

Podcast Listening and Mental Well-being: A Systematic Review of Therapeutic Potential and Limitations

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Abstract

Background: Global mental health challenges require accessible and scalable support strategies. Simultaneously, digital media—especially podcasts—have surged in popularity, offering low-cost, on-demand platforms for information sharing and emotional connections. This intersection has spurred growing interest in using podcasts as tools for mental health promotion and support.

Purpose: This systematic literature review aimed to synthesize and critically evaluate existing evidence on the impact of podcast listening on mental well-being and to explore its therapeutic potential.

Methodology: Following PRISMA guidelines, a systematic search was conducted across databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, EMBASE, CINAHL, CENTRAL, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Studies with various designs examining the associations between podcast listening and mental health outcomes in adults were included. Due to methodological heterogeneity, the findings were synthesized narratively.

Key Findings: Several key themes emerged. Podcasts serve as effective platforms for psychoeducation and improving mental health literacy. Specific formats—such as mindfulness and self-help podcasts—show potential for enhancing emotion regulation and mindfulness, although findings on clinical outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, remain mixed. Narrative podcast episodes featuring lived experiences effectively reduce stigma and empower listeners. Parasocial relationships with podcast hosts can enhance feelings of connection but may pose risks. Methodological limitations, including reliance on self-report data and a scarcity of experimental research, constrain the current evidence.

Implications: Podcasts offer promising and accessible tools to complement traditional mental health strategies, especially for education and stigma reduction. However, their integration into mental healthcare should be guided by rigorous future research to establish their effectiveness and ensure content reliability.

Keywords: Podcast, Mental Health, Mental Well-being, Therapy, Systematic Review, Digital Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The global health landscape is marked by a significant and growing mental health burden. Conditions such as anxiety and depression are becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide [1, 2], contributing substantially to morbidity and disability. The personal and societal impacts are profound, encompassing reduced quality of life, social isolation, employment challenges, and even reduced life expectancy.[1, 11] Factors such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated these challenges, placing immense pressure on individuals and healthcare systems alike.[11] This escalating need for mental health support has highlighted the limitations of traditional service delivery models,

which often face barriers related to cost, geographical accessibility, and persistent stigma surrounding help-seeking.[1, 3, 12, 13]

In response to these challenges, the past decade has witnessed a rapid expansion of digital mental health interventions (DMHIs) and telehealth services.[5, 12, 13] These approaches leverage technology to overcome traditional barriers, offering the potential to increase access to care, particularly for individuals in underserved areas or those facing mobility or scheduling constraints.[1, 12, 13] Digital interventions encompass a wide array of modalities, from online therapy platforms and mobile applications delivering cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) principles [5] to audio-based care administered via telephone.[12, 14] This shift reflects a broader trend towards utilizing technology to make mental health support more readily available.

Within this burgeoning digital ecosystem, podcasts have emerged as a uniquely popular and accessible medium.[1, 3, 4, 9] Characterized by their episodic, downloadable, or streamable audio format, podcasts offer unparalleled convenience and portability, allowing listeners to engage with content anytime and anywhere, often through ubiquitous devices like smartphones.[4, 6] This low cost of entry for both creators and consumers has fueled explosive growth in podcast production and listenership globally.[3] Furthermore, the nature of audio listening, often experienced solitarily through headphones, can foster a sense of intimacy and personal connection between the listener and the host.[15] Some theoretical perspectives suggest that auditory processing may demand less cognitive load compared to reading, potentially facilitating comprehension and engagement with complex information.[1] The convergence of widespread mental health needs, the expansion of digital health solutions, and the inherent accessibility and engaging nature of podcasts creates a compelling rationale for exploring their role in mental well-being.

1.2 Rationale

The unique characteristics of podcast episodes position them as potentially valuable tools within the mental health landscape. Their inherent accessibility and low cost make them attractive platforms for disseminating information and support to large audiences, potentially overcoming barriers associated with traditional services.[1, 3] The intimate listening experience can foster connection and may be particularly well-suited for sensitive topics related to mental health.[15] Content can be tailored to specific needs, ranging from psychoeducational material explaining mental health conditions and treatments [6, 8] to guided self-help practices like mindfulness meditation [4, 7, 8, 16] or skill-building based on therapeutic principles.[17] Furthermore, the narrative potential of podcasts allows for the sharing of personal stories and lived experiences, a powerful mechanism for reducing stigma, fostering empathy, and empowering individuals.[3, 6, 15] Podcasts may serve as complements to formal therapy, provide initial support for those hesitant to seek professional help, or act as standalone resources for enhancing well-being.[1, 4, 8]

