Suite Project. The City of Berkeley INN Technology Suite Project (later renamed to Help@Hand) was part of a broader statewide collaborative, administered through the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA), to bring technology-based mental health services and solutions to California residents on an at-will, voluntary basis through Apps that can be used on computers, tablets, and smartphones.

The focus of the Help@Hand project was to provide discreet, low-threshold mental health support to local residents while reducing stigma and barriers to mental healthcare. Through this project, the City of Berkeley, Mental Health Division offered free subscriptions on a limited basis to two mental health Apps, myStrength and Headspace, to individuals living, working, or attending school in Berkeley. Both Apps collected passive data on mental health symptoms and provided evidence-based tools for coping with stress, anxiety, and depression. Free subscriptions for both Apps launched on October 1, 2021:
- myStrength subscriptions were funded for 13 months and concluded October 31, 2022
- Headspace subscriptions were funded for 24 months and concluded September 30, 2023

The City of Berkeley, Mental Health Division partnered with Hatchuel Tabernik and Associates (HTA) Consulting to conduct a local evaluation of the Berkeley Help@Hand project. The aim of the local evaluation was to assess the project's implementation and overall effectiveness, and to complement the state-level Help@Hand evaluation conducted by the University of California at Irvine (UCI).

Evaluation Methods

After meeting with key City of Berkeley, Mental Health Division Help@Hand leaders in Summer 2021, HTA developed the following evaluation questions to guide focus groups, key informant interviews, and the analysis of program data. These questions are meant to capture the work that the City of Berkeley, Mental Health Division Help@Hand project accomplished from September 1, 2021 – September 2023 and the local impact of the program.

4. Who did the project reach?
   a. *Who used codes/downloaded the Apps offered? Were there any differences by subpopulations?*
   b. *Did they subsequently access the Apps? Were there any differences by subpopulations (ex. age, gender, education, sexuality, income)?*
5. What was the impact on App users' mental health?
   a. *Was there a change in stigma around mental health and help-seeking?*
   b. *Was there a change in users' sense of belonging and purpose? Was there a change in users' sense of isolation and social connectedness?*
   c. *Was there a change in users' nervousness, restlessness, depression, or sense of self-worth?*
   d. *Was there a change in users' quality of life (e.g., sleep, physical activity, employment, school involvement)?*
6. What was the impact on App users from specific target populations?
   a. *Are there differential impacts by age (specifically youth and Transition Age Youth (TAY), and older adults), race/ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status?*

Table 1: Berkeley Help@Hand Local Evaluation Questions and Data Sources

Evaluation Questions		Data Sources
1. **Who did the project reach?**	Who used codes/downloaded the Apps offered? Were there any differences by subpopulations?	App Data; Marketing Data
	Did they subsequently access the Apps? Were there any differences by subpopulations (ex. age, gender, education, sexuality, income)?	App Data
2. **What was the impact on App users' mental health?**	Was there a change in stigma around mental health and help-seeking?	UCI User Surveys; User Interviews/Focus Groups
	Was there a change in users' sense of belonging and purpose? Was there a change in users' sense of isolation and social connectedness?	UCI User Surveys; User Interviews/Focus Groups
	Was there a change in users' nervousness, restlessness, depression, or sense of self-worth?	UCI User Surveys; User Interviews/Focus Groups
	Was there a change in users' quality of life (e.g., sleep, physical activity, employment, school involvement)?	User Interviews/Focus Groups
3. **What was the impact on App users from specific target populations?**	Are there differential impacts by age (specifically youth and Transition Age Youth (TAY), and older adults), race/ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status?	App Data

To address these evaluation questions, HTA implemented a mixed-methods evaluation. To gather feedback on each mental health App, HTA conducted focus groups and qualitative interviews with App users. Focus group and interview questions were developed from the core evaluation questions, and the topics covered included: how users learned about free access to the App via Berkeley Help@Hand; personal impetus for downloading the App; frequency of use; most frequently used App features; changes in personal perception of mental health stigma; and the impact of App use on users mental, physical, and overall well-being. For the full list of focus group and interview questions, please refer to the report Appendix.

Qualitative data was collected in two phases that aligned with the conclusion of user access to free subscriptions to each App:

- myStrength data was collected in Winter 2022; and

- Headspace data was collected in Winter 2023.

Program participants were recruited via email. Both focus groups were conducted virtually by Zoom video call, while individual interviews were conducted by phone. To gather feedback from myStrength users, HTA conducted a 60-minute focus group with four participants, as well as two (2) individual half-hour phone interviews. To gather feedback from Headspace users, HTA conducted a 60-minute focus group with two participants, as well as six individual half-hour phone interviews. All focus group and interview participants received a $25 gift card for their time. Overall, HTA spoke with fourteen (14) Berkeley Help@Hand participants, six of whom were myStrength users and eight of whom were Headspace users.

In addition to qualitative data collection, HTA regularly collected App user data from both myStrength and Headspace, including user demographics (ex. birth year, gender), frequency of use, most commonly used features in each App, and outcome data where possible. Additional outcome data was obtained through the state Help@Hand evaluation team at University of California, Irvine (UCI), including pre- and post-surveys of Berkeley Help@Hand Headspace users.

Evaluation Findings

EQ-1.

