

The problem: Psychotherapy is effective, but its effectiveness decreases over time

There are many nicknames for psychologists or psychiatrists. In Germany, they are sometimes called “seelenklempner” (soul plumbers). The term dates back to the time of Sigmund Freud, who suggested that certain mental disorders are caused by a “pinched affect” (similar to a pinched nerve) and could be corrected, once and for all, by tracing the origin of a psychological problem.

Today, we know that mental problems are complex and persistent. Psychotherapy is highly effective, even more effective than medication for some disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression. Yet, the effects of psychotherapy often diminish considerably over time if the individual does not continue to use the new strategies for dealing with problems and ultimately old patterns resurface. Unfortunately, many people are only willing to work on their psychological difficulties if they feel bad. When the problems subside, they have little motivation to continue working on the underlying problematic thought patterns. While this is understandable, it can lead to relapse.

[“New Smartphone App – “Toothbrush for the soul””](#) – learn more and donate on [betterplace.org](https://www.betterplace.org).

The approach: Daily exercises via smartphone apps for people with psychological problems

In order to achieve more sustainable therapy effects, we have developed and tested an app for people with depression in which users receive short exercises several times a day as “push notifications.” The effectiveness of these exercises is well established. The app is similar to a “toothbrush for the soul” because users work on their mental health for a short time every day, just as brushing your teeth every day helps to keep your teeth healthy. The exercises are fun and do not take up much time. The advantage over conventional treatment is that you don’t have to overcome any inner resistance or remember to do the exercises—the mobile phone takes care of that for you.

In a study of 90 people with self-reported depressive symptoms, we found that those who used the app daily showed significantly fewer depressive symptoms after 4 weeks compared to those in the wait-list control group. The majority of the study participants rated the app positively. For detailed results, download the study here:

 [Luedtke et al. 2018 PsyRes Smartphone App.pdf \(2.3 MiB\)](#)

We recently developed a variant of this app for individuals with problematic or pathological gambling. The app rewards users who do exercises with small medals that can be collected over the course of a week, keeping users motivated to use the app frequently.

[Top](#)