

Health Triangle

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AGEING IS A
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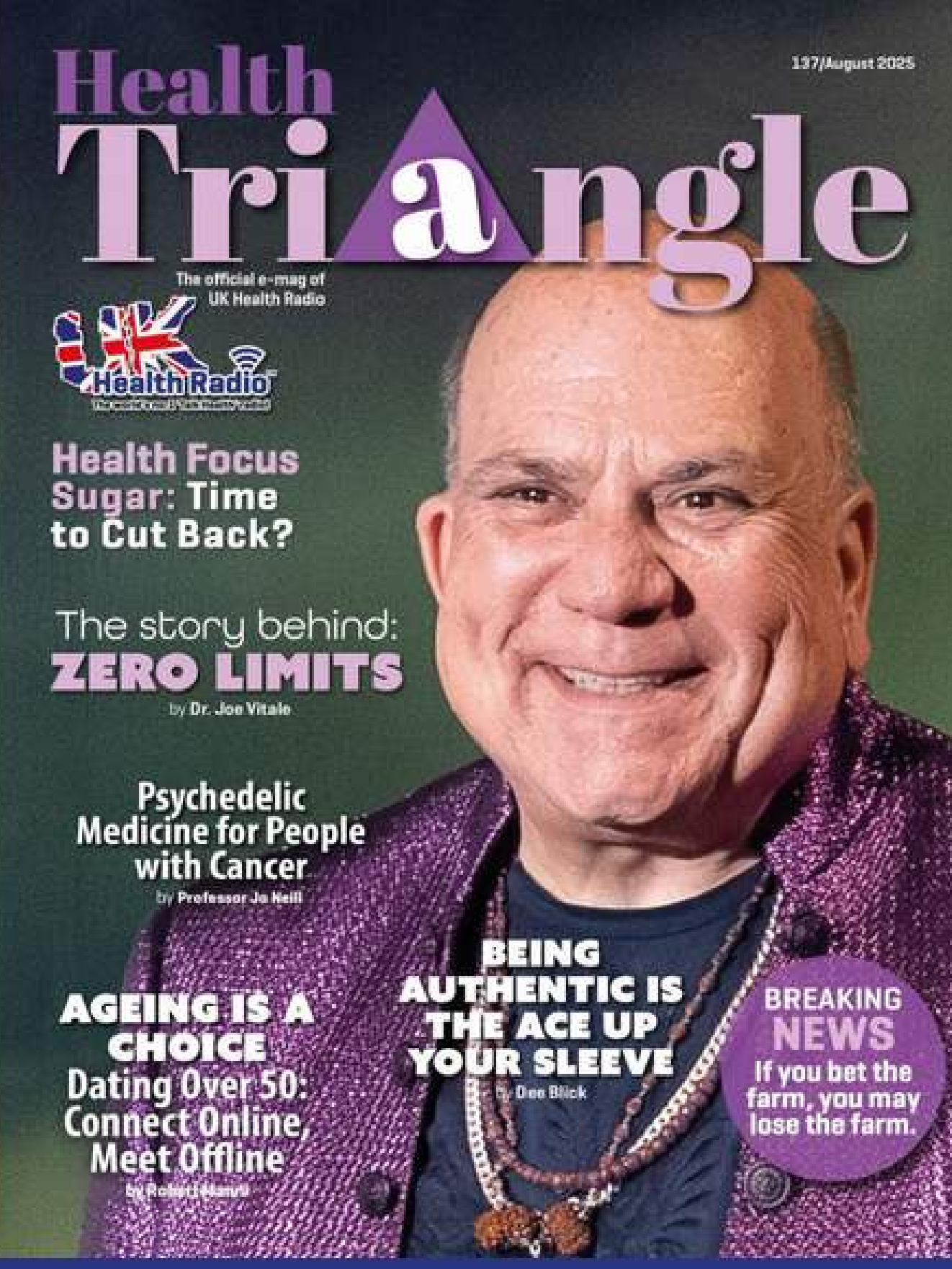
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AUTHENTIC IS
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YOUR SLEEVE

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BREAKING
NEWS

If you bet the
farm, you may
lose the farm.





DIGITAL LIFELINES:

How Teletherapy and AI Are Bringing Mental Health Support to Remote Crisis Areas

by Prof. Dr. Anabel Ternès von Hattburg

THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

In a small refugee camp in Lebanon, 12-year-old Amina hasn't spoken in months. Her family fled Syria after a bomb destroyed their home, taking with it not just their belongings but also Amina's sense of safety. In another part of the world, Carlos, a first responder in the aftermath of a hurricane in Honduras, struggles with sleepless nights, replaying the trauma of pulling survivors from collapsed buildings.

These stories are not unique. In conflict zones, disaster areas, and refugee camps worldwide, millions suffer from invisible wounds—depression, PTSD, and anxiety—with little to no access to mental health care. Traditional therapy is often impossible because there are too few professionals, too much stigma, and too many logistical barriers.