Who did the project reach? *Who used codes/downloaded the Apps offered? Were there any differences by subpopulations? Did they subsequently access the Apps? Were there any differences by subpopulations (ex. age, gender, education, sexuality, income)?*

### Who used codes/downloaded the Apps offered? Were there any differences by subpopulations?

Overall, 7,328 individuals living, working, or attending school in Berkeley signed up for a Headspace subscription through the Berkeley Help@Hand program. While Headspace did not provide demographic data for all Berkeley Help@Hand Headspace users, some demographic data was obtained through UCI's pre- and post-surveys for Help@Hand Headspace users; UCI was able to provided demographic data for 275 Help@Hand Headspace users. Of those 275 individuals, 73.5% were women, 17.5% were men, and 9.1% were another gender identity.[1] The majority of users were aged 26-59 (62.9%), followed by 0-25 (29.5%) and age 60+ (7.6%). Most respondents (53.5%) identified as Non-Hispanic White, 20% as Asian, 7.3% as Hispanic/Latino, and 19.3% as another race.[2] A large proportion reported household incomes less than $100,000 (44.4%), over three quarters (78.5%) had a postsecondary degree, and 59.3% identified as heterosexual or straight. Compared to the overall population of Berkeley, women and people aged 26-59 were overrepresented among Help@Hand Headspace users *(See Table 2 for more detail).*

---

[1] Note: 'Other' gender identities were reported in aggregate from UCI due to small sample sizes.
[2] Note: 'Other' racial identities were reported in aggregate from UCI due to small sample sizes.

Overall, 1,720 individuals living, working, or attending school in Berkeley signed up for a myStrength subscription through the Help@Hand program. Of those individuals, 66.6% identified as women, 18.6% were men, 3.9% were nonbinary, and 10.9% did not provide information about their gender. The majority of users were between 26 and 59 years old (59.9%), followed by individuals aged 0-25 (24.8%) and older adults aged 60+ (15.2%).[3] myStrength did not collect user data on race, ethnicity, household income, sexual orientation, or level of education. Compared to the overall population of Berkeley, women and individuals aged 26-59 were overrepresented among Help@Hand myStrength users *(See Table 1 for more detail).*

Figure 2: Help@Hand User Profiles for both Headspace and myStrength.

---
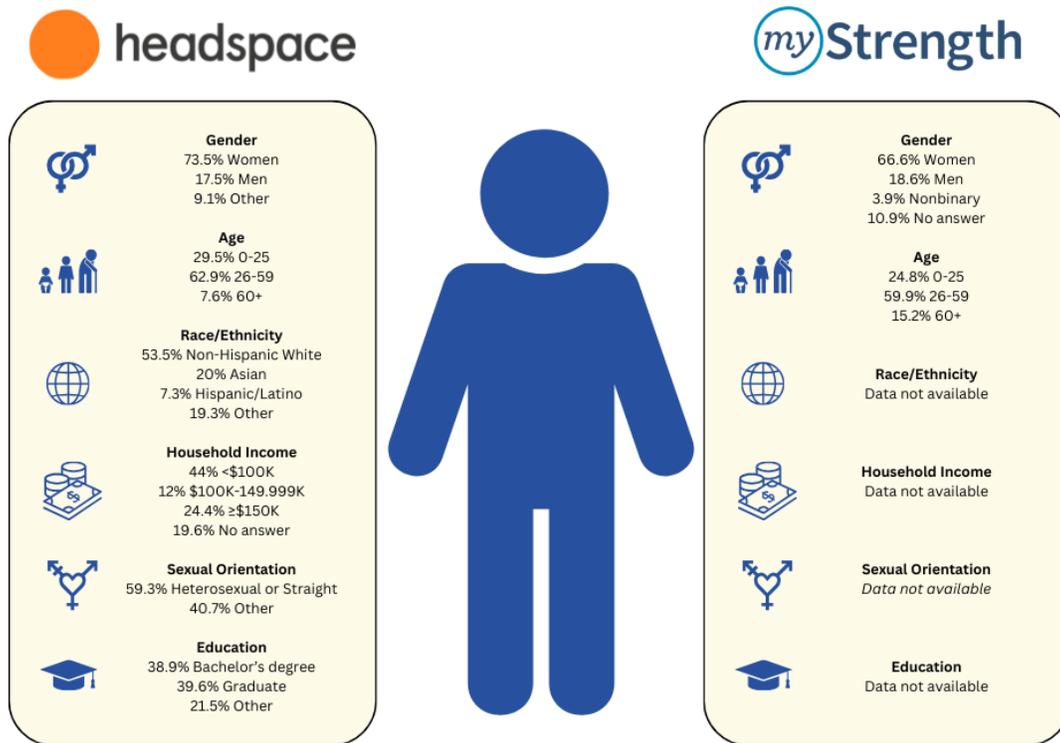
[3] Note: Ages were calculated from birth year, which was the data point collected by myStrength. To distribute ages without exact birthdates, all users were assigned a birthdate of July 1st.

Table 2: Berkeley Help@Hand User Profiles for Headspace and myStrength compared to Berkeley, CA Census Data.

	Headspace % (n)	myStrength % (n)	City of Berkeley % (n)
Gender[4]			
Woman/Female	73.5 (202)	66.7 (1,145)	51.0 (63,408)
Man/Male	17.5 (48)	18.6 (320)	49.0 (60,913)
Nonbinary	*Data not available*	3.9 (67)	*Data not available*
Other[5]	9.1 (25)		*Data not available*
No answer	*Data not available*	10.9 (188)	*Data not available*
Age[6]			
0-25	29.5 (81)	24.8 (427)	40.0 (49,782)
26-59	62.9 (173)	59.9 (1,031)	40.3 (50,054)
60+	7.6 (21)	15.2 (262)	19.7 (24,485)
Race/Ethnicity[7]			
Non-Hispanic White	53.5 (147)	*Data not available*	53.3 (66,267)
Asian	20.0 (55)	*Data not available*	20.0 (24,896)
Hispanic/Latino	7.3 (20)	*Data not available*	13.7 (17,013)
Other[8]	19.6 (53)	*Data not available*	26.7 (33,158)
Household Income[9]			
Less than $100,000	44.0 (121)	*Data not available*	50.7
$100,000-$149,999	12.0 (33)	*Data not available*	12.2
$150,000 or more	24.4 (67)	*Data not available*	37.2
No answer	19.6 (54)	*Data not available*	
Sexual Orientation			
Heterosexual or straight	59.3 (163)	*Data not available*	*Data not available*
Other[10]	40.7 (112)	*Data not available*	*Data not available*

[4] Note: the US Census only includes two categories for sex (male and female), and gender is not recorded, so a direct comparison is not possible.

