



one small step

Empowering Recovery & Well-Being Through Real-Time Human Connection with Talk, Text & Video

AN EVALUATION BY HITLAB



This report presents HITLAB's Heuristic Evaluation of One Small Step, a digital peer-support platform providing Substance Use Disorder (SUD) & Serious Mental Illness (SMI) recovery through real-time connection and continuous care.

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Executive Summary

This whitepaper presents HITLAB's heuristic evaluation of One Small Step (OSS), a digital peer-support platform developed to foster real human connection in mental health and addiction recovery. The platform connects users with certified peer supporters—individuals who have lived through similar challenges and are trained to provide empathetic, non-clinical emotional support.

Using Jakob Nielsen's Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design, HITLAB conducted a comprehensive review of both the web and mobile app versions of OSS. The evaluation examined the platform's design, interaction flow, communication features, and user empowerment mechanisms to assess alignment with usability principles.



Findings indicate that One Small Step excels in empathy-driven communication, emotional safety, and accessibility. The platform's minimalist design, visible support options, and flexible chat or call features make it approachable and comforting. However, opportunities exist to further enhance usability through improvements like chat timestamps, editable and downloadable chat histories, flexible availability of peers, and interactive coping exercises.

Overall, One Small Step demonstrates strong adherence to user-centered design and stands out as a scalable model for technology-enabled peer support. HITLAB's insights provide a structured roadmap for continuous improvement to strengthen engagement, inclusivity, and emotional impact.

Why Today's Mental Health Support Systems Fall Short?

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) recovery requires ongoing emotional, behavioral, and social support both during and after rehabilitation. While clinical and therapeutic care provide a strong foundation, sustaining recovery in everyday life remains a major challenge (Fortuna et al., 2020; WHO, 2022).

Within rehab, individuals with SUD benefit from structured routines and professional support, yet feelings of isolation and limited peer engagement often persist. After discharge, these challenges intensify—individuals in outpatient or community-based recovery face daily stressors without consistent, empathetic connection, increasing the risk of relapse and emotional instability (SAMHSA, 2022; Lawn & Smith, 2018)

Discontinuity of Support After Leaving Rehab



- **The Problem:** Once individuals complete a rehabilitation program, the structured care and accountability they relied on diminish significantly. Without ongoing peer connections or digital support networks, many struggle to maintain emotional stability.
- **The Consequence:** Feelings of abandonment, isolation, and a higher likelihood of relapse due to lack of consistent encouragement and monitoring (SAMHSA, 2022; Davidson et al., 2012).

Limited Real-Time Emotional Support During Crisis



- **The Problem:** Whether inside rehab or in community recovery, emotional crises can occur at any time. However, access to immediate peer support is often unavailable outside session hours or facility limits.
- **The Consequence:** Unattended distress can escalate into harmful behaviors, reinforcing feelings of helplessness or failure (APA, 2023; Hilty et al., 2021).

Why Today's Mental Health Support Systems Fall Short?

Social Stigma and Fear of Judgment



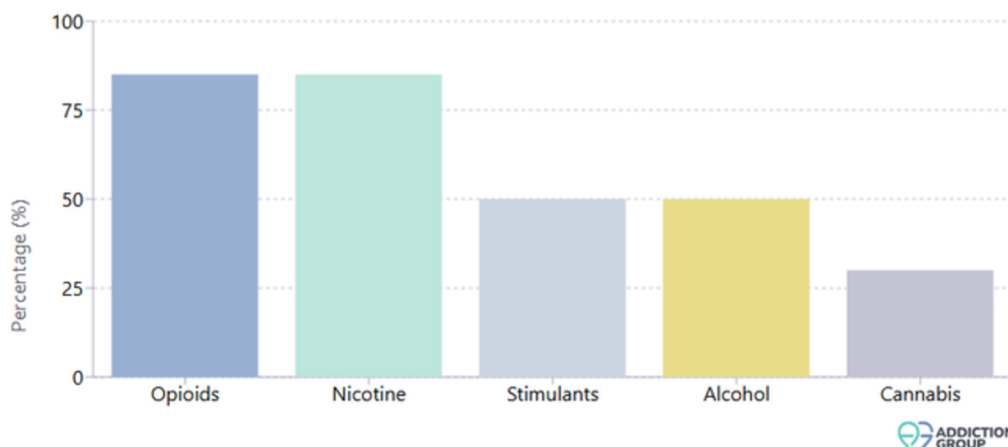
- **The Problem:** Many individuals hesitate to express their struggles openly, fearing judgment from society, family, or even fellow patients. The absence of safe, non-judgmental communication channels prevents emotional release.
- **The Consequence:** Bottled emotions and secrecy hinder recovery progress and contribute to social withdrawal or self-stigmatization (Lawn & Smith, 2018; WHO, 2022).

