

Alternatives to therapy? There's an app for that

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Apparently, there is no problem too complex that an application cannot be created to solve it.

We have finally come to that place where the last bastion for neurotic, depressed, confused, hopelessly miserable human beings, seeking to find relief, nirvana, happiness, the meaning of life, money, marital bliss and emotional stability has been reduced to a [phone application](#).

Along the way, a cadre of techno-psychiatric-analyst-coaching charlatans has created venture-funded startups that effectively take Sigmund Freud and his couch from the warm, safe confines of a small, windowless office and replaced it with a panoply of pop psychology in the Apple Store, suitable for download at the slightest overcast from the dark clouds of life which might temporarily block out the sun.

In other words, welcome to Shrink On The Phone, with a dollop of artificial intelligence sprinkled over it, sort of like psychiatric pasta in a light garlic and oil sauce. Silicon Valley has finally done it—on-demand therapy, complete with metrics and return-on-equity analysis. The age of matching therapists with clients, using the tools of online dating has arrived. Swipe left you get a Freudian; swipe right and you get a new age guru.

Kip is a startup that says, "We took world-class providers, supercharged them with smart software tools and designed a seamless experience for both clients and providers." The Kip system breaks your therapy into data and quizzes in order to determine exactly how your happiness and anxiety levels are progressing. The app encourages clients "to record their moods in real time, with pop-up questions throughout the day designed by your therapist." The founder, Ti Zhao claims that this technique decreases "recency bias."

Another Valley startup, Reflect, calls its therapy offering "the gym for your soul." Still another, Two Chairs, is a startup that has raised \$21 million dollars. Alex Katz, the founder, claims, "We're out to build a new mental health system."

But wait, just like late-night television, there's more. Stoic, a mental health tracker app that provides "charts and insights." Y Combinator has funded Stoic, as well as another app company, Quirk, which uses behavioral therapy to treat people with anxiety (let me tell you, just writing about this insanity is giving me anxiety and depression). I don't want any adverse psychiatric indication to be left out in the cold, unloved, with no app to meet with me on a snowy night on a park bench. (I know there is no snow in Silicon Valley, but I like the image.)

Y Combinator also funded Mindset Health—which was founded by two brothers, Alex and Chris Naoumidis—whose previous skills in the area of the human mind resided in their ability to create a peer-to-peer dress-sharing app. "When that app failed, we were overcome with anxiety." Sure, that seems rational, you lost a ton of other people's money and now you are nervous that you will never work again, so you build an app to relieve your anxiety. The Valley is like The Twilight Zone.

But wait, there's still more. If a phone is too impersonal, there are life coaches. Allie Stark is a coach in the region and her mantra is, "There's a beauty in existentialism. It's also very paralyzing." I wonder if Ms. Stark would say that to a double amputee above the knee.

There actually is an Existential Humanistic Institute in San Francisco, and its leader, Dr. Kirk Schneider has been quoted as saying, "The goal is to move from a sense of abject terror and paralysis to a gradual sense of intrigue and eventual wonder." Better maybe to just delete the stock market app.

Now a final confession. I have been seeing the same psychoanalyst for 26 years. I wanted to become sane, and he was looking for some entrepreneurial business advice, so now, from time to time, we just switch chairs. I think he's made a lot of progress. And trust me, he won't know about this column—he doesn't read the paper. "The definition of

insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting a different result."—Albert Einstein

Rule No. 635: "Get a life," Dr. Ben Sobel, from the movie, "Analyze This."

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