[5] 'Other' is used here to protect the privacy of survey respondents who indicated any gender identity where the number of respondents indicating that identity is N=10 or less. The full list of gender identity options on the UCI Headspace Survey were as follows: 'Man/male'; 'Woman/female'; 'Transgender man'; 'Transgender woman'; 'Genderqueer / Gender non-conforming / Non-binary'; 'Questioning or unsure of gender identity'; 'I prefer to self-identify (Please explain):'; and 'I prefer not to answer'.

[6] Note: US Census age categories differ slightly from the UCI Headspace Survey categories; Census tallies have been reallocated proportionally to UCI's age categories in order to compare data across the three sources.

[7] Source: 2020 Census Data Table DP1

[8] Other' is used here to protect the privacy of survey respondents who indicated any racial or ethnic identity where the number of respondents indicating that identity is N=10 or less. The full list of gender identity options on the UCI Headspace Survey were as follows: 'American Indian/Native American/Native Alaskan'; 'Asian'; 'Black or African American'; 'Hispanic/Latino/a/x'; 'Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander'; 'White/Caucasian'; 'Other (Please explain):'; and 'I prefer not to answer.'

[9] ACS 2022 Estimates Table S1901

[10] Other' is used here to protect the privacy of survey respondents who indicated any sexual orientation where the number of respondents indicating that identity is N=10 or less. The full list of sexual orientation options on the UCI Headspace Survey were as follows: 'Gay or Lesbian'; 'Heterosexual or Straight'; 'Bisexual'; 'Pansexual'; 'Queer'; 'Asexual'; 'Questioning or unsure of sexual orientation'; 'I prefer to self-identify (Please explain):'; and 'I prefer not to answer'.

Education[11]			
Bachelor's degree	38.9 (107)	*Data not available*	36.2
Graduate degree	39.6 (109)	*Data not available*	43.4
Other[12]	21.5 (59)	*Data not available*	17.6
Totals	**100% (275)**	**100% (1,720)**	**100% (124,321)**

Sources: UCI Headspace Survey; myStrength App data; US Census Data 2020; American Community Survey (ACS) 2022 estimates.

Qualitative Findings

Focus group and interview participants were asked to share how they learned about Help@Hand access to Headspace or myStrength, as well as what ultimately prompted them to sign up for an account and download the App. When asked how they learned about the program, the most common answers were through school or work. Several participants also learned about the program through other sources, including: social media, through their child's school, through online searches for mental health resources, and through their social networks (e.g., family, therapist).

"It was a Berkeley email about free Headspace subscriptions." – Headspace Interview

"I had been using Headspace on my dad's account, but he stopped his subscription and I was like, 'Oh no,' and I'm a Berkeley student so I googled to see if there was something free for students." – Headspace Interview

"Probably from Berkeley School District family engagement, or also the director website." – Headspace Focus Group

A few participants noted that they had been going through a particularly stressful life period when they found the program and downloaded the Apps.

"I felt a little depression at the time, so I just looked for any App or any therapies, and this information came up. I live in Berkeley, so I was excited and glad that the city takes care of people and that I'm not the only one." – myStrength interview

It was a time when I was really stressed about school and I downloaded it. Personally, I wouldn't purchase it, but I found a need for it in that moment." – Headspace interview

Did they subsequently access the Apps? Were there any differences by subpopulations (ex. age, gender, education, sexuality, income)?

Over the period of time that Headspace subscriptions were available through the City of Berkeley, Mental Health Division, the average monthly engagement rate was 25%; however, engagement rates were highest during the first few months of the program and waned over time *(See Table 2)*. Two-thirds (66.8%) of respondents to the UCI Headspace pre-survey reported that they used the App

---

[11] ACS 2022 Estimates Table S1501

[12] 'Other' is used here to protect the privacy of survey respondents who indicated any education level where the number of respondents indicating that education level is N=10 or less. The full list of education level options on the UCI Headspace Survey were as follows: 'Less than high school (no diploma or GED)'; 'High school graduate (or GED)'; 'Some college with no degree'; 'Associate's degree'; 'Bachelor's degree'; 'Graduate or professional degree'; 'Other (Please explain):'; 'I prefer not to answer'.

'daily' or 'several times a week,' and this number dipped slightly amongst post-survey respondents to 60.2%. These data suggest that UCI Headspace survey respondents represent a highly engaged proportion of Berkeley Help@Hand Headspace users. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were run to see if there were any significant differences by age range or gender in the average frequency of Headspace use; no significant differences were found *(See Appendix for additional information)*. This means that any small variations by age range or gender in how frequently people used their Berkeley Help@Hand Headspace subscription are likely random and due to chance.

'Managing Anxiety' was the most popular Headspace course among Berkeley users, while 'The Wake Up' was the most popular non-course feature. When survey respondents were asked what Headspace content was most useful to them, 'Meditation' was the top-cited resource (75.2% of respondents found it useful).

Of the 1,720 Berkeley Help@Hand myStrength users, 913 (53.1%) only logged into the App once—when they signed up for the account. The average number of log-ins per user was 2.81, and 187 (10.9%) users logged into the App five or more times. Each user was assigned a myStrength 'Wellness Program' to address their needs; the most common programs amongst Help@Hand myStrenth users were PTSD (25.3% of users were assigned to this program), Insomnia (15.5%), and Anxiety (13.8%) *(See Table 3)*. One-way ANOVA tests were run to see if there were any significant differences by age range or gender in average length of use or frequency of myStrength use; no significant differences were found *(See Appendix for additional information)*.