Lack of Structured Peer Interaction in Rehab



- **The Problem:** Although group therapy and counseling exist, not all rehabilitation programs integrate structured peer mentorship with lived experience. Peer interactions are often informal, inconsistent, or unavailable after discharge.
- **The Consequence:** Missed opportunities for mutual learning, empathy, and sustained motivation that come from sharing lived recovery experiences (Davidson et al., 2012; SAMHSA, 2022).

One-Year Relapse Rates by Substance



Why Today's Mental Health Support Systems Fall Short?

Emotional Disconnection in Remote Recovery



- **The Problem:** Individuals in community recovery often struggle to rebuild social networks, especially if their previous circles were linked to substance use or trauma. Without continuous emotional reinforcement, they feel disconnected from progress.
- **The Consequence:** Increased vulnerability to relapse triggers, depression, or disengagement from treatment goals (Fortuna et al., 2020; Manea et al., 2023).

Limited Use of Digital Tools for Ongoing Support



- **The Problem:** Most existing rehab systems rely on in-person follow-ups, while digital tools for peer support remain underutilized or poorly designed for emotional engagement.
- **The Consequence:** A gap in continuity between structured care and real-life recovery environments, leading to feelings of isolation and lack of accountability (Hilty et al., 2021; Fortuna et al., 2020).

Both individuals in rehabilitation and those navigating recovery outside of it require consistent, empathetic, and human-centered support. The absence of structured peer systems—especially those accessible through digital platforms—creates a critical gap in continuity of care. Bridging this gap with technology-enabled, real-time peer connection platforms like One Small Step can help sustain recovery momentum, reduce relapse risk, and foster long-term emotional resilience (SAMHSA, 2022; WHO, 2022).

Treatment Adherence and Economic Impact in SUD

Adherence to Recovery Programs

Completion rates for substance use recovery programs remain modest—only 55–60% of individuals finish treatment. Digital and e-health interventions show similar adherence ($\approx 47\text{--}60\%$), with engagement often dropping due to withdrawal challenges, mental health comorbidities, and social instability.



Patients Leaving Against Medical Advice (AMA)

Approximately 1–2% of all hospital discharges occur AMA, but individuals with SUD are up to three times more likely to leave prematurely. AMA departures increase relapse, readmission rates, and post-discharge mortality, reflecting gaps in withdrawal management and access to medications for addiction treatment.

Financial Impact on Healthcare Systems

SUD-related hospital care costs the U.S. healthcare system about \$13 billion annually, primarily from repeat admissions and complications related to incomplete treatment. For clinics, non-adherence reduces operational efficiency and increases cost per successful recovery.



Broader Economic Implications

The overall societal cost of substance use reaches hundreds of billions annually, factoring in lost productivity, criminal justice expenses, and reduced workforce participation. The lifetime economic burden per opioid use disorder case is estimated at around \$700,000. Enhancing adherence yields significant economic returns through decreased healthcare utilization and improved social functioning.

The Power of Peers: Redefining Recovery in SUD Treatment

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) remains a critical public health challenge, with relapse rates of 40-60% following treatment (NIDA, 2023). Peer Recovery Support Services (PRSS) have emerged as an evidence-based component of recovery-oriented care, leveraging lived experience to foster engagement and sustain recovery (SAMHSA, 2024). This review synthesizes evidence on peer support's effectiveness for SUD treatment outcomes.

Peer support is grounded in **recovery capital theory** (Cloud & Granfield, 2008) and empowerment theory (Solomon, 2004). These frameworks emphasize how shared experience builds social capital, hope, and self-efficacy - essential elements for sustainable recovery (Turpin & Shier, 2017). The unique value of peer support lies in its ability to reduce stigma, model successful recovery, and build trust through authentic connection (Horn et al., 2025).



Multiple systematic reviews confirm peer support **significantly improves treatment engagement and retention** (Eddie et al., 2025; Bassuk et al., 2016; Stack et al., 2022). Randomized trials show particularly strong results in outpatient settings, with one behavioral activation intervention increasing 3-month methadone retention by 28.9% (Magidson et al., 2022). Emergency department studies also demonstrate improved treatment initiation with peer support (Treitler et al., 2024), though effects vary by setting and implementation.

