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New digital therapy platform introduced to enhance mental health services for students

Mental health services for University of Lethbridge students are receiving an online boost with the introduction of the TAO Connect digital platform, making behavioural health therapy more accessible, efficient and effective.

Through TAO (therapy assistance online) Connect, students now have access to an app providing behavioural health tools on the go, in addition to in-person sessions with U of L Counselling and Career Services. TAO's technology can be used two ways: therapists at the counselling centre can individually assign TAO to students as a way to supplement in-person sessions, or students can enroll in the program and download the app for a completely self-guided experience outside of the counselling centre.



"A huge benefit of this platform is that it broadens our reach in terms of being able to provide support to a larger number of students – some of whom who are not ready to seek professional help or like to access supports in other modalities," says Jennifer Ellis-Toddington, manager of Counselling and Career Services at the U of L. "Another benefit is the self-check component in the app where students can check on their own mental health and, if indicated, that can move them towards getting professional help."

Students utilizing TAO Connect have access to a suite of digital behavioural health tools, and also have the option to use the technology in tandem with a U of L counsellor. This gives students the ability to diligently practice the skills and techniques they learn through their counselling sessions, on their own time.

The platform is being funded through the University of Lethbridge Students' Union health and dental plan and came about through a series of conversations between the ULSU and Student Services.

“It was really just conversations about how we can continue to best meet the mental health needs of students on campus,” says Mark Slomp, executive director of Student Services. “My favourite part of this is the collaboration that led to us getting together around a common concern, which is student well-being, and partnering to figure out how we can continue to do our best to address that.”

Andrew Gammack, ULSU president, says the platform meets students in their own space, anonymously, and is backed by evidence-based practices.

“Not everyone is in a position to approach counselling. A ULSU core value is accessibility and we wanted to make sure that there were more services on campus to help those who maybe don’t feel quite as comfortable coming forward to counselling services,” he says. “I interact with a lot of students who can identify with these issues. I really appreciate this service and the science behind it.”

The program includes high quality, interactive, educational modules in structured programs along with a companion app with daily practice tools. TAO’s screening measure can help someone choose the best program for them, and TAO’s progress measure helps track improvement. The anonymous self-screening tool combines five different tests for depression, alcohol and drug problems, anxiety, trauma and chronic pain. Once screened, the user will either be given links to access the appropriate self-help tools, or suggestions to see a health professional.

Through TAO’s completely self-directed, self-help app and online program, students are provided an opportunity to learn stress management, mindfulness skills, problem solving and strategies to avoid rumination and develop more helpful thinking patterns.

“We’re really eager to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to student mental health on campus, recognizing that students have very different needs and like to access services and supports in different ways,” he says. “We want to make sure we have all kinds of services and tools so we can best meet the needs of all students.”

TAO Connect is available for free to all U of L students by using their U of L email address to register. They can access the platform on the Counselling and Career Services website or on this Students’ Union website link. To learn more about TAO and its technology, visit [TAOConnect.org](https://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/new-digital-therapy-platform-introduced-enhance-mental-health-services-students), and to download the TAO mobile app, visit the iTunes Store or Android’s app store.

To view online: <https://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/new-digital-therapy-platform-introduced-enhance-mental-health-services-students>

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