Universal access to information communications technology:

**Mood and stress-related challenges**

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# Introduction

Moods are essential to how people experience the world. When moods become disturbed or when people are very stressed the consequences can be profound and accompanied by considerable distress. Their ability to accurately judge others and situations, to be alerted to threats, and on the flip side, to recognise opportunities becomes somewhat compromised. A disturbance in mood can be acute when we experience overwhelming grief, sadness, anxiety or stress. Also, mood disturbances can be long lasting as is the case with those affected by mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. This disturbance is typically triggered by upsetting life experiences ranging from a lack of sleep or minor illness to job loss or the death of a loved one.

Regardless of where an individual is positioned along this continuum their use of information communications technology (ICT) in everyday life is often essential. ICTs are an effective means of gathering information to support decision making relating to our work, travel, health and finances. These technologies also provide a useful and convenient way to maintain relationships with others and offer many opportunities to engage in recreational activities including online shopping, gaming, watching movies and listening to music.

People with mental health conditions are poised to gain even more benefit from ICTs. They use ICTs as an informational resource to learn more about their conditions and to access help when necessary. They are also increasingly using ICTs as tools for convenient monitoring and treatment of their conditions. Additionally, there are many ICT services, which enlist friends, family and others affected by these conditions, such as forums, mental health communities and social networks, that are useful platforms of support.

However, some features of ICTs can potentially produce barriers to use for people when they are experiencing a disturbance in mood or are stressed. Using ICTs can be a very cognitively demanding activity requiring the ability to quickly analyse, synthesise, evaluate and apply information. From booking an emergency flight at short notice to visit a severely ill relative to making a large last-minute financial transaction that could result in penalties if past due, online interactions can be especially difficult, even when not accounting for the distraction of adverts or perils of online fraud. Also, the lack of non-verbal and social-context cues (e.g., facial expressions) featured in ICTs provides little guidance for behaviour and can make interaction difficult for those experiencing a disturbance in mood.

As the age of automation increasingly advances and human-to-human interaction is replaced or mediated by ICTs, there is a need to reconsider the scope of the designs of the ICTs that people interact with. The focus can no longer be solely on efficiency but must also be on accommodating users when they are experiencing mood and stress-related challenges among other psychological problems. Developing appropriate standards and policies that support and encourage the protection of ICTs users when they are not feeling their best would be an important step towards improving ICT accessibility for all.