The Power of Peers: Redefining Recovery in SUD Treatment

Evidence for reduced substance use is mixed but promising. Meta-analyses show small-to-moderate effects on recovery outcomes (Lyons et al., 2021), while observational studies report **significant reductions in recurrent overdose** (Treitler et al., 2024). Some randomized trials show peers performing comparably to clinical staff in preventing overdose (Chambers et al., 2024), suggesting peer support represents a valuable addition to standard care.

Qualitative research reveals peer support **fosters critical intra-personal development, including enhanced self-awareness, hope, and reduced shame** (Turpin & Shier, 2017). These psychosocial benefits are particularly valuable for trauma survivors and those with co-occurring disorders (López-Castro et al., 2015).

Multiple studies demonstrate peer support reduces acute care utilization. Participants show **lower rates of hospitalization and emergency department visits**, with sustained improvements in outpatient engagement (Hutchison et al., 2023; Magidson et al., 2021). These patterns suggest peer support may produce significant cost savings within recovery systems.

Effectiveness depends on several key factors: implementation fidelity, clear role definitions, and proper supervision (Horn et al., 2025). Cultural and gender considerations also moderate outcomes, with evidence supporting tailored approaches for specific populations (Jimenez Chavez & Peltier, 2025; De Dios et al., 2016). **Integration within multidisciplinary teams** appears crucial for maximizing benefits.

Peer support consistently enhances SUD treatment engagement and retention while showing promising effects on substance use outcomes. The approach offers unique psychosocial benefits that complement traditional treatments. Future implementation should focus on **standardized roles, adequate supervision, and cultural responsiveness** to maximize effectiveness across diverse populations and settings.

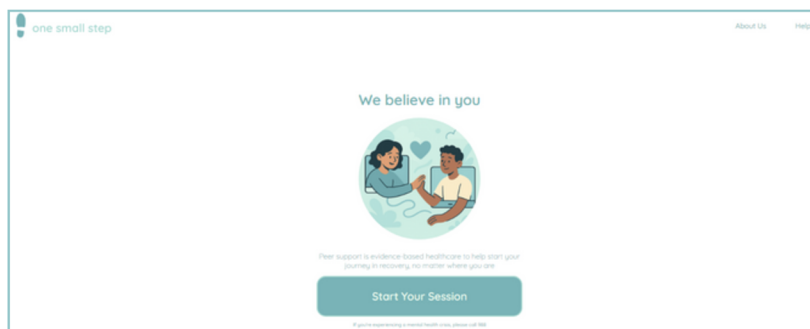
One Small Step

Empowering Recovery & Well-Being Through Human Connection

One Small Step aims to build more connected and compassionate communities by enabling meaningful human conversations that foster understanding and empathy. Its mission is to create a scalable, technology-enabled platform where individuals can engage in respectful dialogue with diverse perspectives, strengthening social cohesion and psychological well-being. This platform envisions a world where listening, understanding, and shared humanity replace polarization and isolation—transforming everyday interactions into opportunities for healing and growth.

Web-Based Platform

The web platform serves individuals in structured rehabilitation or supervised recovery environments. It enables access to certified peer supporters via chat, ensuring a consistent and low-stimulation interface suitable for clinical or semi-clinical settings.



Key features

- *Structured Session Flow:* Starts with consent, privacy acknowledgment, and guided connection to a peer supporter.
- *Multiple Interaction Modes:* Allows users to connect via chat, call, or video depending on comfort and context.
- *Clear Onboarding Process:* Provides terms, privacy details, and orientation before initiating sessions.
- *Post-Session Feedback Form:* Encourages user reflection and helps improve overall service quality.
- *Privacy and Confidentiality Controls:* Ensures secure, compliant communication within supervised settings.
- *Minimalist Interface Design:* Maintains a calm, distraction-free environment ideal for recovery contexts.