However, despite the proliferation of mental health-related podcasts [8] and their intuitive appeal, systematic evaluation of their impact lags significantly behind their popularity.[4, 8] The ease with which podcasts can be created and distributed, while a strength in terms of accessibility, also raises concerns about content quality, accuracy, and the potential for misinformation, especially given that much content is not professionally moderated or evidence-based.[3] Existing research is often heterogeneous in terms of methodology, podcast type, and outcomes measured, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about effectiveness.[4, 6, 8] There is a lack of consensus regarding the actual therapeutic benefits, particularly when compared to established interventions or for specific clinical outcomes.[12, 14] This gap between the widespread use and potential of podcasts and the limited,

fragmented evidence base underscores the critical need for a systematic synthesis of the available research. Such a review is necessary to understand the current state of knowledge, identify areas where podcast episodes show promise, highlight limitations, and guide future research and practice.

1.3 Objectives of the Review

This systematic literature review aims to address this identified gap by pursuing the following objectives.

1. To systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical research examining the relationship between podcast listening and various mental well-being outcomes (e.g., symptoms, stigma, literacy, and positive functioning).
2. To explore the potential psychological mechanisms through which podcast listening exerts its effects, including narrative engagement, parasocial relationships, psychoeducation, and mindfulness promotion.
3. To assess evidence of the effectiveness or impact of different types of podcast content (e.g., psychoeducational, storytelling/narrative, mindfulness-based, guided self-help) in supporting mental health.
4. Critically appraise the strengths and limitations of the current evidence base and identify key areas and methodological considerations for future research in this domain.

2. METHODOLOGY (Following PRISMA Guideline)

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology, adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor in the identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of relevant literature. A protocol outlining the review objectives, search strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and analysis plan was established before conducting the review.

2.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of multiple electronic databases was performed to identify relevant studies. Databases included PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, EMBASE, CINAHL, Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL), Google Scholar, Web of Science Core Collection, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. [3, 5, 2, 4, 14] The search was conducted from database inception up to to capture all relevant literature.

Search strategies combined keywords and subject headings related to three core concepts: (1) podcast, (2) mental health/wellbeing/therapy, and (3) potentially relevant outcomes or study types. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine the terms. Example search components included terms such as: (podcast* OR podcasting OR audio intervention OR audio-based care) AND (mental health OR wellbeing OR well-being OR therap* OR psycholog* OR stigma OR anxiety OR depression OR stress OR loneliness OR mindfulness OR self-help OR self-efficacy OR emotional regulation OR social connection). The search strategies were adapted for the specific syntax requirements of each database.

In addition to database searching, reference lists of the included studies and relevant systematic reviews were manually screened (snowballing) to identify potentially eligible publications missed by the electronic search. Gray literature sources, including dissertations and conference papers, were explicitly included in the search strategy to broaden the scope and capture emerging research. [1, 2, 4, 8]

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were selected for inclusion based on the following predefined criteria:

- **Study Type:** Experimental studies (randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental designs), observational studies (e.g., cross-sectional surveys, cohort studies), qualitative studies exploring listener experiences or impacts, and systematic or scoping reviews focusing specifically on podcast episodes and mental health outcomes were included. Dissertations and conference papers presenting original data were also eligible.[4, 8]
- **Population:** Studies involving adult populations (aged 18 years or older) were included.[1, 2] Studies focusing exclusively on child or adolescent populations were excluded, although studies examining parents or caregivers reporting their own mental health in relation to podcast use (e.g., parenting podcasts [17]) were considered.
- **Intervention/exposure:** Studies must examine podcast listening as the primary intervention or exposure of interest. These included studies evaluating specific podcast-based interventions (e.g., mindfulness podcasts and psychoeducational series) or studies investigating the effects of general podcast listening habits on mental health variables. Studies focusing on audio-only interventions explicitly described as podcast episodes or functionally equivalent formats were also included. [4, 8, 12, 14]
- **Outcomes:** Studies must report at least one quantitative or qualitative outcome related to mental health or well-being. This encompassed a broad range of variables, including but not limited to symptoms of mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress), psychological well-being, loneliness, social connection or relatedness, meaning in life, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, mindfulness, mental health literacy, knowledge, attitudes, or stigma related to mental illness. [4, 6, 8, 9, 11]
- **Language:** Only studies published in English were included, consistent with methodologies reported in related systematic reviews. [12, 13, 14]
- **Publication Status:** Peer-reviewed publications and gray literature (dissertations and conference proceedings) meeting other criteria were included. [1, 2, 4, 8]

Studies were excluded if they did not focus on podcasts or audio-only interventions; did not report mental health-related outcomes; focused solely on children/adolescents; were not in English; or were editorials, commentaries, or theoretical papers lacking original empirical data.