Table 2: Berkeley Help@Hand Headspace App Usage

App Usage: Quarterly Average Engagement Rates[13]	Percentage of Berkeley Help@Hand Headspace Users	
Oct-Dec 2021 (Q1)	51%	
Jan-Mar 2022 (Q2)	32%	
Apr-Jun 2022 (Q3)	26%	
Jul-Sep 2022 (Q4)	22%	
Oct-Dec 2022 (Q5)	22%	
Jan-Mar 2023 (Q6)	20%	
Apr-Jun 2023 (Q7)	17%	
Jul-Sep 2023 (Q8)	16%	
October 2023 (Q9)[14]	9%	
Overall	25%	
App Usage: Self-Reported Frequency of Use (UCI Survey)	Percentage of Pre-Survey Respondents (N=265)	Percentage of Post-Survey Respondents (N=108)
Daily	21.5	24.1
Several times a week	45.3	36.1
Several times a month	18.1	23.1
About once a month	6.4	7.4
Rarely	4.2	6.5
I only used it once	2.3	0.9
Other	2.3	1.9
Top 5 Courses Accessed:	Percentage of All Berkeley Help@Hand Headspace Course Sessions	
Managing Anxiety	14.1%	
Basics	10.8%	
Letting Go of Stress	9.3%	
Basics 2	5.3%	
Sleep	4.2%	
Top 5 Non-Course Features Accessed:		
The Wake Up	9.3%	
Goodnight	3%	
Sleeping	2.4%	
Everyday Headspace	2.1%	
Doze	1.8%	

---

[13] Note: Averages were taken across three-month increments, based on monthly engagement rates provided by Headspace. Headspace defined "engaged" users as enrolled members who had engaged with at least one piece of content in Headspace in the last 30 days.

[14] Note: Engagement rates lag 30 days behind the official start and end of the program. For example, if a participant registered for Headspace on the last day of the Help@Hand program (September 30, 2023) they had access to the program through October 2023.

UCI Survey: What content on Headspace is or was useful to you? Select all that apply.	Percentage of Survey Respondents (N=109)
Meditation	75.2
Sleep	57.8
Stress	41.3
Mindfulness	53.2
Other	9.9

Sources: Headspace dashboard data; UCI Headspace Survey

Table 3: Berkeley Help@Hand myStrength App Usage

App Usage: Number of log-ins	**Statistics across all Berkeley myStrength Users (N=1,720)**
Average number of log-ins	2.81
Median number of log-ins	1
Mode number of log-ins	1
Minimum	1
Maximum	472
App Usage: Days Between First and Last Use	**Statistics across all Berkeley myStrength Users (N=1,720)**
Average	29.4
Median	1
Mode	1
Minimum	1
Maximum	771
Wellness Program:	**Percentage of Berkeley Help@Hand myStrength Users (N=1,720)**
PTSD	25.3
Insomnia	15.5
Anxiety	13.8
Mindfulness and stress reduction	9.4
No answer	8.7
Depression	7.0
Relationships	6.1
Pregnancy and early parenting	3.4
Chronic pain	3.0
Drugs and alcohol	2.5
Mindfulness and meditation	1.7
Divorce	1.5
Grief	1.2
Balancing intense emotions	0.7
Nicotine	0.1
Opioid recovery	0.1
Worklife	0.1

Source: myStrength User Data

Qualitative findings

When asked how frequently they used the Apps, most participants indicated that they initially used the App daily or several times a week. A couple of participants maintained the same frequent use until their subscription expired. However, most participants we spoke with shared that, over time, their use of the Apps became less frequent.

"I used it I would say at least once a week, probably closer to three times a week." – Headspace interview

"After I completed the initial assessment, daily for six months or so, and then I used the sleep diary regularly after that." – myStrength focus group

"When I first got the app, I used it pretty much daily for about a month— either every day or two to three times a week. But over the course of one to two months, I kind of trailed off, and then eventually just stopped using it entirely."– myStrength interview

"Initially quite often, maybe three to four times a week, and then as the school year started it started to wane, just because I hadn't built in the habit of using it more consistently." – myStrength focus group

"I would go through spells where I would use it pretty much daily for a month or so at a time, and then I would travel or take a vacation or something and stop for a couple weeks, but I would try to use it every day as much as I could." – Headspace interview

Some participants also shared that they generally used it less frequently when their mental health was in a better place, but that they might use it more frequently if they were having a stressful week or month.

"It's usually when I'm just feeling more stressed and can't sleep at night, so way back it was like every day for two weeks." – Headspace interview

"I think for me I had phases. Phases when I was not well, I was using it several times a week. When I felt better, once a month. So, for me it was a useful tool because [of its] flexibility." – Headspace focus group

Only two participants shared that they had been an infrequent user for the duration of the program.

"I haven't used it many times, only several times, even though I like it." – myStrength interview

"Personally, I haven't used it as much as I would like to, working on my Master's and being a parent, but suddenly now it isn't there and I miss it." – Headspace focus group

Both myStrength and Headspace users were also asked which App features they used most often and which they found the most helpful. The most popular App features among focus group and interview participants were the sleep features: myStrength featured a sleep diary, while Headspace featured a "sleepcast" podcast.

"I have sleep issues, sleep and mental health, and the App was very streamlined in that and had an awareness of how those affect each other." – myStrength focus group

"I always did it for sleep, so I would use either the soundscapes or the sleep casts." – Headspace interviewee

Meditation and mindfulness exercises, as well as grounding and breathing animations, were also popular among the participants HTA spoke with.

"I have another App that I use for just meditation, but I really liked the short breathing videos that they did every day, some of the short mindfulness techniques. And I had the intention to do some of the courses but didn't get to them unfortunately." – Headspace interview

"I personally liked breathing with the animations—I found that to be really helpful. If I felt anxious about things in my life I would breathe with the dot and it would ground me." – Headspace interview

A few participants mentioned that they liked how many themed educational modules there were in each App:

"I used the stress module, and there's a family one. There are different themes, and I liked to go through the themes."
– Headspace focus group

Finally, a few participants indicated that they used the daily check-in features in the Apps.