One Small Step

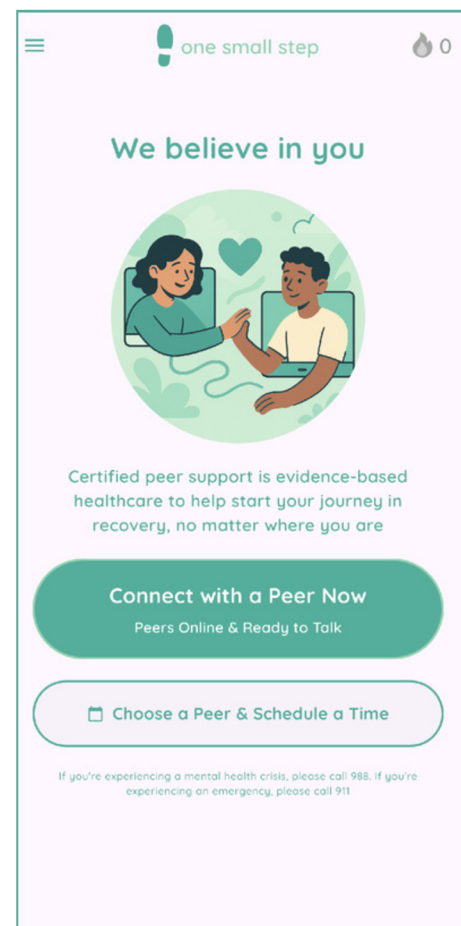
Empowering Recovery & Well-Being Through Human Connection

OSS App

The mobile application targets individuals in outpatient or community recovery, providing a portable, always-available channel for support. It allows users to choose chat, call, or video interactions, track consistency through streaks, and access coping exercises for self-regulation. The design emphasizes simplicity, empathetic visuals, and on-screen reassurance, ensuring that users feel accompanied even outside therapy hours.

Key features

- *Flexible Communication Options:* Offers chat, call, and video features for real-time peer support on nights and weekends.
- *Streak Tracking:* Visually reinforces user consistency and motivates continued engagement.
- *Coping Skills Library:* Provides accessible self-help exercises and mindfulness tools.
- *Visible Help and Support System:* Prominently displays guidance and emergency assistance options.
- *Empathetic Design Language:* Uses warm visuals and supportive tone to build emotional comfort.
- *Coping Skills feature:* Offers guided exercises and mindfulness tools to help users manage stress and anxiety independently during recovery.



One Small Step integrates technology with empathy to provide users in recovery with accessible, real-time peer support. Both the web-based and app-based platforms are designed to ensure safety, simplicity, and human connection, tailored to different stages of the recovery journey.

One Small Step

Empowering Recovery & Well-Being Through Human Connection

Key Value Propositions

- **Accessibility Beyond Therapy:** Bridges the gap between clinical sessions, offering ongoing peer support when professional care isn't available.
- **Empowerment Through Choice:** Users maintain full control over mode and pace of interaction, fostering self-confidence.
- **Trust and Emotional Safety:** Compassionate design and visible safeguards encourage honest communication.
- **Consistent Engagement:** Streaks, reminders, and coping skills sustain user motivation.
- **Simplicity with Depth:** Minimal interface supports clarity while embedding meaningful emotional cues.



Results & Impact

Implementation to date has shown promising outcomes and impact of the OSS solution for SUD patients.

30%

Reduction in discharges against medical advice (AMA) at early partner sites

35%

Reduction in crises services utilized month over month

45 mins

Average session length

4.9

Out of 5 stars

Over 50%

Patients return for multiple sessions

41%

Sessions reveal novel, treatment-relevant information not previously known to the care team

Heuristic Evaluation

Conducted by HITLAB

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation was designed to simulate the perspectives of One Small Step’s key end users—including individuals in rehabilitation and those continuing recovery outside structured care—while providing expert analysis of the platform’s design, usability, and functionality.

Guided by Jakob Nielsen’s Ten Usability Heuristics, a globally recognized framework for evaluating interface design, each principle—visibility of system status; match between system and the real world; user control and freedom; consistency and standards; error prevention; recognition rather than recall; flexibility and efficiency of use; aesthetic and minimalist design; help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors; and help and documentation—was systematically applied to identify usability strengths and opportunities for improvement.

The evaluation involved a multi-day review of both the One Small Step web-based and mobile platforms. Test scenarios were designed to mirror real-world user interactions, focusing on critical activities such as initiating and managing peer support sessions, navigating coping tools, completing feedback surveys, and accessing help and support features.

Personas

HITLAB conducted a heuristic evaluation of the One Small Step platform, applying structured usability inspection methods to assess its effectiveness, efficiency, and alignment with the needs of individuals in recovery and peer supporters. The evaluation focused on how well the platform facilitates accessible, empathetic, and secure peer-to-peer interactions that promote emotional well-being and continuity of support.