But in places where therapists can't reach, technology is becoming a lifeline. From AI chatbots offering instant comfort to teletherapy sessions conducted over shaky internet connections, digital innovations are revolutionising mental health support in the world's most vulnerable communities.

THE RISE OF TELETHERAPY IN CRISIS ZONES

When psychologist Dr. Sarah Kamal first visited a refugee settlement in Jordan, she was overwhelmed by the need. She recalls seeing hundreds of people who had survived war, only to be trapped in a cycle of grief and fear. But with only a handful of mental health professionals available, in-person therapy was a luxury few could access.

That's when her team turned to teletherapy as a solution. Using tablets and smartphones, they connected refugees with licensed therapists hundreds of miles away. One of their patients, a Syrian mother named Layla, had lost her husband in an airstrike and struggled with panic attacks. She admits that at first, she was afraid to speak about her pain. But she found that talking to someone who couldn't see her—just hear her—made it easier to open up.

The benefits of teletherapy are profound. First, it provides unprecedented accessibility, allowing a therapist in London to counsel a survivor in South Sudan. Second, the anonymity of digital sessions helps many people feel more comfortable sharing their struggles. Finally, in cultures where mental health is

heavily stigmatised, teletherapy offers discreet support that can bypass social barriers.

Still, challenges remain. Unstable internet connections, frequent power outages, and lack of devices can disrupt care. Yet, for many like Layla, even sporadic sessions are better than no support at all.

AI-POWERED MENTAL HEALTH TOOLS: CHATBOTS, APPS, AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Not everyone is ready to talk to a human therapist—especially those who have endured extreme trauma. That's where AI steps in to provide an alternative form of support.

In a crowded Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh, 16-year-old Rahim discovered an app called **Wysa**, an AI chatbot designed to offer cognitive behavioural therapy techniques. He explains that he couldn't sleep because of constant nightmares, but the app taught him breathing exercises that helped. To him, it felt like having a friend who never judged him.

AI mental health tools are filling critical gaps in crisis zones. They provide 24/7 support through chatbots like **Woebot**, which deliver instant coping strategies to users in distress. Machine learning algorithms can analyze language patterns to detect early signs of PTSD or depression, allowing for timely intervention. Most importantly, these tools offer scalability—while one therapist can only help a limited number of people, an AI tool can reach millions.

Dr. Elena Rodriguez, who works with displaced Venezuelans in Colombia, shares a powerful example of AI's impact. She describes a young girl who lost her parents and was showing signs of severe depression. An AI tool flagged her concerning responses, enabling Dr. Rodriguez's team to intervene just in time to provide life-saving care.

However, AI isn't a perfect solution. It lacks human empathy, and misdiagnoses can occur. Yet in crisis zones, where mental health resources are scarce, these digital tools often serve as the first step toward healing for those who would otherwise go without help.

CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While technology offers hope, it's not without significant hurdles that must be addressed. Internet access remains a major barrier in many crisis zones. In rural Yemen or war-torn Ukraine, connectivity

▲ Crisis Care

is often unreliable or completely unavailable. Language and cultural differences also pose challenges, as an AI trained in English may misunderstand culturally specific expressions of grief or trauma. Additionally, data privacy concerns are paramount, as vulnerable populations risk exploitation if their sensitive mental health data is mishandled.

Organisations are actively finding workarounds to these obstacles. **The Field Innovation Team**, for example, deploys offline-capable mental health apps in disaster areas where internet access is spotty. Meanwhile, groups like **Refugee Trauma Initiative** ensure AI tools are culturally adapted by incorporating local dialects and trauma-informed design principles.

The biggest ethical debate centers on whether AI can or should replace human therapists. Most experts agree that the answer is no—AI should complement, not replace, human care. However, in emergency situations where no other options exist, these digital tools can serve as a crucial bridge to mental health support.

THE FUTURE: CAN TECHNOLOGY CLOSE THE MENTAL HEALTH GAP?

The next wave of digital mental health innovation is already making waves in crisis response. Virtual reality therapy is being used to help refugees

in Germany safely process trauma through controlled exposure therapy. AI-powered translation apps are breaking down language barriers by enabling real-time communication between counsellors and non-native speakers. Meanwhile, predictive analytics allow NGOs to anticipate mental health crises before they escalate, enabling proactive intervention.

Governments and NGOs must continue investing in these technologies while also prioritising training for local providers. As Dr. Kamal emphasises, technology should serve as a supplement, not a substitute, for human care. The ultimate goal is to empower communities to develop sustainable, culturally relevant mental health solutions.

CONCLUSION: A NEW ERA OF MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Amina, the silent girl from the Lebanese camp, finally spoke again—not to a person, but to a tablet screen. Through a teletherapy program, she drew pictures of her lost home and, slowly, began to rediscover her voice.

In a world where crises never stop, innovation ensures help is always within reach. Digital mental health tools won't solve everything, but they're proving that even in the darkest places, no one has to suffer alone.

As humanitarian workers often say: *"Healing isn't about having all the answers. It's about making sure no one is left without a way to ask for help."*

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