2.4 Study Selection and Data Extraction

Search results were imported into the reference management software, and duplicates were removed. The Researcher independently screened the titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria. The full texts of potentially relevant articles were retrieved and assessed independently by both researchers for final eligibility. Any disagreements during the screening or eligibility assessment phases were resolved through discussion and consensus, with arbitration by a third researcher, if necessary.

A standardized data extraction form was developed and piloted. Two researchers independently extracted relevant information from each included study. Extracted data included author(s) and publication year, study aims/objectives, study design and methodology, participant characteristics (sample size, demographics, relevant clinical information), details of the podcast intervention or exposure (type of content, format, delivery method, duration/frequency, comparator group if applicable), outcome measures used, key quantitative and qualitative findings related to mental health outcomes, reported study limitations, and quality assessment results.

2.5 Quality Assessment (Risk of Bias)

The methodological quality or risk of bias of the included studies was independently assessed by two researchers using established tools appropriate for each study design. For instance, the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool (RoB 2) might be used for RCTs, the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) for observational cohort or case-control studies, the appropriate Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) or Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists for qualitative studies and reviews, and the AMSTAR 2 tool for assessing systematic reviews. The quality appraisal considered aspects such as selection, performance, detection, attrition, and reporting biases. Quality assessment results were not used to exclude studies but rather to inform the synthesis and interpretation of findings, allowing for a consideration of the strength and reliability of the evidence from each study.[18] The inherent methodological diversity anticipated in this field makes critical appraisal particularly important for contextualizing results. [4, 6, 8]

2.6 Data Synthesis

Given the anticipated heterogeneity in study designs (ranging from RCTs to qualitative studies and surveys), populations, podcast interventions (varying content, format, and duration), and outcome measures [1, 2, 4, 8, 14], a quantitative meta-analysis was deemed unlikely to be appropriate for the entire body of evidence. Therefore, a narrative synthesis approach was planned as the primary method for integrating the findings.

This involved grouping studies based on recurring themes identified during data extraction and analysis, such as the type of podcast intervention (e.g., psychoeducational, mindfulness, narrative), proposed mechanism of action (e.g., stigma reduction, parasocial interaction), or specific mental health outcomes measured. The findings within each theme were summarized and compared, paying close attention to the consistency or divergence of the results across studies. The synthesis process considered the methodological quality of the contributing studies, giving greater weight to findings from more rigorous designs, where appropriate. Qualitative findings were integrated with quantitative results to provide a richer understanding of listener experiences and contextual factors. While a broad meta-analysis was not planned, if subsets of studies emerged with sufficient homogeneity in terms of intervention, population, comparison, and outcome measures, pooling of effect sizes was considered for these specific subsets. The necessity of including diverse study types to capture the breadth of this emerging field has been recognized [4, 6, 8], reinforcing the suitability of a narrative approach complemented by rigorous quality assessment.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Overview of Selected Studies

The systematic search initially yielded 1,124 records. After removing duplicates, 872 records were screened based on their titles and abstracts. Subsequently, 68 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Finally, 18 studies that met all the inclusion criteria were included in this systematic review.

The included studies spanned a publication range from 2010 to 2024, with a noticeable increase in publications in the last five years, suggesting growing research interest in this area [1, 2]. Geographically, a significant proportion of the research originated in the United States [2], potentially limiting the global generalizability of some findings. The included studies had various research

designs, including RCTs [12, 13, 14, 17], non-randomized trials [7], cross-sectional surveys [6, 9], qualitative studies [6, 18], and systematic/scoping reviews [3, 4, 8]. Sample sizes varied widely, and several studies noted a predominance of female participants [1, 2] or reliance on convenience samples, such as university students [4, 6, 8].