Heuristic Evaluation

Conducted by HITLAB

Evaluation Persona 1

29-year-old Individual in Residential Rehab



Alicia Gomez

Occupation: Retail Associate (on leave)

Age: 29 years

“The hardest part is feeling cut off from the outside world. I just want to stay connected and know that someone truly understands what I’m going through. Having someone to talk to—even for a few minutes—can make all the difference.”

<p>Background</p> <p>Alicia entered a residential recovery program after a relapse triggered by job stress.</p> <p>She is motivated to rebuild stability but often struggles with loneliness during non-therapy hours. She relies on structured routines and consistent emotional support.</p>	<p>Goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain motivation through daily peer interaction. • Learn coping skills and strategies from lived experiences of others. • Rebuild confidence to transition back to independent living. • Stay accountable to her recovery plan even after discharge 	<p>Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited support during off-hours in the facility. • Anxiety about relapse after discharge. • Difficulty tracking progress or accessing resources digitally. • Struggles with balancing vulnerability and independence.
<p>Motivations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire to regain control of her life and maintain sobriety. • Encouraged by hearing real stories of recovery success. • Wants to make her family proud by staying on track. • Finds hope in small, daily progress and positive reinforcement. 	<p>Frustrations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels isolated when staff are unavailable. • Worries that discharge will mean losing consistent support. • Frustrated when technology feels impersonal or hard to use. 	<p>Needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued access to encouragement and guidance after formal treatment ends. • Regular reminders and motivational nudges that feel gentle and supportive. • Tools that are easy to navigate, with clear visuals and straightforward steps.

Heuristic Evaluation

Conducted by HITLAB

Evaluation Persona 2

45-year-old Individual in Outpatient Recovery



Michael Chen

Occupation: Freelance Graphic Designer

Age: 45 years

“Therapy helps once a week—but what about the nights I can’t sleep and need someone to talk to? Those quiet hours feel the longest when my thoughts start to spiral. Sometimes, I just need a real person to listen and remind me that I’m not alone in this.”

Background <p>Michael is undergoing outpatient treatment for anxiety and alcohol dependence.</p> <p>He manages work from home and attends therapy sessions weekly. While he’s committed to recovery, he struggles with isolation and maintaining accountability between appointments.</p>	Goals <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access real-time peer support when feeling anxious or at risk.• Build a support network that fits his flexible work schedule.• Stay motivated and avoid relapse through structured engagement.• Incorporate mental well-being routines seamlessly into daily life.	Challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nighttime often triggers emotional distress.• Limited peer connection beyond therapy sessions.• Hesitant to seek support due to stigma and guilt.• Struggles to maintain routines amid low motivation and energy shifts.
Motivations <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Values mental clarity and stability for his creative work.• Wants to avoid hospitalization or relapse.• Believes shared experiences help sustain progress.• Finds purpose in helping others through his own journey.	Frustrations <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Long gaps between professional sessions.• Impersonal or generic support platforms.• Difficulty finding trusted, relatable peers online.• Feels discouraged when progress isn’t immediately visible.	Needs <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Smooth access to resources, routines, and guidance that align with their ongoing care plan.• A private, easy-to-navigate platform that feels intuitive and comfortable to use.• Supportive interactions to stay aware of progress and challenges.