"Every day they asked how are you feeling, and then they had little modules and lessons." – Headspace focus group

beyond that I really liked the dailies; what I liked about this is that it kind of gave you betas, some life advice, you could swipe through thoroughly – myStrength FG

Other features mentioned:
- availability in other languages:
  "I think for me the most useful was that it was available in French, and I think that was a real relief, because when I had phases I was not feeling well, and I felt like I chose what I needed most, and it felt natural."
  – Headspace FG
- topic-specific modules (e.g. family module, stress module, anxiety module)
- that it was a springboard to accessing other mental health resources:
  "After taking the quiz it gave recommendations, so I used it mainly to find information about outside resources, mainly a tool for information and then doing more research and seeking outside help." – myStrength focus group

EQ-2.
What was the impact on App users' mental health? *Was there a change in stigma around mental health and help-seeking? Was there a change in users' sense of belonging and purpose? Was there a change in users' sense of isolation and social connectedness? Was there a change in users' nervousness, restlessness, depression, or sense of self-worth? Was there a change in users' quality of life (e.g., sleep, physical activity, employment, school involvement)?*

Was there a change in stigma around mental health and help-seeking?

Qualitative findings

To gauge focus group and interview participants' social perceptions of using a mental health App, they were asked two questions:

- Did you have any hesitations downloading the app?
- Do you feel like using the app changed your perception of accessing mental health resources?

The majority of participants did not have any hesitations downloading myStrength nor Headspace. One myStrength user stated that the App felt confidential, so they were not worried about their data. Another myStrength user expressed that the fact that the subscription was provided by the City of Berkeley gave them confidence.

"Because it's confidential, and that space is only for me. Even though I wrote things down, I trust the site that they're not going to share anything." – myStrength interview

"I had no hesitation. If anything, I thought it was wonderful that the City of Berkeley was offering it for free. It's really important." – myStrength focus group

Of the few participants who indicated some hesitation downloading the Headspace App, two cited concerns about hidden fees, and one participant felt more comfortable downloading the App once someone they knew personally had recommended it. Stigma was not mentioned as a reason not to download the Apps.

"It felt too good to be true, and I thought there would be hidden fees, so it was great that it was truly free… That's always my first anxiety–I'll forget to cancel the App and then get charged." – Headspace focus group

"I had some thoughts about, 'Okay, this will be free for a while, but won't be free again,' and I was also wondering how the city was paying for it… does the city have a flexible payment for users who may come and go?"
– Headspace focus group

"I briefly heard about this App for a long time, but I hesitated to download it until my TA highly recommended it."
– Headspace interviewee

Additional information on stigma was collected through the UCI Headspace Survey. Respondents were asked to respond to two statements on a scale of 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree' *(See Table 4)*. Comparisons of pre- and post-survey means showed a significant increase in agreement to the statement 'Most people believe that having mental health challenges is a sign of personal weakness,' indicating a possible slight increase in stigma amongst active Headspace users.

Table 4: UCI Headspace Survey Changes in Stigma (N=275).

	Pre-Survey Averages	Post-Survey Averages
Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree using a scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5).		
Being around people who don't have mental health challenges makes me feel out of place or inadequate.	2.7	2.7
Most people believe that having mental health challenges is a sign of personal weakness.	2.7*	3.0*

Note: Asterisks indicate significant differences between pre-survey and post-survey responses based a paired sample t-test.

Was there a change in users' sense of isolation and social connectedness? Was there a change in users' nervousness, restlessness, depression, or sense of self-worth? Was there a change in users' quality of life (e.g., sleep, physical activity, employment, school involvement)?

Qualitative findings
To capture the overall impact of the program, participants were asked about the impact of App use on three facets of their wellbeing: 1) mental health; 2) physical health; and 3) broader wellbeing (e.g. work life, school life).

When asked what impact, if any, using the Apps had on their mental health, participants most frequently shared that the Apps enabled them to address and improve their mental health in an accessible, cost-free way. A few participants specifically noted that they were grateful that Help@Hand enabled them to access mental health care without involving medical insurance or health providers.

"I can see my problem, and I can solve my problem by myself, without asking for a specialist… This App helps for some people who are struggling to control their mood, light level of mental health. – myStrength interviewee

I was more thinking that taking care of myself meant I had to go somewhere, like a therapist, but that's a very expensive thing. And so with the App, I [realized] actually taking care of oneself is just you accessing things like that, felt really lowkey and easy, and just being guided… and I think this was really helping me choose different topics. And, maybe because I haven't done therapy, I would think you'd stick to a topic you're diagnosed for, but I just really liked that the App was helping me address some mental health challenges I had." – Headspace focus group

"I didn't have to do all these steps to access self-care. If my daughter is in bed and I can't sleep, I can pull this App up and use it, and it was really helpful in that moment." – Headspace focus group

"As a gateway to other resources, it had a big impact; but in a vacuum by itself, not as much."
– myStrength focus group

A couple of participants noted that it helped them use technology in a way that improved their mental health, whether it be a module to help them focus or a way to start their day in a more positive headspace.

"I found myself on my phone, on screens a lot, so using the App was easy for me because I was already using technology a lot. I was using my phone as distraction, so the App helped me stay focused. Let's sit with how you're feeling, and get connected to outside resources." – myStrength focus group

"I was looking to start my day in a better mental space, so I think knowing that I was going to do it every morning helped me pause and start my day off better." – Headspace interview

Several participants also noted that using the Apps helped them improve their anxiety and stress levels, and that it increased their mindfulness.

