Universität Basel

GeneGuide

PHOBYS – THE SCIENCE-BASED APP TO REDUCE FEAR OF SPIDERS

Problem – Challenge

Fear of spiders is widespread and can be very distressing. Although conventional exposure therapy has proven successful, sufferers rarely seek professional help because they are reluctant to expose themselves to real spiders. This calls for a new and innovative approach.

Solution

The smartphone-based app Phobys combines an evidence-based treatment approach with augmented reality technology.

A spider is virtually added to the real world through the smartphone camera. Following the principles of exposure therapy, the user is confronted with increasingly difficult situations involving spiders over 10 levels. After mastering all levels, a memory of safety has been built up and helps the user to deal with their fear when confronted with real spiders.

Scientific evidence

We tested the effectiveness of the Phobys app in a randomized controlled trial at the University of Basel, Switzerland. Participants in the group who used Phobys at home for two weeks showed a significant reduction in fear and disgust of spiders afterwards – both in a real-life spider situation and in questionnaires (Zimmer et al., J Anxiety Disord, 2021). Phobys is now available for people with subclinical fear of spiders via a low-cost downloadable app.

Large potential

We are convinced that digital technologies such as virtual and augmented reality have great potential to enhance treatments in psychiatry by offering convenient, low-threshold and low-cost options. We are therefore committed to continue investing in the development of science-based applications.