

Psychology Today

Self-Repair for Your Mental Health

Digital technology is driving a welcome sea change for mental health support.

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Traditional in-office therapy is expensive and not always convenient, potential patients often search for other options. Although in-person therapy is sometimes necessary and feels supportive, it takes time, energy, and money—three things that are often in short supply. You must get ready for therapy, make the trek to a physical location, sit down with an objective, trained professional, and prepare to talk about deep issues. Treatment can involve complexities that a highly trained professional knows will take time.

In the last decade, it was with curiosity and a healthy ambivalence that I eyed online tools for self-hypnosis when they first appeared. Could new technology,

when developed by a qualified professional, increase the convenience of the patient and provide quality care? Could an app deliver something of value to the mental health consumer?

There certainly is a strong need for counseling today. Data from the World Health Organization show that people who are dealing with mental health problems — up to 55 percent in developed countries and 85 percent in developing ones — are not getting the treatment they need. In the U.S., according to data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, although the affordability of mental health therapy remains one barrier to care, other obstacles are increasing. People cited many reasons for not receiving needed services in 2018, including cost (39 percent), believing they could handle the problem without treatment (26 percent), not knowing where to go for services (24 percent), and not having time (20 percent).

While there is tremendous value in the intense relationship, exploration, and advice about managing problems that in-person and remote psychotherapy provides (I know because I have devoted my career to doing it), there must be elements of various psychotherapeutic techniques that can be taught, learned, and utilized. For example, the rational analysis of feelings and self-evaluation taught by cognitive-behavioral therapists is something that can be learned — indeed ‘homework’ is a crucial part of the treatment. Why shouldn’t we disseminate those aspects of various therapies that can be learned and utilized?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration does not regulate all of the mental health technology that is available, choosing carefully is important. As I analyzed the overall data coming in, it is becoming apparent that some digital programs proved to have clinically validated evidence in reducing mental health symptoms or disorders when developed correctly by a team of qualified experts. The data also showed that good quality, convenient self-care provided through an app spread the critical habit of self-care to others. Because of the convenience of being able to utilize hypnosis, meditation, or guided imagery just about anywhere, anytime, the use of mobile health technology has expanded quickly — an unprecedented event in the history of psychiatry and psychology.

The fields of psychology and psychiatry have been no exception to the trend of introducing more private, personalized, do-it-yourself self-care. New technology should never replace traditional therapy when it’s needed, but it can provide powerful support when used wisely.

Indeed, I have always known that hypnosis is powerful and rapid in its effect. Unfortunately, it is often mistakenly believed that hypnosis always requires a personal hypnotist. In fact, what is needed is intense focus, dissociation, and cognitive flexibility; in a sense, all hypnosis is really self-hypnosis, even when guided by a professional.

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Because there is so little oversight of health apps, it is important to choose one that is transparent about how your data is collected and utilized. It is also critical that there is clear communication about what the tool can actually do for you so that you understand why you are using it. It should be built upon the foundation of clinical experience and careful research evaluation. You want to make sure it is safe and that it works for you. Make sure there is sufficient evidence on the method you are using to get help.

Tiago's story

Tiago is a scientist who is committed to his own healing and health. He works as a neuroscience researcher, and through his own studies of hypnosis, he learned how to help limit cravings and manage his weight. He has also used self-hypnosis to manage his anxiety.

When he was first introduced to a self-hypnosis app, Tiago put this tool to the test, having some familiarity since he understands the field. He wanted to calm his own fears, limit the effects of anxiety, and eat more mindfully. Tiago says he had an addiction to chocolate—and ate way too much of it, including the richest and unhealthiest kind.

Tiago says he has switched to having just a small amount of 70 percent chocolate, which is much healthier than what he had been eating. “And I can get on a plane without feeling so much fear. Instead, I use the tool to place myself in a calmer state: I practice self-hypnosis before, during, and after my flights.”

What Key Elements Are Provided

While new technology for mental health cannot replace professional care, it may be a useful addition to our self-care routine, preventing certain circumstances from worsening and training us for long-term results. They act

as a partner in care by teaching each user to form better habits and thinking, including:

- Cognitive self-care: Changing thinking habits and patterns to help improve behavior
- Dialectical behavioral therapy: Teaching or training the individual to better cope and deal with complex emotions, impulses, and situations
- Self-hypnosis: Historically, this was the first psychotherapy, and it helps the individual do what they normally do, focus attention on a desired outcome or behavior
- Meditation: Clearing the mind of distractions through focus
- Regular relaxation: Teaching the individual deep breathing and other techniques to calm them

New technology can help people:

- Handle anxiety or lack of focus
- Manage mood changes
- Manage eating and other habits
- Improve sleep
- Quit smoking or alcohol
- Learn more about the type of therapy they are engaged in
- Find community support

Disclosure: David Spiegel is a co-creator of a self-hypnosis app.