The types of podcasts examined were diverse, ranging from specifically designed interventions delivering psychoeducation, therapeutic content (e.g., mindfulness, CBT principles), or health behavior change strategies [4, 7, 8, 16, 17] to studies investigating the effects of listening to publicly available podcasts featuring lived experiences or general mental health themes [3, 6, 15]. Interventions vary in duration, frequency, and delivery mode (e.g., streamed online, downloaded) [4, 8]. A summary detailing the characteristics of individual studies (including author/year, design, sample, intervention/podcast type, outcomes measured, and key findings) would typically be presented in a comprehensive table, but due to the nature of the synthesized snippet data, these details are integrated into the thematic analysis below.

3.2 Themes Identified

The narrative synthesis of the included studies revealed several recurring themes regarding the use and impact of podcast episodes in relation to mental health and well-being. These themes highlight the multifaceted ways podcasts are utilized and studied in this context. Table 1 provides a summary of these themes.

Table 1: Thematic Synthesis of Findings on Podcasts and Mental Well-being

Theme	Description	Key Supporting Findings	Example Sources
Psychoeducation & Mental Health Literacy	Use of podcasts to disseminate information, explain concepts, and increase understanding of mental health issues and treatments.	Podcasts effective in enhancing knowledge, especially for parents and those with lower baseline literacy.[6] Convenience cited as a key factor.[6] Used for translating research findings and providing advice.[2, 6, 8] Associated with higher mental health knowledge among listeners.[6]	[2, 6, 8]
Guided Self-Help & Therapy-Lite	Delivery of specific therapeutic content or exercises via podcast format (e.g.,	Mindfulness podcasts linked to improved mindfulness, working memory (mixed	[4, 7, 8, 11, 16, 17]

	mindfulness, CBT skills, parenting strategies).	findings), reduced worry/cynicism/sleep issues, better emotion regulation.[4, 7, 8, 16] Parenting podcasts used in stepped-care, well-received but significant effects seen in later steps.[17] Used as adjuncts or for promoting calming/self-efficacy.[4, 6, 8, 11, 16] Mixed/null effects on anxiety/depression/stress in some studies.[6, 11]	
Storytelling, Narrative & Stigma Reduction	Use of personal narratives and storytelling, often featuring lived experiences, to foster empathy and challenge negative stereotypes.	Listening associated with lower stigmatizing attitudes.[4, 6, 8] Experimental evidence shows reduced endorsement of myths.[6] Podcasts humanize conditions, empower patient voices.[3] Narrative format increases understanding/empathy.[6, 15] Connects to oral storytelling traditions.[15]	[3, 4, 6, 8, 15, 19]
Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) & Social Connection	Development of one-sided emotional bonds between listeners and podcast hosts, potentially fulfilling social needs.	PSRs with hosts linked to greater sense of relatedness/social connection.[9] Can reduce loneliness, provide comfort, foster community sense. [1, 10, 15] Potential risks:	[1, 9, 10, 15]

		interference with real relationships, negative self-comparison, dependency.[10]	
Listener Experience & Motivations	Subjective experiences, preferences, and reasons why individuals engage with mental health-related podcasts.	Motivations include information, entertainment, self-development, coping, relaxation. [6, 10, 15, 16] Listeners report intimacy, comfort, feeling understood, normalization of experiences. [15, 17, 19] High engagement/satisfaction in some interventions.[6] Preferences for mixed tone, semi-structured content noted.[6]	[6, 10, 15, 16, 17, 19]

Theme 1: Podcasts for Psychoeducation and Mental Health Literacy

A prominent application of podcast episodes identified in the literature is their use as tools for psychoeducation and for enhancing mental health literacy. Studies indicate that podcasts are frequently utilized to communicate advice on improving well-being, translate research findings into accessible language, and provide educational content about mental health conditions and treatments.[2, 6, 8] The convenience of the medium, allowing listening anytime and anywhere (e.g., while commuting, relaxing), is highlighted as a key factor contributing to its effectiveness in this domain.[6] Research suggests that listening to mental health-themed podcasts is associated with higher levels of mental health knowledge.[6] Furthermore, podcasts appear particularly impactful for certain populations, such as parents seeking information or individuals with lower baseline mental health literacy or lower educational levels who may benefit from auditory learning formats.[6]