"I guess it makes me more aware. It brings mindfulness to my daily life, and with that I've definitely noticed that my anxiety levels have reduced." – Headspace interview

"It really just allows me to take a moment of breath, because I don't know how to do meditation–it gives me that way to take a moment to breathe."– Headspace interview

"I focus on the anxiety portion and getting comfortable with discomfort. I would say that it had a medium or moderate impact to my mental health, and I only did those in the last six months." – Headspace interview

However, one participant pointed out that there was a downside to the App being lower threshold in that it did not necessarily hold someone "accountable" in the way that individualized treatment might:

"To be honest, I started therapy somewhere in the middle of using… I found that more effective and it held me accountable in a weird way. The App can feel impersonal and passive in a way. – myStrength focus group

Other mental health impacts mentioned included:
- improved sleep
- feeling less isolated; and
- that it was meaningful to be notified of the program through an employer:
  "I found the app very impactful, especially when it was first introduced; I was really looking for support from my employer. Even though it came through the City of Berkeley, I just felt that receiving that support more broadly meant a lot–it showed where their values lie." – myStrength focus group

When asked what impact, if any, using the Apps had on their physical help, several participants noted improved sleep. In fact, positive changes in sleep quality were mentioned by a majority of focus group and interview participants, and several participants shared that they felt that using the Apps had a considerable impact on their physical health in indirect ways because App use had improved their mental health.

"I mean sleep is super important to physical health, so I would say [that]." – Headspace interview

"My sleep diary–not even the sleep activities, but just the process of logging my sleep and stuff like that." – myStrength focus group

"I've usually been pretty active, but this isolation [from the pandemic], I lacked the motivation to go out. And I don't think it was the modules specifically, but because I was depressed or anxious [before], and because my mental health was better from App, then I was doing the things that I enjoyed." – Headspace FG

"I think it helped me wake up a little faster [in the morning], kind of mentally wake up." – Headspace interview

"I didn't use the sleep function specifically--I used the meditation—but I did see a significant improvement in my sleep." – myStrength FG

Only one participant felt that the Apps had no impact on their physical health.

Finally, when asked what impact, if any, using the Apps had on their lives more broadly (e.g., at school, at work), several participants felt using the Apps improved their work or school lives and helped reduce stress related to both.

"It has a positive effect on school because I mostly get anxiety because of schoolwork in the first place, and so using the Headspace app and the breathing exercises has had a positive effect on reducing my anxiety level."
– Headspace interview

"It feels as if our staff is always on fire. This app encouraged me to take breaks more frequently… It helped me to have a healthier relationship with my work." – myStrength focus group

"I was looking for it to start my day off on a better foot, and work tends to be the first thing I have to do, so it helped me to start the day off better and have better interactions with people in the mornings." – Headspace interview

"I'm a student so it's very stressful during the day so it was nice at night to kind of just relax." – Headspace interview

To close out discussions, focus group and interview participants were asked if they had any additional feedback to share about the Help@Hand program. The most common feedback was that participants were grateful for the program and wish that it were continued by the City of Berkeley—all but one participant shared this sentiment. Several participants felt strongly that the fact that subscriptions were no cost was crucial, as even a small monthly fee might have prevented them from using the Apps. UCI Headspace survey respondents further confirmed this sentiment: when asked if they would use Headspace again in the future, 60.6% answered 'Yes, but only if it's free'.

"How important this is to offer and continue to offer; I think it was incredibly valuable to me and could be incredibly valuable to others. I hope Berkeley continues; I can't emphasize that enough… And I would not have downloaded if it were just discounted–the fact that it was free." – myStrength focus group

"I am very grateful to the city for providing this resource." – Headspace interview

"I'd love to see the subscription lowered for people in specific situations, or the free option extended. Right now, I would really love it, but I'm not in a financial place to subscribe."– Headspace focus group

"I feel like again just knowing that it's available and free, and continuing to advertise, I think this is what society should do–provide basic, free mental health options and then you can take it more seriously and do it at your level versus 'oh I can't afford, so when I will be able?'"– Headspace focus group

"The idea that the city was sponsoring a city-wide mental health initiative, it really helps remove some of the stigma, offering program the same way you offer any other public services… That was foundationally really exciting to see."
– myStrength focus group

"It's been super impactful and I'm super grateful that I've been able to access it for free, because I wouldn't have paid for it, even though I should pay for it because it's super helpful." – Headspace interview

"I'm bummed that I don't have it anymore. I don't know how much it costs, but I go on YouTube now and they have some of the Headspace sleepcasts on YouTube, so I listen to them there now, but it's not the same."
– Headspace interview

Additionally, a few participants shared suggestions on how to improve the Apps, including:
- Reminders from the Apps to utilize them
- A calendar feature to measure one's progress
- An option to increase the speed on certain audio/video features
- That the Apps could be more engaging; and
- To make data sharing policies clearer for users,
- And an easier myStrength log-in interface:
  "The only thing I could think of is my phone broke, and logging back in took a really long time—that coupled with authentication made it really hard to log into." – myStrength focus group

In addition to qualitative analysis, UCI Headspace Survey was analyzed to test the impact of Headspace over time amongst Berkeley users. Pre-post analysis indicated a significant decrease in the average levels of agreement to three statements: 'It is easy to fit Headspace into my everyday life and activities.'; 'I find Headspace useful in my daily life.'; and 'Using Headspace improves my mental health and wellness' *(See Table 5)*. These findings aligned with earlier findings that Headspace use waned over time, which may have caused users to perceive it as a less effective tool over time. In both the pre- and post-survey, Headspace users on average 'Somewhat agreed' that the App was useful, improved their mental health and wellness and made them feel supported when they were stressed, that App is easy to use, and that Headspace is respectful of cultural differences.

Table 5: UCI Headspace Survey Headspace Impact Over Time (N=275).

