



Taboo subjects such as depression may benefit from the low threshold offered by virtual therapy. But, how do you set up an effective therapy? Saskia Kelders is studying just this.

## A VIRTUAL COACH FOR MENTAL HEALTH

discipline, there is extensive knowledge about which interventions work. It is not just known yet to what extent this also applies to an online context. In the pilot project, half of the people received automatic feedback and the other half received advice from a counsellor. This enables us to measure how people responded to the different reactions.

One of the results was that people expected fast feedback from an online application. This means that a healthcare worker in an online application cannot save up all the questions and answer them all once a week, because people will give up while waiting for an answer. The relatively large amount of text that is needed makes such a tool less suitable for people with little computer experience. However, people were able to open up about their problems faster than in a 'regular' session, which is a common phenomenon of the internet.

We are standing on the threshold of the development of virtual health coaches, according to Kelders.

Marketing has much more knowledge about how to convince people to do something online. The healthcare industry may learn a lot from marketing, but also from the gaming industry. Unfortunately, this is still too expensive to experiment with.

When I started out in the discipline of eHealth, it was largely wide open, says Kelders. Some things had been developed, but people hadn't studied if and how it worked. The first thing I helped to develop was an online tool for the Netherlands Nutrition Centre to help people in developing healthy diet and exercise habits. I learned a lot from it, although the application was not that effective in the end. It became clear to me that the extent to which it was used differed greatly. And I wanted to know if it was because of the people or because of the technology. In order to find out, Kelders set up her own pilot project, an application for people with depressive symptoms. Seeing that they had everything under control, she was better able to look at the success and failure factors of this form of eHealth, as digital tools in healthcare are also referred to.

First of all, I held many interviews with experts and people from the target group, says Kelders. In this

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