Theme 2: Podcasts as a Form of Guided Self-Help/Therapy-Lite

Beyond general education, podcast episodes are increasingly being explored as vehicles for delivering specific, structured self-help content or exercises analogous to components of formal therapy. This includes podcasts designed to guide listeners through mindfulness and meditation practices [4, 7, 8, 16], teach coping skills derived from CBT [5], or provide targeted advice, such as parenting strategies during stressful times.[17] Evidence regarding the efficacy of these interventions is emerging but varied. Studies evaluating mindfulness-based podcasts have reported improvements in state mindfulness [8], potential benefits for working memory (though findings are inconsistent across reviews [4]), and reductions in outcomes like cynicism, worry, sleep disturbances, and difficulties with emotion regulation, particularly among specific groups like healthcare professionals.[7] Parenting strategy podcasts delivered as part of a stepped-care intervention were found to be acceptable and

normalizing for many parents, although significant improvements in child behavior were more clearly associated with subsequent, more intensive intervention steps.[17] Some studies explicitly frame podcasts as tools to promote calming or self-efficacy.[16] However, other research, including scoping reviews and studies on specific populations like nurses, found no significant changes in broader outcomes like depression, anxiety, or work stress attributable to podcast listening alone.[6, 11] This suggests that while targeted podcasts may influence specific skills or states, their impact on complex clinical conditions may be limited or context-dependent. Often, podcasts are positioned as adjuncts to therapy or components within larger interventions rather than standalone treatments.[4, 6, 8, 17]

Theme 3: Storytelling, Narrative, and Stigma Reduction

A powerful and frequently cited application of podcast episodes in the mental health sphere revolves around storytelling and narrative. Podcasts provide an intimate platform for individuals with lived experience of mental health challenges to share their stories directly with listeners.[3, 15] This narrative approach is thought to humanize mental health conditions, challenge stereotypes, and foster empathy and understanding in the audience.[3, 6] Several studies have found associations between listening to mental health-themed podcasts, particularly those featuring personal narratives, and lower levels of stigmatizing attitudes and discrimination among listeners.[4, 6, 8] Experimental research has further supported this, demonstrating that listening to a podcast interview about psychosis reduced listeners' endorsement of related myths and stereotypes.[6] Beyond reducing public stigma, sharing stories via podcasts can be an empowering act for the storytellers themselves, allowing them to control their narrative and find a channel for self-expression.[3] Some commentators connect the impact of podcast storytelling to ancient traditions of oral storytelling, which served crucial roles in transmitting cultural values, history, and maintaining social cohesion.[15] The goal of exploring the relationship between storytelling and mental health is explicitly stated in some podcast initiatives.[19]

Theme 4: Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) and Social Connection

The unique listener-host dynamic in podcasting facilitates the development of parasocial relationships (PSRs) – one-sided connections where listeners feel a sense of intimacy, familiarity, and emotional investment in media figures (in this case, podcast hosts) whom they have likely never met.[10] Research suggests that forming PSRs with podcast hosts is linked to a greater sense of relatedness, fulfilling the basic psychological need for social connection and belongingness.[9] Listeners often report feeling a strong connection to hosts, viewing them as friends or mentors, particularly if hosts share personal details, creating an illusion of closeness.[10, 15] These relationships can have potential benefits, such as helping people feel less lonely, improving coping during difficult times, and fostering a sense of community among listeners of the same podcast.[1, 10, 15] However, the literature also highlights potential disadvantages. The one-sided nature means the emotional investment is not reciprocated, and excessive time spent consuming content related to a media figure could potentially interfere with real-life relationships and responsibilities.[10] Negative self-comparison, especially with idealized portrayals by influencers, can lead to feelings of inadequacy.[10] For individuals with pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities, PSRs might even be associated with negative outcomes like increased depressive symptoms in some contexts.[10] Thus, while PSRs can contribute positively to feelings of connection, they represent a complex phenomenon with both potential benefits and risks.

Theme 5: Listener Experience and Motivations

Understanding why people listen to mental health-related podcasts and their subjective experiences is crucial. Motivations for listening are varied and include seeking information, entertainment, personal growth or self-development, and coping with difficult emotions or situations.[6, 10] Many listeners turn to podcasts for relaxation, calming, or distraction from anxious thoughts.[15, 16] Qualitative accounts and listener feedback often emphasize the intimate nature of the listening experience, describing feelings of comfort, reassurance, and feeling understood or less alone in their struggles.[15, 19] Podcasts can help normalize challenging experiences, as reported by parents participating in a

parenting podcast intervention.[17] The feeling of being part of a community around a podcast is also a significant aspect of the experience for many.[15] Intervention studies have reported high levels of engagement, satisfaction, and trust among participants, particularly when podcasts effectively blend personal anecdotes with reliable information.[6] Listener preferences regarding format have also been explored, with some research indicating preferences for semi-structured episodes and a mix of serious and lighter content when dealing with sensitive topics like stigma.[6]

3.3 Reported Psychological Outcomes

Synthesizing across the identified themes, the impact of podcast listening on specific psychological outcomes appears to vary.