Heuristic Evaluation

Conducted by HITLAB

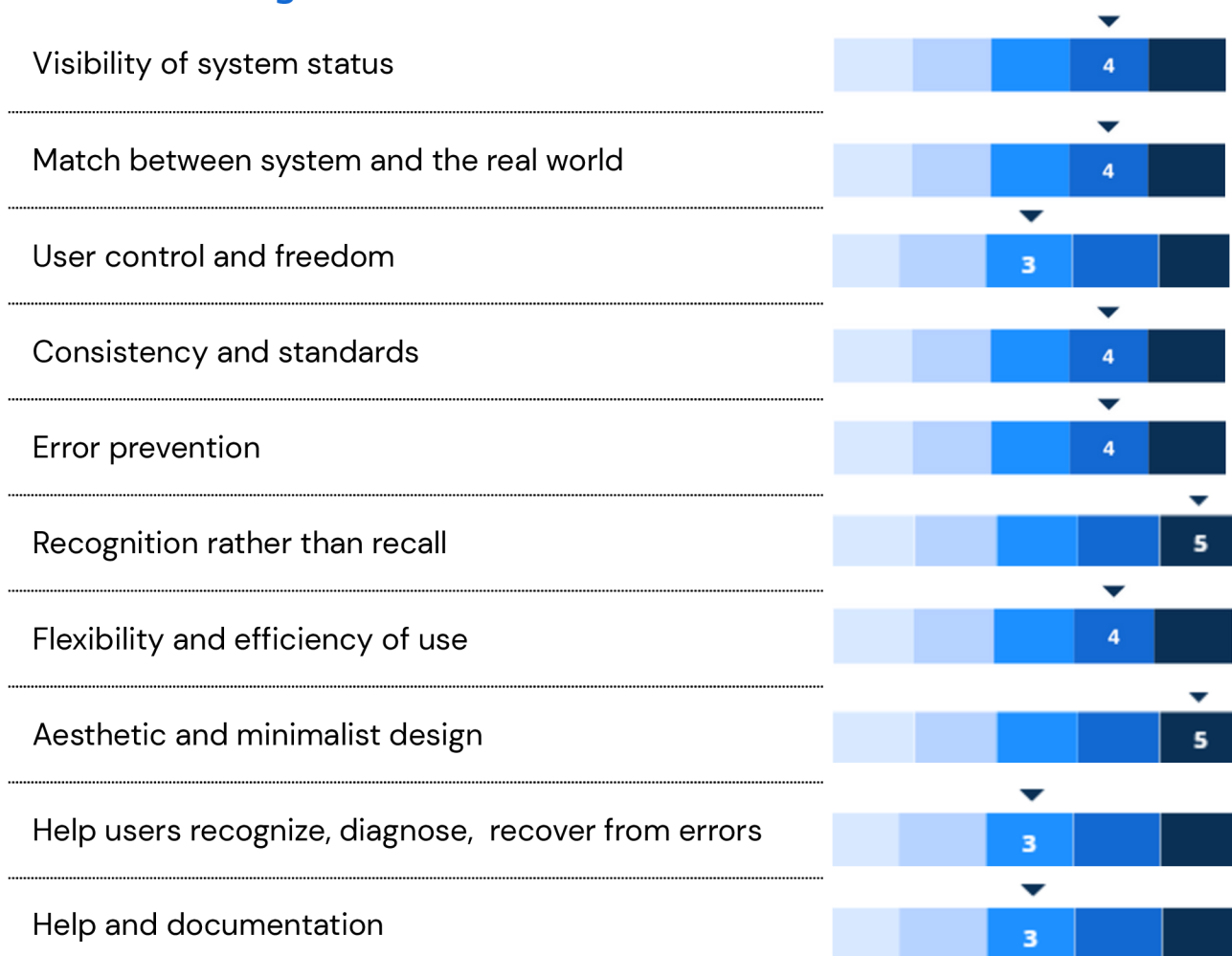


Findings

The One Small Step platform and app demonstrated a solid foundation, scoring consistently across key usability dimensions with most ratings in the 4-5 range (on a 5-point scale), indicating a robust, positive, and patient-oriented design. The evaluation identified several notable strengths in areas such as minimalistic design, flexibility and efficiency of use, consistency, and matching system design to real-world needs.

The study findings also highlight some opportunities for refinement in the platform's workflows and interface design to enhance clarity, reduce user errors, and improve the overall experience for both patients and facility staff before broader scale-up.

Heuristic Ratings



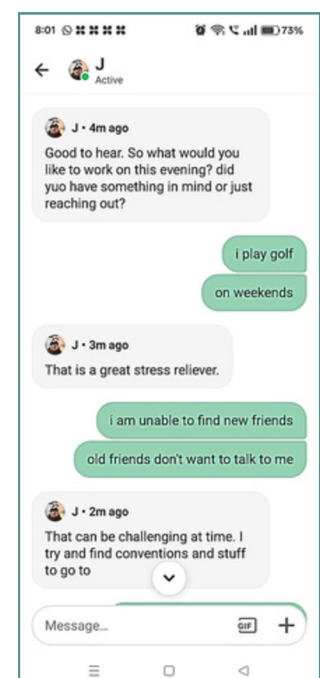
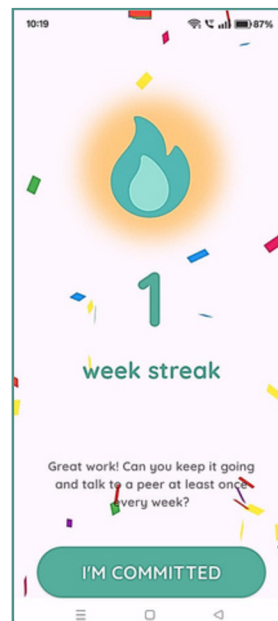
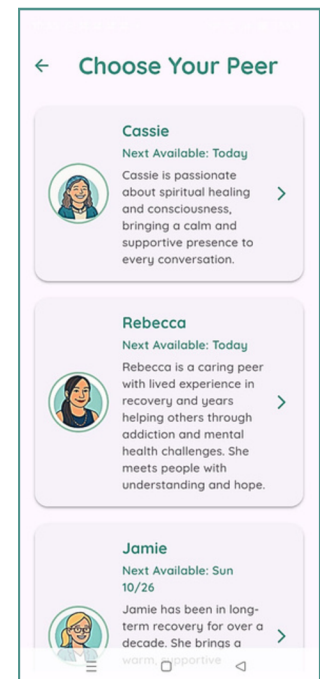
Heuristic Evaluation

