INTRODUCTION

Many studies point to the negative impacts on mental health of constantly being connected to smart devices. However, technological devices also provide the solution, paradoxically, to many mental health problems like depression and stress. Gadgets are increasingly becoming the key to accessible, cheap and easy ways to support and even to improve mental health.

OBSERVATIONS

- Among the negative impacts of technology, smart-device involvement predicts a higher likelihood of depression and stress-related diseases.
- On the other hand, the technological market that is supporting and improving mental health is now growing. ‘Transformative technologies’ are science-based hardware and software that can produce reliable and positive changes in the human psychological experience.
- The most popular meditation application for the smartphone, Headspace, has 8.5 million active users. It is accessible at Spotify and offered as a service at multiple airlines.
- Wearables can provide biofeedback so you can become aware of your state of mind and change it if necessary. This way you can ‘hack your consciousness’.
- In rich countries, the largest single cause of misery is mental illness. Mental health is more important for happiness than income.
- Stress is on the rise across countries. The annual cost of stress in the U.S. alone is estimated to be $300 billion in healthcare and lost productivity. Depression is the number two cause of disability.
- In the book ‘Positive Computing’ (2017) the authors mark the trend of technologists’ increased focus on the support of human well-being. This includes a focus on positive emotions, self-awareness, mindfulness, empathy, and compassion.

ANALYSIS

Technology offers not only ways to reduce its negative effects on our well-being, but also to enhance our well-being. Apps like Headspace are very attractive and low-key solutions. Headspace just takes a smartphone and ten minutes of your time to guide you into meditation. More advanced technology is developed to improve our mental state of being. Wearables, for example, measure brain activity and give real-time feedback, like the Muse headband.

What is behind this trend of technology that improves our mental well-being?

Mental health awareness is growing with the Millennial generation at a time in which – according to the WHO – depression is the leading cause of mental illness. Staying mentally healthy seems essential in a world where due to automation, mental work is increasingly important in comparison to physical work. Millennials are searching for accessible solutions, and what is more accessible to them than their smartphone?

Millenials have discovered that the digital world has made it easier to track, learn about and manage their health. Monitoring ourselves and responding to data to work on our mental performance comes close to Yuval Harari’s term ‘dataism’. He coins this term as our future worldview, seeing organisms as little more than biochemical algorithms whose consciousness is steered by technology. In secular, rich countries we lost God as one of the buffers against depression. A study found that religious patients respond better to treatment of mental-health issues such as depression or anxiety. Religion gives people a sense of purpose in life, and helps them cope with negativity. Also, meditation and meditative prayer help to reduce stress. In our modern society, dataism might be our new religion. Technology helps us meditate and data can help us to manage our mental state. Moreover, technology can make us mindful and help us reach an alternate state of consciousness. We are looking for ways to step out of our daily reality and into a higher state of being. Technology assists us in that.

In the near future, technology for well-being is likely to become more personalized and part of our daily lives. Voice assistants to make interaction more personal will become more common in technology. We already see that working on our mental health is no longer something we do in our free time. It is offered by our educators and employers to increase our performance.

POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES

- Technology that consolidates scientific findings of well-being into quick, accessible applications for our daily life.
- Scalable technology offering different solutions to mental health problems.