	Pre-Survey Averages	Post-Survey Averages
Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree using a scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5).		
It is easy to fit Headspace into my everyday life and activities.*	4.30*	4.17*
I find Headspace useful in my daily life.*	3.88*	3.71*
Using Headspace improves my mental health and wellness.*	4.31*	4.14*
Using Headspace makes me feel like I have more support when I am feeling down.	3.77	3.63
Using Headspace makes me feel like I have more support when I am stressed.	3.84	3.72
Using Headspaces helps me feel more confident seeking mental health and wellness services (such as therapy or counseling).	3.46	3.34
I currently use Headspace to support my wellness in between therapy sessions.	3.68	3.55
I think Headspace is easy to use.	4.38	4.50
Headspace values and respects cultural differences.	3.97	3.97

Note: Asterisks indicate significant differences between pre-survey and post-survey responses based a paired sample t-test.

EQ-3.

What was the impact on App users from specific target populations? *Are there differential impacts by age (specifically youth and Transition Age Youth (TAY), and older adults), race/ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status?*

To the extent possible, sub-analysis was completed to measure any differences in the impact of the Headspace App by two available user demographics: age and gender. There were no significant differences in App impact by gender *(See Table 6)*. However, there were several significant differences by age, with younger Headspace users having generally more favorable views of the App and its impact on their mental well-being *(See Table 7)*.

Table 6: UCI Headspace Survey Headspace Impact by Gender (N=275).

	Averages by Gender		
	Men	**Women**	**Others**
Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree using a scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5).			
It is easy to fit Headspace into my everyday life and activities.	3.98	4.22	4.00
I find Headspace useful in my daily life.	3.84	3.90	3.86
Using Headspace improves my mental health and wellness.	4.09	4.36	4.29
Using Headspace makes me feel like I have more support when I am feeling down.	3.78	3.88	4.24
Using Headspace makes me feel like I have more support when I am stressed.	3.88	3.99	4.14
Using Headspaces helps me feel more confident seeking mental health and wellness services (such as therapy or counseling).	3.44	3.52	3.68

I currently use Headspace to support my wellness in between therapy sessions.	3.38	3.43	4.33
I think Headspace is easy to use.	4.37	4.50	4.33
Headspace values and respects cultural differences.	3.80	3.87	3.95

Note: Asterisks indicate significant differences between survey responses based a one-way ANOVA test.

Table 7: UCI Headspace Survey Headspace Impact by Age (N=275).

	Averages by Age		
	0-25	**26-59**	**60+**
Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree using a scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5).			
It is easy to fit Headspace into my everyday life and activities.	4.15	4.18	4.05
I find Headspace useful in my daily life.*	4.12	3.83	3.52
Using Headspace improves my mental health and wellness.*	4.30	4.40	3.57
Using Headspace makes me feel like I have more support when I am feeling down.	3.99	3.89	3.55
Using Headspace makes me feel like I have more support when I am stressed.	4.03	4.01	3.68
Using Headspaces helps me feel more confident seeking mental health and wellness services (such as therapy or counseling).*	3.79	3.47	2.95
I currently use Headspace to support my wellness in between therapy sessions.*	3.58	3.63	2.14
I think Headspace is easy to use.*	4.53	4.52	3.86
Headspace values and respects cultural differences.*	4.01	3.86	3.38

Note: Asterisks indicate significant differences between survey responses based a one-way ANOVA test.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From September 2021 through September 2023, the City of Berkeley, Mental Health Division offered free subscriptions for mental health Apps Headspace and myStrength. The program reached 9,038 individuals living and/or working in Berkeley, with 7,328 individuals registering for Headspace and 1,720 individuals registering for myStrength. A local evaluation of the program concluded with the following findings:

- Based on the data available, Help@Hand participants were Racially/ethnically representative of the City of Berkeley, which suggests that there was equitable outreach about the program to different racial/ethnic groups.
- For both Headspace and myStrength, users were more likely to be women than men. Over-representation of women may be due to an increased likelihood of women to seek mental health treatment compared to men.[15]
- For both Headspace and myStrength, users were more likely to be between the ages of 26-59 years old. Over-representation of 26–59-year-olds may be due to App age limits (both Apps require users to be 13 or older).
- In terms of App use, the data suggests the majority of people who registered either a myStrength or Headspace account used the App less than a handful of times.
    - However, a considerable portion of individuals were active users, using the Apps several times a week or more
    - There were no significant differences by age group in frequency of App use, or in content or features they accessed within the Apps
- App data, focus group and interview findings, and UCI Headspace Survey data all indicated that the top reasons for using the App were to address anxiety, stress, and sleep issues.
- Overall, focus group and interview participants reported that the Apps helped them reduce their anxiety and stress levels, improve their sleep, and show up to work or school in a healthier way.
- Overall, UCI Headspace Survey respondents had positive reviews of the App and generally agreed that it improved their mental health and wellness
    - There were no significant differences in perceptions of the Headspace App by gender
    - However, younger users had overall more positive perceptions of the Headspace App and its impact on their mental health and wellness
- Focus group and interview participants emphasized the importance of keeping subscriptions no-cost in any future iterations of the program, as they felt even a small monthly fee would dissuade potential users. UCI Headspace Survey results further supported this sentiment.
- It is important to point out that while Headspace and myStrength users represented in this evaluation had favorable reviews of the both Apps and the impact of the Apps on their mental health and wellbeing, the users who participated in the Help@Hand surveys, focus groups, and interviews also represent a subset of particularly active Help@Hand users. The majority of users who registered for subscriptions through Help@Hand did not engage with myStrength or Headspace to the same extent as the average survey, focus group, or interview

---

[15] Source: Centers for Disease Control

participant. Future iterations of the program might consider how to maintain subscriptions for 'active' users while canceling 'inactive' accounts in order to contain expenses.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to participate in an interview today for us to learn more about your experience using the myStrength/Headspace App! My name is Rachel Maas and I am an Evaluation Associate at Hatchuel Tabernik & Associates. I am working with the City of Berkeley to evaluate their Help@Hand program, which has provided free subscriptions to myStrength and Headspace to people who live and/or work in Berkeley. Our interview should take about 30 minutes, and all your responses will be kept confidential—there will be no way for your responses to be tied back to you in the final report. Before we get started, do you have any questions? Great, let's begin!

