Can An App Curb Alcoholism?

By Tracy Chabala+ on March 17, 2015 News & Culture

These days, if an alcoholic wants to put the booze down, they’ve got lots of options. From 12-step groups to cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to SMART recovery, there’s plenty of resources—hey, there’s even Antabuse and Camparol. But if you really want something cutting edge, you could start with a game installed on your smartphone.

Retraining the Brain

Researchers at the University of Twente in the Netherlands have developed ControlTheBrain, a gaming app that they say can rewire neural circuitry to ward off alcoholism. The app is the brainchild of Marloes Postel, a lecturer in psychology, health and technology at the University of Twente, who observed that people with addictions need an easily accessible solution or support system. She is also a senior researcher at an organization that treats many types of addiction, from drugs and alcohol to gaming and gambling, where she’s witnessed firsthand the struggles people face when trying to break insidious addictive habits.

ControlTheBrain is the app version of a computer course that was designed to train the brain not to get tangled up in negative patterns of thought. While the concept can be applied to any addiction, the app is focused on helping alkies put the plug in the jug.

Alcoholics who play the game are shown photos of both boozy and non-boozy drinks. The players can either swipe the drinks away from themselves or pull them in closer, just as you zoom in and out on your smartphone to make an image or a webpage smaller or larger. There’s a catch: They can’t bring the alcoholic drinks closer but must push them away. In keeping with the intent of the game to crush their desire for liquor, players are only allowed to bring the non-alcoholic drinks closer into the frame. According to the researchers, by doing this repeatedly, the response and thought patterns in the brain change.
More Effective Than CBT

The app practices cognitive bias modification (CMB), an online therapy that weans the brain away from destructive thought patterns, also known as “biases.” A 2013 study by the Free University of Berlin showed that when CMB is used to treat addiction, the likelihood of relapse decreases by 10 percent. Postel explains that CMB is more effective at treating addiction than CBT because it targets the brain’s unconscious processes.

“Both conscious and unconscious processes play a role in keeping an addiction going, so paying attention to both will therefore have the greatest effect,” says Postel. “The app offers a simple alternative to those addicts for whom approaching a therapist is too big a step, as it helps them to overcome these biases themselves in an unconscious way.”

An AA Alternative?

Any kind of treatment for addiction requires the addict to be willing to use specific tools, be it a 12-step meeting, a dose of Chantix, a stint at detox or a guided meditation, to get through the day without taking a drink or a hit. The smartphone app is certainly accessible—and even more anonymous than AA—and could benefit alcoholics who are too shy or tentative to hit an AA meeting. But let’s be clear: relying on an app to save your life isn’t exactly the wisest way to go. If it was, I’d recommend that the creators up the cost to priceless.