

## An Automated Web-Based Self-Help Program to Prevent Depression

*Combining usual care with a guided program using cognitive-behavioral therapy reduced major depressive episodes by 52% in patients with chronic back pain.*

Consistent with the move toward remote interventions for mental disorders, researchers assessed whether a web-based cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) program could prevent major depressive episodes (MDEs) in patients with chronic back pain.

A total of 295 patients with persistent back pain (mean age, 53) from 82 orthopedic clinics in Germany were randomized to receive usual care alone (controls) or in combination with a guided, web-based, self-help program designed for patients with back pain (eSano BackCare-DP). Patients did not qualify for a formal depressive diagnosis at baseline. The CBT-based program was supplemented with online feedback from psychologists who followed the patients' progress through six required and three optional 43-minute modules. Outcomes were assessed by telephone using structured depression rating scales.

During 12 months of follow-up, patients in the intervention group compared with controls had significantly lower risk for MDE onset (14.1% vs. 28.1%; number needed to treat, 2.84) as well as improvements in quality of life and pain-related functioning, but not pain intensity. A slight reduction in prescriptions for analgesics was observed.

### COMMENT

The study showed that the intervention reduced the risk for an MDE in patients who had subclinical symptoms and were thus vulnerable to developing an MDE. However, the researchers did not specify whether subclinical symptoms decreased, stayed the same, or increased without reaching a threshold for an MDE in patients receiving the web-based therapy. Also, the extent to which individualized contact with psychologists was important is not known. However, this kind of approach can be easily implemented in nonpsychiatric practices for patients with chronic illnesses who are prone to depression.

— **Steven Dubovsky, MD**

Dr. Dubovsky is Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University at Buffalo, SUNY.

Sander LB et al. Effectiveness of a guided web-based self-help intervention to prevent depression in patients with persistent back pain: The PROD-BP randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Psychiatry* 2020 May 27; [e-pub]. (<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.1021>)