Can Video Games Help Treat Depression?

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Might video games and so-called brain-training apps help treat depression? It's possible if people use them regularly, according to findings published in the journal Computers in Human Behavior. The study showed that a group of college students who received these high-tech interventions felt more in control of their mental state, ScienceDaily reports.

For the study, researchers at the University of California, Davis reviewed survey results from 160 students who said they suffered from mild depression. As an incentive, the volunteers were offered class credit for participating. Three fourths of the participants (average age 21) were women, and more than half of them were of Asian heritage, followed by white, Latino and other ethnicities.

Scientists asked the students to play six specially designed three-minute video games modeled after neurophysiological training tasks shown to help improve cognitive control among people suffering from depression. (Some of the messages and games targeted depression caused by biological or hereditary factors; others focused on external factors, such as a job or relationship situation, as the trigger.)

Although the reminder messages employed slightly different approaches, all ended with the inspirational statement "Just like a regular workout, much of the benefit of these tasks comes from using them without taking breaks and putting in your best effort."

Findings showed that participants believed these games helped them feel more in control of their depression regardless of the source of their sadness. "Through the use of carefully designed persuasive message prompts…mental health video games can be perceived and used as a more viable and less attrition-ridden treatment option," wrote study authors Jorge Peña, PhD, an associate professor, and Subuhi Khan, a graduate student, both of the department of communications at UC Davis.

The scientists noted that their study supports other research showing brain-training games could potentially induce cognitive changes. But they stressed that these findings didn't examine whether playing these games actually reduced depression. That's something they're planning to examine in the future.

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