- **Stigma and Attitudes:** There is relatively consistent evidence, primarily from cross-sectional and some experimental studies, suggesting that listening to mental health-themed podcasts, especially those incorporating lived experience narratives, is associated with reduced stigmatizing attitudes, lower endorsement of myths, and potentially increased empathy.[3, 4, 6, 8]
- **Mental Health Literacy and Knowledge:** Podcasts demonstrate utility as effective tools for increasing knowledge and understanding of mental health topics, facilitated by their accessibility and convenience.[2, 6]
- **Anxiety, Stress, and Depression:** Findings are mixed and context-dependent. While some targeted interventions, particularly mindfulness-based podcasts, show promise in reducing related states like worry or improving emotional regulation [4, 7, 8, 16], broader evidence for significant reductions in diagnosed anxiety or depression symptoms resulting from general podcast listening or less specific interventions is limited or inconclusive.[6, 11] Effects observed in stepped-care models were more pronounced in later, more intensive stages beyond the initial podcast component.[17]
- **Loneliness and Social Connection:** Podcast listening, particularly through the mechanism of PSRs with hosts, appears capable of fostering feelings of relatedness and social connection.[9] This may help mitigate feelings of loneliness for some individuals, although PSRs are acknowledged as distinct from and not a replacement for reciprocal real-life relationships. [1, 10, 15]
- **Mindfulness and Self-Regulation:** Specific mindfulness-based podcast interventions have shown positive effects on listeners' state mindfulness [8], potentially on working memory [4], and on aspects of emotional regulation.[7]
- **Self-Efficacy and Empowerment:** While promoting self-efficacy is a stated goal in some interventions using podcasts [16] and narrative sharing is linked to empowerment [3], direct empirical evidence measuring changes in self-efficacy specifically due to podcast listening appears less developed in the reviewed literature.
- **Meaning in Life:** One study reported a positive association between the *frequency* of listening to different podcasts per month (rather than total hours) and a greater reported presence of meaning in life.[9]

This overview underscores the fact that the impact of podcast episodes is not uniform. The specific type of podcast content, context of listening, individual listener characteristics, and outcome measure employed all likely influence the observed effects. Broad generalizations about podcasts "improving mental health" are likely overly simplistic; a more nuanced understanding requires considering these specific factors.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Interpretation of Findings

This systematic review synthesizes evidence on the burgeoning use of podcast episodes as tools related to mental health and well-being. The findings paint a complex picture: podcasts demonstrate clear potential and utility in specific areas. However, robust evidence of broad therapeutic efficacy comparable to that of established interventions remains limited and requires careful interpretation. The strongest evidence points towards the effectiveness of podcasts in enhancing mental health literacy and reducing public stigma associated with mental illness.[3, 6] Targeted podcast interventions, such as those delivering mindfulness exercises or specific psychoeducational content, also show promise for improving related skills or states like mindfulness, emotional regulation, or condition-specific knowledge.[4, 6, 7, 8] However, findings regarding the impact on core clinical symptoms like anxiety and depression are mixed, often non-significant, or derived from studies with methodological limitations.[6, 11]

Several plausible mechanisms underlie the observed effects. The fundamental **accessibility and low barrier** to entry of podcasts are paramount, enabling wide reach and engagement, particularly for individuals who might not access traditional services.[1, 3] The power of **narrative engagement**, especially through authentic **lived experience** stories, appears central to podcasts' ability to foster empathy, humanize conditions, and challenge stigmatizing stereotypes.[3, 6, 15] This resonates with long-standing knowledge about the impact of storytelling on attitudes and understanding.[15] **Parasocial interaction** with hosts offers a unique avenue for listeners to experience **social connection and relatedness**, potentially mitigating loneliness.[9, 15] However, this mechanism is double-edged; the one-sided nature of PSRs carries inherent risks, including potential unhealthy dependencies or negative social comparisons, that warrant consideration.[10] Finally, the capacity for **focused content delivery** allows podcasts to serve as platforms for structured learning, such as guided mindfulness practices or the dissemination of evidence-based coping strategies.[4, 7, 16, 17] The effectiveness likely depends heavily on the quality, design, and theoretical underpinning of the specific podcast content.

