

# VA Virtual Care: Bridging the Digital Divide through Cultural Competency



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**  
Veterans Health Administration  
*Office of Connected Care*

# Purpose

The goal of this training is to provide VA care teams with the foundational information needed to integrate virtual care into clinical practice. Virtual care has the potential to empower and more fully engage Veterans in their treatment plan and serves as an extension of Veteran-centered care.

In this training, we will give an overview of the intersection of culture and technology and how it can affect care. We will describe cultural issues that affect both VA health care staff and Veterans in the provision of clinical care and how health care staff can develop cultural safety and competence when using virtual care tools to improve Veteran care.

# Presenter



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# Learning Objectives

**At the conclusion of this training, VA health care staff should be able to:**

- Promote reflection on and awareness about how cultural and social determinants of health may affect the availability of health and virtual care technologies.
- Promote Veterans' access to health and virtual care technologies, and their readiness to adopt them.
- Identify potential biases regarding technology use and how these could affect delivery of care.

# Overview

- Adoption of Technological Innovation
- Digital Health Equity
- Cultural Competency
- Bridging the Technological Cultural Divide
- Key Takeaways
- Resources and References

# Virtual Care

Telehealth

Electronic Health Record

Mobile Health

Patient Portal

*Virtual Health*

*eHealth*

*Digital Health*

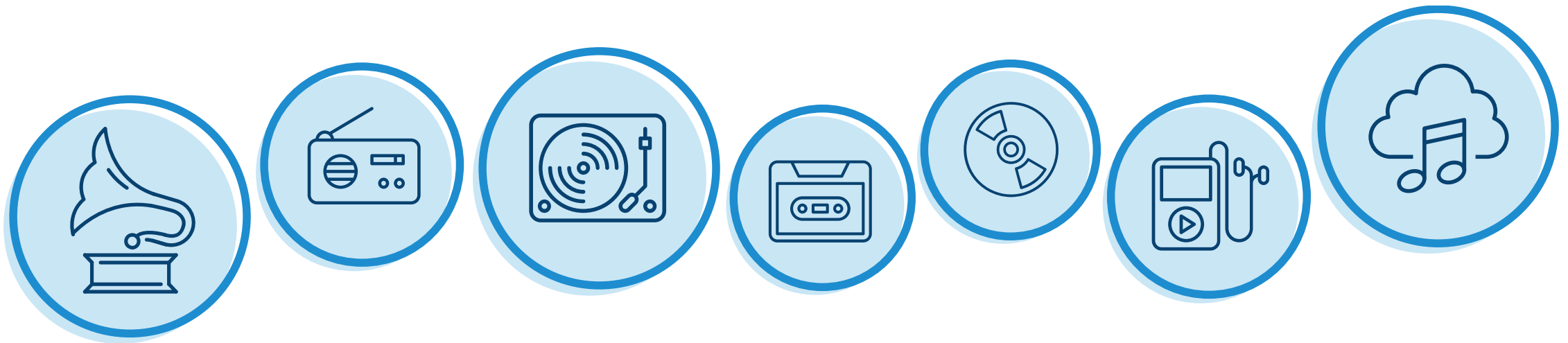
*Connected Care*

*Connected Health*



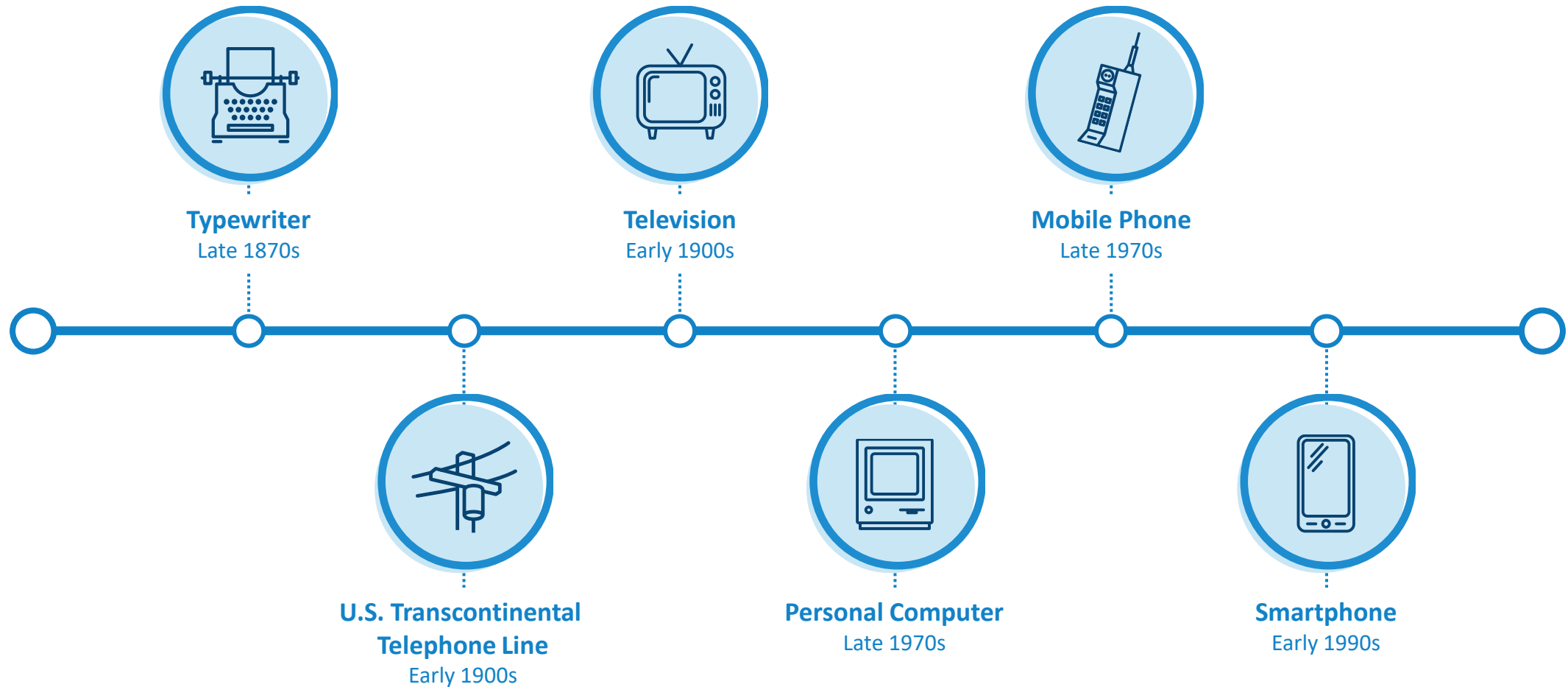
# Adoptions of Innovation

**“It’s only technology if it happened after you were born”** (Levine 2012).





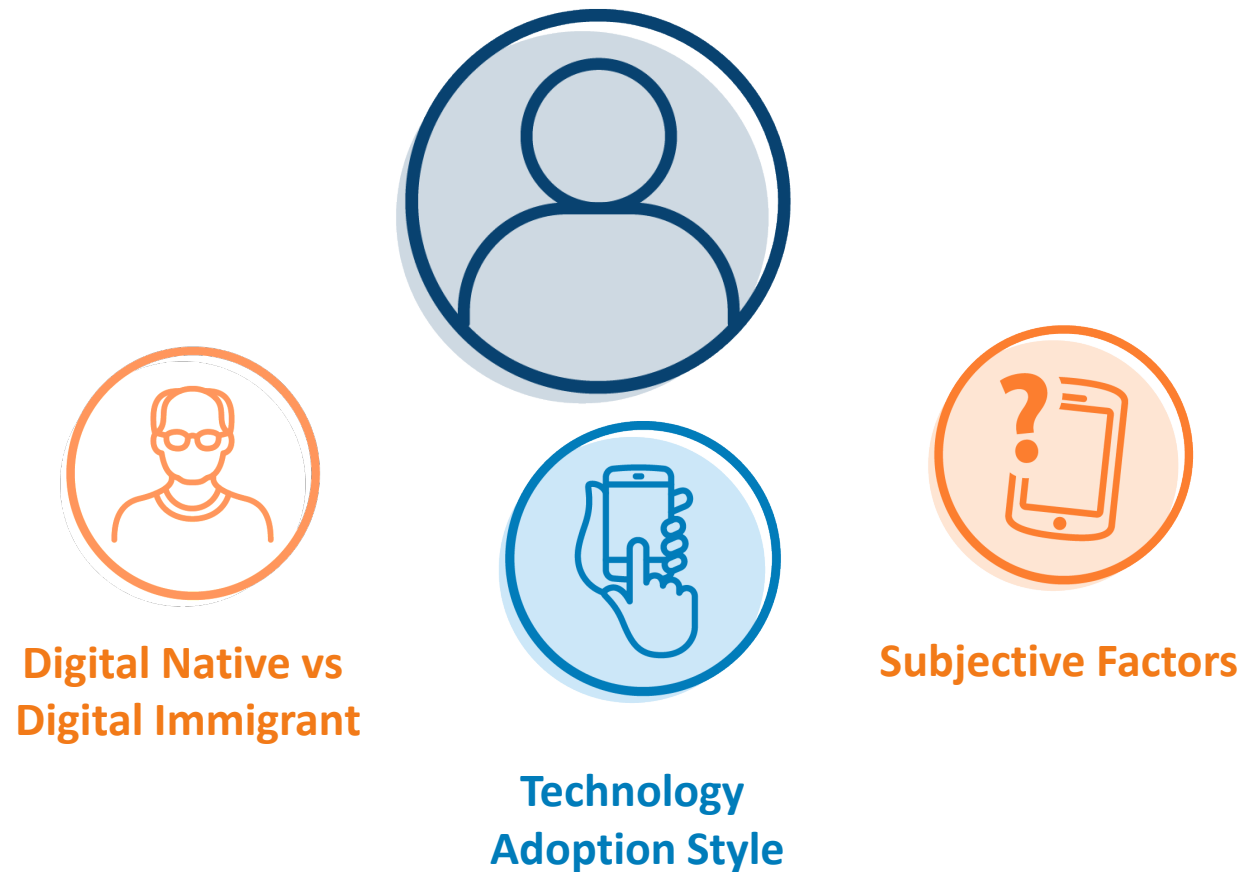
# Major Technological Milestones





# Adoption and Technological Experience

## FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ADOPTION OF TECHNOLOGY



# Veteran Access to Technology

**Rates of smartphone ownership in the U.S. adult population are high and similar across gender and ethnoracial backgrounds** (Pew, 2021).

**In 2020:**

- **97%** of U.S. adults owned a cellphone of some kind.
- **85%** owned a smartphone.
- **61%** of adults 65 and older owned a smartphone.

**In a study of older Veterans (average age of 69.2), rates of technology ownership were also high** (Gould et al. 2019).

- **92%** of older Veterans owned a cellphone.
- **77%** owned a smartphone or tablet.
- **85%** owned a computer.
- **81%** had internet service at home.



# Digital Health Equity

**Virtual care can improve the quality of care for a Veteran, but inequities in access to and implementation of virtual care can deepen the existing disparity in health care systems.**

Contributors to poor health outcomes:


- Poverty
- Lack of access to digital health technologies
- Poor engagement with digital health
- Barriers to digital health literacy

