

App to understand and improve the mental health of young people

October 10 2018



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Teenagers' attachment to their smart phones is being harnessed to prevent anxiety and depression and improve wellbeing.

Researchers are developing an app to help [young people](#) to monitor, learn about and manage their emotions through self-help tools to

strengthen resilience and promote wellbeing.

The app – created by the European Commission Horizon 2020 funded ECOWEB project led by University of Exeter (www.ecowebproject.eu/) – will help users to learn about their emotions, and develop their "emotional intelligence" skills, in a way that is tailored to the individual.

For example, if the initial measures indicate that a person worries a lot, the app could provide him or her with self-help exercises and strategies to reduce worry.

If someone feels events are outside of their control, leading to despondency and depression, they will learn ways to judge that they have some control over the situation.

The ECOWEB app is currently in the development phase – with help from young people.

It will be made available to thousands of young people across Europe for free from summer 2019 as part of a scientific study to learn what emotional skills are particularly important for predicting wellbeing in young people over one year and to test if training those skills can improve wellbeing.

"As we mark World Mental Health Day (10 October), there is growing concern about increasing rates and earlier onset of poor mental health in young people," said Professor Ed Watkins, of the University of Exeter.

"These difficulties can severely affect the life chances of young people at a key formative period, damaging their education, employment, social development and future health.

"Traditional treatment approaches are not widely available enough to

address the global burden of anxiety and depression.

"In any case, because [poor mental health](#) can be recurring, it is better to prevent it than treat it once it has started."

We already have evidence that helping young people to manage their emotions better, for example, by worrying less, or by adopting more helpful mind-sets can reduce rates of depression and anxiety in high-risk groups by up to 50% over the next year.

The ECoWeB project is seeking to try out these approaches in a mobile app for the first time.

The app, combined with some web-based tasks, will help users to monitor their emotions, learn what can influence their [emotional](#) responses and develop new skills over time.

It will also help them understand not only their own emotions, but also other people's emotions from their tone of voice and facial expressions – an ability that has been shown to lead to better relationships.

"This study has the potential to be a breakthrough in mental health research," said Professor Watkins.

"Although it has long been argued that people might benefit more if help is tailored to their personal needs, ECOWEB is one of the first times this is being tested on a large scale.

"If our trials prove successful, it will validate a digital mental healthcare approach that can be delivered on a large scale and can reduce the burden on health services, educational systems and social services while providing incalculable benefits to young people at risk."

Provided by University of Exeter

Citation: App to understand and improve the mental health of young people (2018, October 10) retrieved 7 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-app-mental-health-young-people.html>

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