



Health Tech: Dr David Spiegel On How Reveri Health's Technology Can Make An Important Impact On Our Overall Wellness

An Interview With Luke Kervin



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In recent years, Big Tech has gotten a bad rep. But of course, many tech companies are doing important work making monumental positive changes to society, health, and the environment. To highlight these, we started a new interview series about “Technology Making an Important Positive Social Impact”. We are interviewing leaders of tech companies who are creating or have created a tech product that is helping to make a positive change in people’s lives or the environment. As a part of this series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. David Spiegel.

David is a psychiatrist and one of the world’s most respected experts in research on and the clinical uses of hypnosis. He directs the Stanford Center on Stress and Health and is the Co-Founder of Reveri Health. At Reveri, David is leveraging technology to make self-hypnosis mainstream and help hundreds of millions of people with conditions like stress, chronic pain, insomnia, eating well and stopping smoking, as well as to improve their lives with better focus and improved performance.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series. Before we dive in, our readers would love to learn a bit more about you. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood backstory and how you grew up?

I grew up in the suburbs of New York, the son of two psychiatrists/psychoanalysts. They told me I was free to be any kind of psychiatrist I wanted to be, so I took them up on it and became an academic psychiatrist. My late sister Annie was the only non-psychiatrist in the family — a pediatrician. She used to brag that she was the only ‘real doctor’ in the family. The dinner table conversations were interesting, and I got my first taste of hypnosis as my father discussed his patients. He had learned it from a Viennese refugee psychiatrist as he prepared to be shipped out as a combat physician in North Africa in World War II.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began your career?

I was on my pediatrics rotation at Boston Children’s Hospital at Harvard, and the nurse told me that my next admission was down the hall in status asthmaticus. I followed the sound of the wheezing and arrived to see a 16-year-old redhead bolt upright in bed gasping for breath, knuckles white. Her mother was in tears. I didn’t know what to do, but had just started a hypnosis course, so I asked her if she would

like to learn a breathing exercise. She nodded in the affirmative, so I got her hypnotized but then realized we hadn't gotten to asthma in the course, so I made up a very sophisticated hypnotic instruction: "Each breath you take will be a little deeper and a little easier." Within 5 minutes she was lying back in bed, her wheezing had stopped, her mother stopped crying, and the nurse ran out of the room. My intern came looking for me, and I expected a surprised pat on the back. Instead, he informed me that the nursing supervisor had filed a complaint that I had violated Massachusetts law by hypnotizing a minor without parental consent. Now Massachusetts has a lot of weird laws, but that is not among them. And her mother was standing right next to me when I did it. The intern then informed me that I had to stop using hypnosis with her. "Why?" I inquired. "It's dangerous," the intern replied. "You're planning to give her general anesthesia and then put her on steroids, and you think my talking to her is dangerous when she is no longer wheezing," I replied. "You can take me off the case, but I am not going to tell my patient something I know is not true." "Well, you can't follow her," he offered. "Why not? We're both in Boston," I replied. There was a weekend meeting among the intern, chief resident, and attending physician and they returned on Monday with a radical idea: "Let's ask the patient." "Yes, I like this," she replied. She had been hospitalized with acute asthma 3 months in a row. She did have one subsequent hospitalization but went on to study to be a respiratory therapist. I figured that anything that could help a patient that much, frustrate the head nurse, and violate a nonexistent Massachusetts law, had to be worth looking into.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

I had been excited intellectually by the writings of Stanford psychiatrist Irvin Yalom, who wrote the standard textbook on Group Psychotherapy (now in its 6th edition!). He was interested in existential philosophy, focusing on the here and now, building authentic relationships, facing the future, however uncertain it was. As a former philosophy major at Yale, I was intrigued by how such philosophical principles could enrich psychotherapy. I always found myself drawn to people suffering from the real consequences of real tragedies in life. Irv heard me give a talk on combining such existential principles with the use of self-hypnosis at a meeting in Texas, and then offered to support recruiting me to Stanford. Once I got there, he called me one day and told me he was running a support group for women with advanced breast cancer, with the idea that their interaction, even as some died, could become a source of strength and growth, based on the existential principle that you don't really live authentically until you face the eventual reality of nonbeing. When the world authority invites a young psychiatrist to co-lead a group with him, you think for a second and say 'yes!' I did, became involved in research on such groups, wound up publishing a great deal on how they helped emotionally and even physically. Irv was continuously supportive of my career, and we became lifelong friends. Helen and I were married at their home. We lost Irv's wife Marilyn recently. They wrote a lovely

book together as she was dying: *A Matter of Death and Life*, and Irv, now 90, is still writing.

**Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”?
Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?**

My father once told me, “Choose your battles.” He was right — you can waste a lot of time and energy on lost causes, but picking the right ones defines who you become. I went to Chicago in 1968 to protest the Vietnam War at the Democratic National Convention. I saw and understood the power of misdirected police force while ducking a billy club, treated a news photographer for a broken arm, and suddenly felt a sense of peace amid the chaos as Peter and Mary (of Peter, Paul and Mary) sang ‘This Land is Your Land’ in Grant Park. I continue to choose my battles continuously but carefully.

**You are a successful business leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success?
Can you please share a story or example for each?**

Listen. Learn. Laugh. Take adversity seriously but in stride. Early in my career at Stanford I had the usual junior faculty disappointments — papers rejected, grants not funded, disinterest from others in my unusual preoccupation with hypnosis. Then I read an article in the *New York Times Magazine* about the National Hockey League. The statistic that caught my eye was “there are no rookies in the NHL who have any of their front teeth left after the first season of play.” I got it —

nobody will strew roses in your path. You must earn your place by learning, adjusting, and persevering. Take problems seriously but not too seriously. W.C. Fields once said: “I was once in love with a beautiful blonde, but she drove me to drink. Come to think of it, I never thanked her for it.”

Ok super. Let’s now shift to the main part of our discussion about the tech tools that you are helping to create that can make a positive impact on our wellness. To begin, which particular problems are you aiming to solve?

At the macro level, we’re trying to make hypnosis mainstream to empower people to take better control of their physical and mental health. Most people are familiar with stage hypnosis from movies, television, and awkward high school assemblies. What most people don’t realize is that hypnosis is rooted in science and proven to be effective at managing a range of challenges. With Reveri, we’re currently helping people manage chronic pain, overcome insomnia, make better choices when eating, relieve stress and anxiety, quit smoking, and enhance their focus to solve problems. We’ll be expanding our range of offerings in the coming months, too.

How do you think your technology can address this?

Traditionally, hypnotherapy has required a visit to a clinician’s office, or more recently, a virtual meeting. With smartphones, voice recognition and machine learning, we’re able to deliver a scalable, yet

personalized, hypnosis experience to anyone who thinks they'd benefit. Reveri has already helped more people (by many orders of magnitude) since launching, than I have been able to help in my four decades of practice. To me that is very powerful.

Can you tell us the backstory about what inspired you to originally feel passionate about this cause?

Something old and something new. Hypnosis is the oldest Western Conception of a psychotherapy — the first time a talking interaction between a doctor and a patient was understood to have therapeutic potential. The idea of combining an 18th Century tradition that has survived into the 21st Century with cutting edge digital dissemination excites me. And the idea that I can be helping more people now as I write this than I do in months of face-to-face clinical work makes me smile. It will be a legacy that makes the most of my 5 decades of clinical training, research, teaching, and treatment. I want to pass it on.

How do you think this might change the world?

We are born with a big brain, but no user's manual. We often don't begin to realize the potential we have to think through problems, modulate perception, enrich social connections, manage our body's responses to stress, and plan to improve our future. We are not machines, we are living, evolving, self-controlling organisms. We also suffer plenty — with anxiety, pain, insomnia, bad habits, difficulty concentrating. We have learned a lot about how the brain can function

better to help the body to function better. We have distilled some of that knowledge into the Reveri app, making it widely available for people to use in dealing better with these problems. And when it works, the relief is immediate. We can teach anyone with an iPhone or a computer how to learn skills that they can use to help themselves to live better, sleep better and feel better. All without the need for drugs.