# Digital Health Equity Framework

**The digital health equity framework proposed by Crawford and Serhal (2020) considers the way an individual's use of technology extends to and is shaped by their cultural, economic, and social position in the world.**

Digital determinants of health interact with the following intermediate health factors:

- Environment
- Health related beliefs and behaviors
- Preexisting health conditions
- Psychosocial stressors



“To be culturally competent doesn’t mean you are an authority in the values and beliefs of every culture. What it means is that you hold a deep respect for cultural differences and are eager to learn, and willing to accept, that there are many ways of viewing the world.”

— *Okokon O. Udo*

# Cultural Competence in VA Care

## VA health care staff can:

- Strive for optimal care to Veterans regardless of their cultural beliefs, ethnicity, gender identity, native language, race, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation.  
(Whaley & Davis, 2007).
- Acknowledge their cultural background, biases, and perspectives, and how these could influence their interactions with Veterans in their care.
- Consider the unique cultural components in the military, behavior norms, belief systems, and language. (Reger et al., 2008).

# Benefits of Cultural Safety, Humility, and Competence in Health Care

- Cultural competence in the delivery of health care **can have a direct impact on the efficacy of delivery of care** (Griner & Smith, 2006; Hilty et al., 2015).
- Providers can **significantly improve patient satisfaction and treatment outcomes** when they acknowledge their own limitations in cultural awareness, attitudes, and knowledge of cultures beyond their own

(Whaley & Davis, 2007; Paez et al., 2009).