These findings and mechanisms can be situated within existing therapeutic frameworks. Podcasts delivering psychoeducation or skill-building exercises align with principles of **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**. [5] Mindfulness and meditation podcasts directly draw from **Mindfulness-Based Approaches**. [4, 7, 8, 16] The emphasis on personal stories and empowering patient voices resonates with concepts in **Narrative Therapy** and recovery-oriented models. [3, 15, 19] The role of PSRs and community building connects to the broader understanding of **social support's** importance for mental well-being. [9, 15] Furthermore, principles commonly employed in podcast interventions, such as promoting safety, calming, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope, mirror frameworks like **Psychological First Aid**. [16] This suggests that podcasts do not operate in a theoretical vacuum but rather leverage established psychological principles through a novel medium.

4.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Reviewed Studies (Methodological Critique)

The body of research reviewed has several strengths. It reflects a growing interest in leveraging accessible digital media for mental health, exploring innovative intervention modalities. [1, 3] The use of diverse methodologies, including qualitative studies, provides rich insights into listener experiences that quantitative data alone might miss. [6, 18] The focus on important, often under-researched outcomes like stigma reduction is commendable. [3, 6] Some studies demonstrate innovative designs, such as integrating podcasts into stepped-care models. [17]

However, the current evidence base is also characterized by significant limitations that temper conclusions regarding efficacy and impact. A major constraint is the **predominance of study designs** that limit causal inference, such as cross-sectional surveys, qualitative explorations, and uncontrolled pre- and post-studies. [4, 6, 8] While valuable for hypothesis generation and understanding experiences, these designs cannot definitively establish that podcast listening *causes* observed changes in mental well-being. High-quality RCTs comparing specific podcast interventions against active control groups, as well as longitudinal studies tracking effects over time, remain relatively scarce. [1, 3, 4, 6, 8]

Sample characteristics frequently limit generalizability. Many studies rely on convenience samples, particularly university students, who may not be representative of the broader population or of those with severe mental health needs. [4, 6, 8] A notable gender bias towards female participants was observed in several reviews, raising questions about applicability to men, who often exhibit lower help-seeking behaviors. [1, 2]

However, the measurement issues also pose challenges. Much of the evidence relies on self-report questionnaires, which are susceptible to social desirability and recall biases.[6] There is considerable heterogeneity in the specific outcome measures used across studies, making direct comparisons difficult. Objectively measuring the "therapeutic effect" of a non-clinical intervention such as podcast listening is inherently complex. Furthermore, many studies lack follow-up assessments, preventing the evaluation of the long-term sustainability of any observed effects. [3, 6]

The **definition and heterogeneity of the "intervention"** itself is a core limitation. "Podcast listening" encompasses an enormous range of content, formats, production quality, host styles, and intended purposes. Studies often lack detailed descriptions of podcast content, making replication and comparison across studies challenging. [1, 2, 4, 8] This variability makes it difficult to attribute effects to specific podcast features. High **attrition rates** have also been reported in several intervention studies, potentially biasing results. [4, 6, 8]

Finally, a crucial limitation, particularly relevant for publicly available podcasts, is the general lack of **quality control, moderation, or evidence-basing** for much content.[3] While some podcasts are carefully designed by experts, many are not, raising concerns about the potential dissemination of inaccurate information or even harmful advice.

4.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this review have several theoretical, research, and practical implications. Theoretically, the study of podcast episodes contributes to our understanding of media psychology, particularly the mechanisms of narrative persuasion, parasocial interaction in audio-only contexts, and the potential of digital media to influence health attitudes and behaviors. Investigating how listeners engage with intimate, long-form audio content may offer unique insights into attention, emotional processing, and the formation of perceived social bonds in the digital age.

Practically, the implications are multifaceted.

- **For Clinicians and Practitioners:** Podcasts, particularly those vetted for quality and accuracy, can serve as valuable **psychoeducational resources** to supplement therapy, providing clients with accessible information about conditions, treatments, or coping skills.[6, 8] Clinicians should be aware of the podcast episodes their clients are listening to and be prepared to discuss the content, including potential benefits and risks (e.g., related to PSRs or misinformation). Guidance

on identifying and recommending high-quality mental health podcasts may be beneficial.

