



HEALTHCARE

How Technology Is Helping Maintain Mental Wellness

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By [Rodika Tollefson](#), Contributor

When Shelbie Rassler learned in March that the rest of her semester's classes were going online due to the pandemic, she was devastated.

As a senior at Boston Conservatory at Berklee, the composition major knew she would not get a chance to perform with her fellow students again. On her flight home to Florida from Boston, Rassler pondered how to bring her community of friends and musicians back together—despite the physical separation.

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By the time her plane landed, she had a plan: a virtual orchestra performance of "What the World Needs Now," the popular 1965 song by Hal David and Burt Bacharach.

"I wanted to think of something that could give my friends a little bit of positivity and a little bit of happiness during such a scary and awful time we're going through," Rassler says. "I thought this was the perfect song to express how we're all feeling right now."

She shared the idea with her friends on Facebook, then wrote the arrangements for the instruments they selected. Rassler and the 74 other musicians—most of them students from the Boston Conservatory at Berklee and the Berklee College of Music—used their mobile phones or computers to record videos of their solo vocal or instrumental performances. Then Rassler went to work putting together the 75 tracks of audio and splicing video clips.

On March 22, just eight days after Rassler's flight home, her virtual orchestra arrangement went live on [YouTube](#). Within 10 days, it had 1.5 million views. By mid-April, the number grew to nearly 1.8 million, and close to 1,300 people from as far as Guatemala posted comments.

"It was absolutely unbelievable," Rassler says. "I'm so grateful that people are listening to it, and it's doing something for them and inspiring them to keep going and not give up hope."

Helping People 'Disconnect'

The unexpected reaction to Rassler's personal project is perhaps a testament to how technology is helping fill the void left by social distancing.

In ordinary times, people turn to recreation and entertainment to stay mentally and physically fit—and to disconnect from technology. But the pandemic has flipped that idea on its head.

While technology serves as the link that keeps everyone connected, it has also further blurred the lines between work and home life. And without any places open to "cure" the collective cabin fever, it's challenging to find ways to escape the always-connected life.

To help fill the void, everyone from entertainers and yoga instructors to artists and personal trainers are using technology creatively to help people "disconnect."

"Right now it feels like you're isolated and in a vacuum. All the news can be quite overwhelming, and you need art to give you a lens to process a lot of that information," says Mahogany L. Browne, professional poet and executive director of [Bowery Poetry Club](#), a New York City spoken-word performance venue operated by the nonprofit Bowery Arts & Science.

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Like all the entertainment hubs in New York—and many across the country—Bowery Poetry had to cancel its workshops, open mics, and other events. Instead, the club launched several virtual events, streamed through [Instagram](#), including writing sessions, seminars, and poetry readings. All are free, except for weekly poet-led workshops, which cost \$15-\$20.

"We made them free in response to the fact that we have a lot of folks who are not essential workers and their money is either diminished or completely gone," Browne says. "We wanted to do our part to engage with our community."

The livestreamed "No Desk Poetry Concerts" on Sundays—a nod to NPR's "Tiny Desk" series—have featured prominent and award-winning poets, and garnered 66,000 social media impressions for the first session and 72,000 for the second, Browne says. Viewers have come from as far as Australia and South Africa.

She acknowledges that in-person readings have a different vibe because there's so much energy, but says the virtual experience creates other opportunities for feedback.

"Folks may not be able to clap but they're still able to respond to you," Browne says. "You can see the responses in the chatroom—they're lighting up those synapses in your brain because you see this is being well-received and is receiving love."

Staying Positive Together—While Apart

Shelly Bailey also knows well how live performers feed off the energy of their audiences. A producer and owner of events-production company [Events by Shelly](#), she has attended hundreds of live comedy shows.

For the past two years, she's produced standup comedy shows and events like taco crawls at bars and other venues around Seattle and Washington state.

"Part of the fun is going out and seeing people and laughing with them, and having a drink or dinner," the self-proclaimed extrovert says.

When one of her longtime audience regulars, Mike Mondello, asked if she would help organize a virtual comedy show, Bailey loved the idea. Mondello is the president of [Made in Washington Stores](#), a regional product retailer with several locations. The goal, Bailey says, was to both help comedians make money through donations and to remind people that Made in Washington is still open for online shopping.

Bailey's events typically sell out but the venues are small, accommodating an average of 50-75 people. For [Quarantine Comedy](#), livestreamed in March via Facebook, 150 people were watching at one point, she says. Three weeks later, the number of views grew past 3,800.

Donations poured in for the two comedians, who earned more than they would on a typical night with a live audience. Viewers—some from Florida and New York, among other states—commented throughout the show, both to the performers and to each other.

"I was missing my normal crowd," Bailey says. "But there was still a sense of community, only without people being in a crowded room."

The show was so well-received, a second show returned in April with new comedians. Bailey says these kinds of things are a healthy diversion when people are home all day. "Laughter is so much more than just hearing a funny joke," she says. "When you watch something like a live comedy performance, you can see that people are still living their lives, and I feel that's uplifting."

Finding a Balance

Technology has been instrumental in providing alternative ways for people to stay engaged with each other, and maintain mental wellness in the era of social distancing. But, Ressler notes, being connected constantly—especially spending long hours on social media and watching news filled with tragedy—can also have a negative impact on mental health.

"It's important to find that balance between your whole life existing online and using technology as a tool."

—SHELBY RASSLER, COMPOSITION MAJOR, BOSTON CONSERVATORY AT BERKLEE

"It's important to find that balance between your whole life existing online and using technology as a tool," she says.

Ressler has been spending even more time online because she's had a whirlwind of media interviews, as well as interactions with a lot of people responding to her project. But she makes sure to cut off electronics at least for an hour before bedtime

every night.

"It's a fine line because, even though technology gives us a way to 'escape,' at some point it's good to just shut it all off and have a quiet moment," she says. "So I make a conscious effort at the end of the day to just have a little bit of 'me' time to decompress."

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