

User Interview Guide: Patients (MDD & BP1)

Research Goal: Understanding why users with depression or bipolar disorder abandon mental health apps

Duration: 45-60 minutes per participant

Format: 1-on-1 semi-structured interview

Target Participants: 4-6 patients with Major depressive disorder (MDD) or Bipolar 1 Disorder (BP1)

Opening Script

"Thank you for participating in this research. I'm studying why people with depression or bipolar disorder sometimes struggle to use mental health apps, even when they want help. There are no right or wrong answers; I'm here to learn from your honest experience. Everything you share is confidential, and you can skip any question that feels uncomfortable.

I want to understand your real experience managing your mental health, including the hard days."

Interview Questions

Question 1: App Usage During Low-Energy States

"Think about your worst mental health days—when you're really struggling, maybe can't get out of bed, or everything feels overwhelming. Have you ever tried to use a mental health app during those times? Walk me through what happened."

Follow-up probes:

- What made you decide to open the app (or not open it)?
 - How many steps or screens did you have to go through to get help?
 - What stopped you from continuing? (If they abandoned)
 - What would have needed to be different for you to actually use it?
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Question 2: First-Time App Onboarding Experience

"Think about the last time you downloaded a new mental health or wellness app. What was happening in your life at that moment? Walk me through the setup process—what did the app ask you to do before you could actually use it?"

Follow-up probes:

- How were you feeling mentally/emotionally when you were going through setup?
 - Were there any questions that felt too personal, too hard to answer, or overwhelming?
 - Did you complete the setup, or did you give up partway through? What made the difference?
 - If you could design the perfect onboarding for someone who's struggling, what would it look like?
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Question 3: Feelings of Judgment or Failure

"Have you ever used an app for mental health, fitness, or medication that made you feel bad about yourself? Perhaps it made you feel guilty, as if you were failing or not doing enough. Please tell me about that experience."

Follow-up probes:

- What specifically made you feel that way? (Was it notifications? Visual design? Language? Metrics?)
 - Can you remember the exact words or images that triggered those feelings?
 - How did feeling judged by the app affect whether you kept using it?
 - Have you ever used an app that made you feel genuinely supported instead? What did it do differently?
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Question 4: Medication Tracking Experience

"If you take medication for your mental health, have you ever tried to track it with an app? What was that experience like?"

Follow-up probes:

- What happened when you missed a dose? How did the app respond?

- Have you ever intentionally skipped medication (because of side effects, feeling better, cost, etc.)? How did tracking that feel?
 - Did the app ever ask WHY you missed a dose, or just remind you that you missed it?
 - What would a truly supportive medication reminder system look like to you?
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Question 5: Understanding Mood Patterns and Triggers

"Do you have a sense of what triggers your depression/anxiety/mood episodes? How did you figure that out? Was it from a therapist, self-awareness, tracking, or something else?"

Follow-up probes:

- Have you ever tried to track your mood or triggers with an app? What was helpful or unhelpful about it?
 - When you're in a bad mental state, can you identify in that moment what caused it, or does that realization come later?
 - If an app could predict "you might have a rough day tomorrow based on your patterns," would that be helpful or anxiety-inducing?
 - How much effort can you realistically put into logging mood/sleep/activities when you're already struggling?
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Question 6: Accessing Coping Strategies in Crisis

"Think about a recent time you felt really anxious, panicked, or overwhelmed. In that moment, what did you actually do to cope? Did you try to use any apps or digital tools?"

Follow-up probes:

- If you did use an app, how many steps did it take to find something helpful?
 - If you didn't use an app, what stopped you?
 - When you're in distress, can you think clearly enough to browse options, or do you need something immediate and obvious?
 - What's the difference between coping strategies you "know about" vs. ones you actually use in the moment?
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Question 7: Long-Term App Usage and Abandonment

"Have you ever used a mental health app regularly for a while, but then stopped? What made you stop using it?"

Follow-up probes:

- Was there a specific moment you decided to quit, or did you just gradually forget about it?
 - Did the app do anything that broke your trust or made you no longer want to use it?
 - Have you ever returned to an app after abandoning it? What brought you back?
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Question 8: Trust and Data Privacy

When sharing personal information with a mental health app, such as your mood, medications, and symptoms, how do you feel about it? Do you trust that your data is private and secure?"

Follow-up probes:

- Have you ever worried about who might see your mental health data? (Insurance, employers, family, etc.)
 - Would you be more likely to use an app if it were recommended by your doctor/therapist?
 - What would make you stop trusting an app with your data?
 - Would you ever show your therapist or doctor your app data? Why or why not?
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Question 9: The Ideal Mental Health App

"If you could design the ideal mental health app for someone managing depression or bipolar disorder, what essential features would it include? What elements should it avoid?"

Follow-up probes:

- What would make it easy to use even on your worst days?
- How would it support you without making you feel judged or guilty?
- What would make you trust it enough to use it every day for months?
- Would you pay for it, or does it need to be free? How much is reasonable?

Closing Questions

1. Is there anything about your experience with mental health apps or managing mental illness in general that I haven't asked you, but you believe is important for me to understand?
2. If you could give one piece of advice to someone designing a mental health app for people with serious mental illness, what would it be?
3. Would you be willing to test an early version of an app we're designing and give feedback?