## Benefits of Cultural Safety, Humility, and Competence in Health Care (cont.)

- Clinicians who work to develop their cultural competence **provide better care** (Lie et al., 2011; Saha et al., 2008; Hilty et al., 2018; Jongen et al., 2018).
- Being culturally competent in the mental health field involves **the use of effective strategies to increase one's knowledge and humility** while being empirically grounded (Whaley & Davis, 2007; Hilty et al., 2021).
- Clinicians' increased cultural competence has been linked to **increased treatment adherence and information seeking and sharing.** (Roncoroni, Tucker, and Wall, 2014; Hilty et al., 2019)

# Technological Cultural Competence in VA Care

**Culture plays a critical role in shaping the structure, content, and process of medical and psychiatric treatment** (Shore, 2019).

- As part of the initial intake, implement a cultural assessment that includes:
  - Appropriate elements related to cultural issues.
  - The Veteran's experiences and perspectives on technologies.
- Before introducing virtual care tools into the Veteran's plan of care, VA health care staff should assess their experiences with and perspectives on technologies— and how these compare with the Veteran's experiences and perspectives. The differences that exist may influence their interactions with Veterans.

# Bridging the Technological Cultural Divide

Step 1: Understand the Cultural Variables

Step 2: Identify Your Own Potential Biases

Step 3: Use a Framework To Better Understand How You Experience These Differences

Step 4: Increase Cultural Safety, Humility, and Competency

Step 5: Determine the Veteran's Relationship With Technology

## Key Takeaways

- Cultural issues, such as ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic variables, can affect clinical care.
- VA health care staff should consider cultural factors that can affect a Veteran's adoption of technology.
- Differing relationships with technology can create a divide between VA staff and Veterans. Assess those differences and use traditional cultural models to mitigate differences.
- VA health care staff must recognize their personal biases and adapt technology use in clinical care according to the needs and comfort level of each Veteran — meeting the Veteran where *they* are.

# Resources and References

## Want to learn more?

### VA Virtual Care Best Practices Series

The goal of the VA Virtual Care Best Practices Series is to provide VA care teams with the foundational training needed to integrate virtual care into clinical practice. This series provides 8 one-hour training modules that will provide healthcare staff the core fundamentals necessary for VA healthcare staff to effectively integrate virtual care including: understanding the evidence base, key elements of virtual care clinical integration, security, privacy, and ethical issues, and cultural considerations.

*Available in TMS*



Evidence Base



Clinical  
Integration



Security  
and Privacy



Ethical Issues

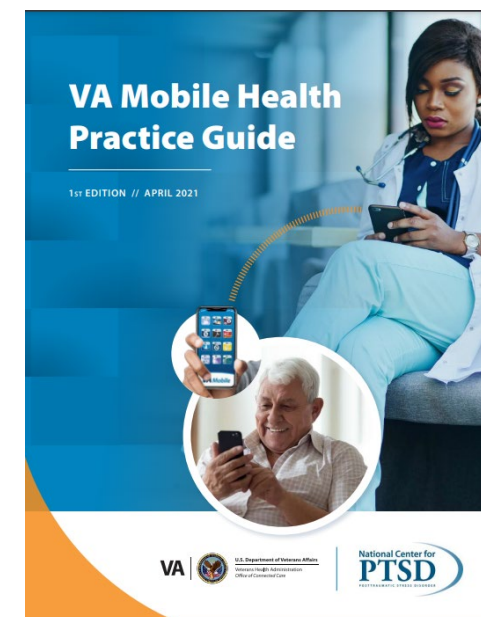


Cultural  
Considerations

### VA Mobile Health Practice Guide

Designed to inform decision-making in clinical settings, this guide describes the five core knowledge areas for integrating mobile technologies into health care. These core knowledge areas provide VA health care staff with the information necessary to effectively integrate mobile health technologies into their clinical practice to support Veteran care.

*Available at <https://connectedcare.va.gov/sites/default/files/va-mobile-health-practice-guide.pdf>*



# Whom Do I Contact for Help?



## Office of Connected Care Help Desk

866-651-3180

Available 24/7



## My HealthVet Help Desk

877-327-0022

Monday to Friday, 7 a.m. – 7 p.m. Central time



## VA Mobile Solutions Help Desk

Veterans: 877-470-5947

Monday to Saturday, 7 a.m. – 7 p.m. Central time

VA Care Teams: 844-482-6624, available 24/7



## VA Mobile Mental Health Apps

[mobilementalhealth@va.gov](mailto:mobilementalhealth@va.gov)



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Office of Connected Care





Thank you!

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