Conducted by HITLAB



Strengths Identified

- **Empathetic Communication:** Peer supporters use compassionate, non-judgmental language that mirrors natural human conversation, helping users feel heard and emotionally safe.
- **Clear and Predictable Interaction Flow:** The structured sequence—from terms and privacy consent to connection and feedback—offers consistency and fosters trust in every session.
- **Flexible Communication Modes:** Availability of chat, call, and video options allows users to choose interactions that match their comfort level and emotional readiness.
- **Streak Tracking for Engagement:** The visual streak indicator motivates continued interaction and reinforces positive behavioral habits in recovery.
- **Aesthetic and Minimalist Design:** A calm, uncluttered layout with soft visuals reduces anxiety and creates a sense of digital safety.



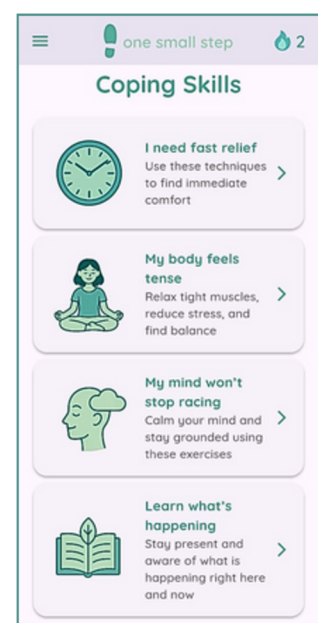
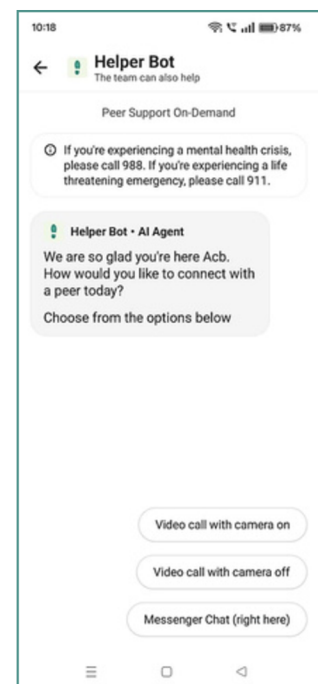
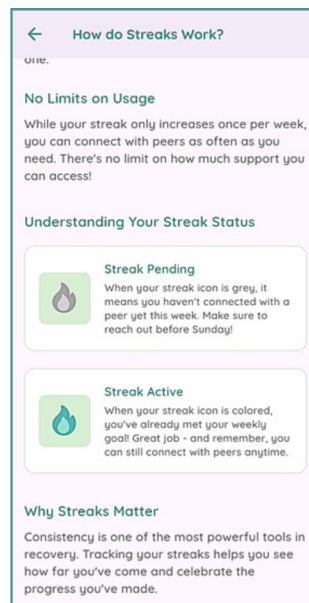
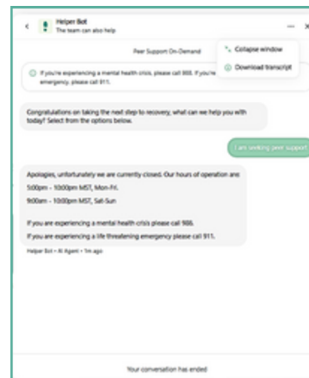
Heuristic Evaluation

Conducted by HITLAB



Strengths Identified

- **Recognition over Recall:** Intuitive buttons, labels, and prompts eliminate the need for memory-based actions, making navigation effortless. The “Download transcript” feature is an excellent feature for record-keeping.
- **High Trust and Privacy Assurance:** Privacy prompts and user control over interaction modes reinforce confidentiality and user autonomy.
- **Consistency in Design Language:** Uniform icons, tone, and flow across both platforms ensure familiarity and reduce cognitive load.
- **Human-Centered Accessibility:** The platform prioritizes emotional tone, inclusivity, and readability—ideal for individuals managing stress or anxiety.
- **Managing stress and anxiety:** Coping Skills feature offers guided exercises and mindfulness tools to help users manage stress and anxiety independently during recovery.



