

Virtual Reality Can Help Treat Severe Paranoia

By combining evidence-based psychological treatment techniques with state-of-the-art virtual reality simulations, we were able to bring about a significant reduction in paranoid symptoms in patients, after a short 30 minute session.

About 1-2% of the population has severe paranoia, typically as a central feature of mental health disorders such as schizophrenia. Patients show extreme mistrust of other people, believing that others are deliberately trying to harm them. The condition can be so debilitating that sufferers may be unable to leave the house.

Coping mechanisms such as avoiding social situations, reducing eye contact or making any social interaction as short as possible worsen the situation, since they reinforce paranoid fears: patients come to believe that they avoided harm because they used these 'defence behaviours'.

By getting patients to drop these defence behaviours in a virtual reality simulation, Professor Daniel Freeman's team at Oxford University's Department of Psychiatry was able to get patients to 're-learn' that situations they feared were safe.

After the virtual reality therapy sessions, over 50% of these patients no longer had severe paranoia at the end of the testing day. The benefits also carried over into real-world situations, such as going to the local shop.

We are currently testing how long-lasting these benefits are, and how well they transfer to real-world situations.

These results demonstrate that our custom-build virtual reality system is an effective way of treating patients with otherwise difficult-to-treat conditions, such as paranoia.



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