1. [Background – Introduction to the program] To start, could you share with me your name, and how you learned about accessing the myStrength/Headspace App through the City of Berkeley? *(ex. How recently did you learn about the program? Did you see an ad on social media, hear from word of mouth, etc.)*
2. How often did you use the App? What resources did you access in the App, and what did you find most helpful? *(Was the App easy to use? Are there aspects of the App you would change to make it more user friendly?)*
3. [Topic: Stigma around mental health and help-seeking] Did you feel any hesitation before downloading and registering for the App? Why or why not? Do you feel like using the myStrength/Headspace App changed your perception of accessing mental health resources? Why or why not?
4. Have you shared or recommended the myStrength/Headspace App to a friend or family member?
5. [Topics – Mental health] What impact, if any, has using the App had on your mental health (ex. Sense of purpose; belonging; sense of isolation; social connectedness; nervousness; restlessness; depression; sense of self-worth)?
6. [Topic- Quality of Life] What impact, if any, has using the App had on your physical health (e.g. sleep; physical activity)?
7. [Topic- Quality of Life] What impact, if any, has using the App had on your life more broadly (e.g. employment; school involvement)?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to share about using the myStrength/Headspace App?

Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to participate in a focus group today for us to learn more about your experiences using the myStrength/Headspace App! My name is Rachel Maas and I am an Evaluation Associate at HTA Consulting. I am working with the City of Berkeley to evaluate their Help@Hand program, which has provided free subscriptions to myStrength and Headspace to people who live and/or work in Berkeley. Our discussion should take about 45 minutes to an hour, and all your responses will be kept confidential—there will be no way for your responses to be tied back to you in the final report.

A few ground rules before we begin:

1) What's shared in our focus group today remains confidential amongst the group.
2) Since we are conducting our focus group over Zoom, it can be very difficult to distinguish voices when multiple people are talking at once, so please don't talk over each other.
3) Do not feel that you have to provide a response to every question–if you do want to, great, but if not, feel free to jump in to answer whichever questions resonate most with you.
4) We have several topics to cover in a relatively short period of time. There may be times when I interrupt you to move our conversation to the next topic. If I interrupt you to move on to the next topic, please be sure to finish your thought first! I don't want to miss any of your important thoughts/take aways just because we're switching gears in our conversation.

I would also like to record this focus group in case I need to go back and fill in parts of my notes later. Do I have your permission to record? [*Start recording, if applicable*]

Before we get started, do you have any questions? Great, let's begin!

1. [Background – Introduction to the program] To start, could we go around and share your name, and how you learned about accessing the myStrength/Headspace App through the City of Berkeley? *(ex. How recently did you learn about the program? Did you see an ad on social media, hear from word of mouth, etc.)*

2. [Background – App usage] How often did you use the App? What resources did you access in the App, and what did you find most helpful? *(Was the App easy to use? Are there aspects of the App you would change to make it more user friendly?)*

3. [Topic: Stigma around mental health and help-seeking] Did you feel any hesitation before downloading and registering for the App? Why or why not? Do you feel like using the myStrength/Headspace App changed your perception of accessing mental health resources? Why or why not?

4. Have you shared or recommended the myStrength/Headspace App to any friends or family members?

5. [Topics – Mental health] What impact, if any, has using the App had on your mental health (ex. Sense of purpose; belonging; sense of isolation; social connectedness; nervousness; restlessness; depression; sense of self-worth)?

---

6. [Topic- Quality of Life] What impact, if any, has using the App had on your physical health (e.g. sleep; physical activity)?

7. [Topic- Quality of Life] What impact, if any, has using the App had on your life more broadly (e.g. employment; school involvement)?

8. Is there anything else you'd like to share about using the myStrength/Headspace App?

Comparison Testing – Differences in App Usage by Age and Gender

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were run to see if there were any significant differences in App usage by gender or age of Berkeley Help@Hand users. There were no significant differences in self-reported frequency of Headspace App use by age or gender *(See Tables 8 and 9)*. There were also no significant differences in myStrength App use by age or gender *(See Tables 8 and 9)*. This means that any small variations in App usage by age or gender are likely due to chance.

Table 8: Differences in App usage by Gender.

	Averages by Gender				
	Female	**Male**	**Nonbinary**	**Others**	**Overall**
Headspace App Usage: Self-Reported Frequency of Use (N =259) *(Scale: Daily=1; Several times a week=2; Several times a month=3; About once a month=4; Rarely=5; I only used it once= 6)*	2.38	2.32	*Not applicable*	2.18	2.32
myStrength App Usage: Number of log-ins (N=1,720)	3.0	2.2	3.4	*Not applicable*	2.9
App Usage: Days Between First and Last Use (N=1,720)	29.0	28.5	28.1	*Not applicable*	28.8

Note: Asterisks indicate significant differences between survey responses based a one-way ANOVA test.
Sources: UCI Survey Data; myStrength App data.

Table 9: Differences in App usage by Age.

	Averages by Age			
	0-25	**26-59**	**60+**	**Overall**
Headspace App Usage: Self-Reported Frequency of Use (N =259) *(Scale: Daily=1; Several times a week=2; Several times a month=3; About once a month=4; Rarely=5; I only used it once= 6)*	2.49	2.22	2.47	2.32
myStrength App Usage: Number of log-ins (N=1,720)	2.68	3.09	1.90	2.81
App Usage: Days Between First and Last Use (N=1,720)	26.49	32.35	22.32	29.37

Note: Asterisks indicate significant differences between survey responses based a one-way ANOVA test.
Sources: UCI Survey Data; myStrength App data.