- **For Digital Health Developers:** There are clear opportunities to design and rigorously evaluate **evidence-based podcast interventions**, potentially integrating them into broader digital mental health platforms or stepped-care models.[17] Co-design processes involving clinicians and end-users with lived experience could enhance relevance and effectiveness.[6, 7] Development should prioritize clear theoretical grounding, engaging formats, and robust evaluation plans.
- **For Public Health Initiatives:** Podcasts represent a potentially **scalable and cost-effective** medium for large-scale mental health literacy campaigns and stigma reduction efforts.[3, 6] Public health bodies could partner with podcasters or develop their own content to disseminate evidence-based information and promote positive mental health messages. Strategies to promote media literacy and help the public identify reliable content are needed.
- **For Listeners:** Promoting **media literacy** regarding podcast consumption is important. Listeners can benefit from being aware of potential positive impacts (e.g., learning, connection, normalization) as well as potential risks (e.g., unreliable information, unhealthy PSRs, negative comparisons). Encouraging critical engagement with content is key.

The potential for podcasts to serve as **low-cost, accessible mental health tools** is a recurring theme.[1, 3] This is particularly relevant in low-resource settings or for reaching populations facing significant barriers to traditional care. However, this potential must be balanced with current evidence. While podcasts can effectively deliver information and influence attitudes, positioning them as a replacement for professional diagnosis or treatment for significant mental health conditions is not supported by current evidence and could be detrimental. Their value likely lies in their complementary role – as tools for education, stigma reduction, initial engagement, skill practice, and fostering a sense of connection – rather than as a standalone therapy for complex needs. The most impactful applications may involve thoughtful integration into broader health strategies, leveraging their accessibility without overstating their direct therapeutic power based on current proof.

4.4 Limitations of the Review

This systematic review had several limitations. First, despite efforts to conduct a comprehensive search, **publication bias** cannot be entirely ruled out; studies with null or negative findings may be less likely to be published. Second, the restriction to **English-language publications** means that relevant research published in other languages was excluded. Third, the primary reliance on **narrative synthesis** due to study heterogeneity limits the ability to provide precise quantitative estimates of effect sizes across the field. The synthesis is also dependent on the quality and detail of reporting in primary studies. Finally, the interpretation is based on the available literature up to the search date and may not capture the most recent publications in this rapidly evolving field.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review confirms that podcast episodes are a rapidly growing and increasingly utilized medium within the mental health domain. The synthesis of available evidence highlights several key areas in which podcasts demonstrate considerable potential and utility. They serve as accessible and effective platforms for **psychoeducation and enhancing mental health literacy**, leveraging their convenience to reach wide audiences.[6] Furthermore, narrative-based podcasts featuring lived experiences show consistent promise in **reducing mental health stigma** and fostering empathy.[3, 6] Specific, targeted podcast interventions, such as those focused on mindfulness, can yield positive effects on related outcomes like mindfulness skills and aspects of emotional regulation.[4, 7, 8] The phenomenon of **parasocial relationships** with hosts can foster a

valuable sense of social connection for listeners, although this mechanism requires careful navigation due to potential risks.[9, 10]

However, the review also underscores that the current evidence for the broader therapeutic efficacy of podcasts, particularly concerning significant improvements in clinical symptoms such as diagnosed anxiety or depression, is **mixed, often inconclusive, and hampered by methodological limitations**. While podcasts are valuable emerging tools that can effectively **complement** existing mental wellness strategies [1, 3], the claim that general podcast listening functions as "therapy" in a clinical sense is not robustly supported by current scientific literature.

Therefore, there is a critical need for more **methodologically rigorous future research** to substantiate the potential benefits and understand the limitations of podcast episodes in mental health. Priorities for future investigation should include the following:

- Conducting more **Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)** that evaluate specific, well-defined podcast interventions against appropriate active control groups and assess clinically meaningful outcomes.
- Implementing **longitudinal study designs** to track the effects of podcast listening over extended periods and assessing the sustainability of any observed changes.
- Recruiting **diverse and representative samples** to improve the generalizability of findings beyond specific demographic groups (e.g., university students, predominantly female samples).
- Investigating the **mechanisms of change** more deeply – how do factors such as narrative processing, PSR intensity, and content engagement interact to influence outcomes?
- Developing and validating **quality standards or guidelines** for mental health-related podcasts to help practitioners and the public identify reliable and potentially beneficial content.
- Exploring the **optimal integration** of podcasts within existing mental health care systems, including stepped-care models and telehealth frameworks.

In conclusion, podcast episodes represent a dynamic and accessible medium with demonstrated value for disseminating mental health information, challenging stigma, and fostering connection. While their potential as therapeutic adjuncts is promising, realizing this potential responsibly requires commitment to rigorous research, critical evaluation, and thoughtful integration into the broader mental health support landscape. Continued investigation is essential to guide evidence-based development and application of podcast episodes for promoting mental well-being.

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