Keeping “[Black Mirror](#)” and the “[Law of Unintended Consequences](#)” in mind, can you see any potential drawbacks about this technology that people should think more deeply about?

Mis-informed critics might say that self-hypnosis at scale could present an opportunity for mind control at scale. But they'd be wrong. With self-hypnosis you enhance control of your mind and body in a more focused way. You learn a skill that you can use to your benefit while learning about yourself and your abilities. The intense focus of hypnosis means that you set aside some pre-existing assumptions to try new experiences — a kind of cognitive flexibility. You can also learn by example about your potential vulnerabilities — sometimes a new idea is not a good idea. Sometimes other peoples' suggestions are not worth the trouble. But you can also challenge your assumptions of personal limitations — you can learn to better control pain, change bad habits, manage stress, reduce anxiety, and make the most of your nights as well as your days.

****Here is the main question for our discussion. Based on your experience and success, can you please share “Five things you need to know to successfully create technology that can make a positive social impact”? (**Please share a story or an example, for each.)**

I’m a psychiatrist, not a technologist, but I can share what I’ve learned from working on Reveri for the past few years.

- Know what problem you’re trying to solve

I knew from my decades of research and clinical work that hypnosis is a powerful tool. But I could never have scaled my individual work to reach the number of people that I wanted to impact. I knew I needed a business savvy technical partner, and I found that in my co-founder, Ariel Poler when he approached me after I gave a talk at the Stanford Brain-Mind Summit three years ago. He has many successful start-ups to his credit and has served on the boards of companies like Strava. Ariel kindly offered to help me make the first working prototype on the Alexa platform. Three years later we have a thriving little company and a rapidly growing userbase, many of whom report immediate relief from their problems.

- Hire the right people to do what you can’t do yourself

We knew we needed a top-notch team of business practitioners, technologists and designers and we took the time to find people who had the right mix of raw talent and natural interest in this space. Many are experienced in business, marketing, tech, and programming; others are very bright Stanford students. All are doing it not just as a job but because they are creating something they believe in and want to see their work help people. The work is its own reward.

- Make it easy for your audience

Hypnosis comes with a lot of misconceptions. So, we knew we needed to deliver an experience that could prove the power of self-hypnosis quickly. We now regularly hear from users who have improvements with their challenge in just 10 minutes. We are getting feedback like, “I haven’t been able to sleep for 15 years — now I can!” A woman with advanced breast cancer adapted our sleep program to help her with chemotherapy-induced hot flashes by imagining in hypnosis that she was in a rushing mountain stream. Their creativity and enthusiasm confirm our knowledge and research. We are so glad to be able to disseminate comfort.

- Test, test, test

Everything in the Reveri experience is being constantly tested and analyzed. All our decisions are informed by data and the roadmap for the app is ever evolving based on new insights. I knew when I started working with hypnosis that we would have to provide proof. Many

people are understandably skeptical or remember some stage hypnosis show from high school. I have published hundreds of scientific papers about hypnosis, and know that evidence must be the foundation, and we now have evidence that Reveri works as well — reducing stress by 35% in 15 minutes, helping 1 in 5 people stop smoking, reducing pain by 25% — all without drugs, some of which do more harm than good.

- Listen carefully to all the feedback

Even when it may be difficult, we read every piece of feedback we get. We are here in service of our users, and we want to be in a constant and intimate dialogue with them. We enjoy hearing from our users — we like the good news and learn as well from the problems. Criticism is helpful, and often people tell us they like what we are doing, feel comforted by the sound of my voice, but want our app to do even more.

If you could tell other young people one thing about why they should consider making a positive impact on our environment or society, like you, what would you tell them?

There is a Native American saying: “You don’t inherit the earth from your parents; you borrow it from your children.” Think how good you will feel if you devote yourself to making it a better place for your children and grandchildren. There is no greater joy than watching them grow and flourish, and no greater satisfaction than making that possible.

Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch, and whom? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)

Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He has better things to do than have a meal with me. He combines extraordinary courage with a sense of humor — he doesn't take himself or his evil opponent Putin too seriously. I admire his combination of grit and wit.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

We are at reveri.com

Thank you so much for joining us. This was very inspirational, and we wish you continued success in your important work.