Heuristic Evaluation

Conducted by HITLAB

Opportunities for Improvement

HITLAB's evaluation identified several targeted refinements to further improve the user experience:

- **Add Chat Timestamps, Edit, and Delete Options:** Users currently lack visibility of message times and cannot edit or remove sent messages, which limits control and context. Including these options would enhance clarity, confidence, and accuracy in communication.
- **Future Expansion of Time Slot Availability:** OSS is planning to extend peers availability time to evenings and night hours to provide more consistent and round-the-clock support.
- **Mode of Communication:** Prompt users to share their preferred contact details and confirm how the peer supporter will reach them, ensuring clear and continuous communication.
- **Add Real-Time Feedback Indicators:** Progress bars or “connecting” messages during session setup would prevent confusion during brief delays.
- **Enhance Accessibility Through Personalization:** Incorporate adaptive content such as mood-based suggestions, reminders, or self-care tips based on user engagement patterns.
- **User profile or login feature:** The web-based version lacks a user profile or login feature, preventing users from restarting or continuing a chat after an interrupted session.



Heuristic Evaluation

Conducted by HITLAB

Recommended Next Steps

To systematically enhance the platform, HITLAB recommends a phased approach:

- **Immediate Refinements (0–2 months):** Provide user login options for contact details and confirm how the peer supporter will reach them, ensuring clear and continuous communication. Introduce basic file upload capability and improve chat control (edit/delete).
- **User Experience Optimization (2–4 months):** Add timestamps, progress indicators, and contextual help prompts. Introduce Help feature and a short Onboarding tutorial in both web-based and app-based platforms.
- **Pilot Validation & Scaling (4–6 months):** Expand peer availability through flexible scheduling or AI-based triage. Pilot data analytics for engagement tracking and behavioral outcomes.

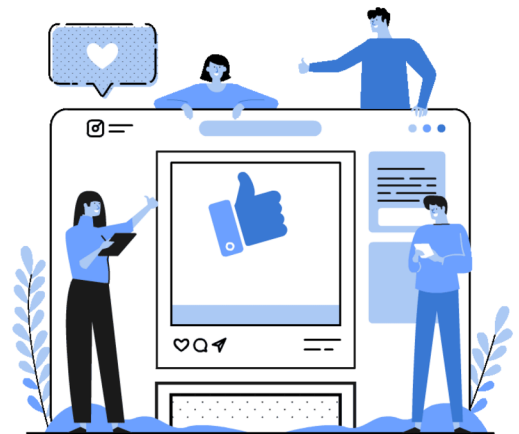


Conclusion

The heuristic evaluation conducted by HITLAB confirms that One Small Step is a thoughtfully designed, empathy-driven digital platform that successfully bridges the gap between clinical care and everyday emotional support. Its intuitive interface, clear interaction flow, and compassionate communication reflect strong adherence to usability principles while promoting trust, accessibility, and emotional safety for individuals in and beyond rehabilitation.

The evaluation highlights that One Small Step empowers users to connect with trained peer supporters in real time, providing a safe space to share, reflect, and heal. Its emphasis on human connection, supported by calm visual design and user autonomy, strengthens engagement and enhances recovery outcomes. By combining technology with empathy, the platform creates a continuous support system that complements professional therapy and fosters resilience.

While One Small Step demonstrates excellence in emotional design and user experience, opportunities remain to refine interactivity, expand support availability, and personalize content for diverse recovery needs. Guided by HITLAB's evidence-based insights, these enhancements will further elevate One Small Step as a trusted model for digital peer support—delivering accessible, compassionate care and empowering individuals to take meaningful steps toward lasting mental well-being.



“

“One Small Step transforms mental health recovery by replacing isolated support experiences with a seamless, human-centered digital connection. Individuals can easily reach certified peer supporters through chat, call, or video, while maintaining control over their comfort and privacy. By fostering empathy, continuity, and trust across every interaction, it delivers faster, more meaningful emotional support and sustained recovery progress.”

— Stan Kachnowski, Chair, HITLAB

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