

# Why virtual reality is the future of MENTAL HEALTH CARE

It may be best known in the world of entertainment, but VR is fast becoming a groundbreaking tool in the treatment of mental-health conditions from anxiety to phobia



WORDS: JAMIE HOOPER

**Y**ou're on the top floor of a building in New York, peering over the balcony at the cityscape below. You glance up towards the sky and for a second it feels like you're flying, but then your stomach drops, your heart starts to race and your mouth feels dry. The voice behind you notes how well you've done, then the skyscrapers dissolve, your headset comes off and you're back in your therapist's office.

It sounds like a scene from a sci-fi movie, but it's not — it's virtual-reality therapy, and it's making serious waves in the mental-healthcare industry. Used in everything from flight simulators to immersive cinema experiences, VR has come a long way since its invention in the 1920s. And while much-hyped VR headsets like Google's Daydream and Facebook's Oculus have

changed how people consume entertainment, a growing number of companies have started tapping into the tech's therapeutic potential.

## VR's rise in health

Although it can be tempting to think of the tech as just another passing fad, the research says otherwise. Over the past two years, studies published in prestigious journals such as *The Lancet* and the *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* have found that VR can be just as effective as traditional therapy for treating mental conditions like depression, anxiety and schizophrenia.

Dr Celin Gelgec, a psychologist at the Melbourne Wellbeing Group, has been using VR therapy for over a year and says she agrees with

the studies. "It's become a great tool for treating anxiety disorders, OCD and phobias," she says.

In the UK, the team at gameChange are working on a six-session VR mental-health course they hope to roll out across the National Health Service, and in Silicon Valley, three-year-old start-up Limbix now supplies VR-therapy systems to hospitals and psychology clinics.

Meanwhile, Psious, a Spain-based VR company, provides psychologists with more than 70 different environments for treating conditions such as anxiety, ADHD and specific phobias like fear of flying or heights.

Using a VR headset, Dr Gelgec is able to put her clients in situations they may find distressing (like taking a flight or standing on the top floor of a skyscraper) and then guide them through it. "Because I'm seeing exactly what my

client is experiencing, I can coach them differently, provide them with strategies and give them real-time feedback. VR isn't a replacement for therapy, but it's a very effective tool," she notes.

## How it works

This ability to provide real-time feedback is one of VR's strongest selling points.

"It really helps you feel confident enough to step outside your comfort zone," explains Dr Gelgec. "Taking the leap from practising techniques in the therapy office to applying them in real-life situations can sometimes feel too hard, but with VR, you can take on challenges that feel like real life while a psychologist is there to support you."

As well as providing you with a more immersive therapy experience, VR also allows psychologists to gain a deeper understanding of your condition, and this helps them treat you more effectively.

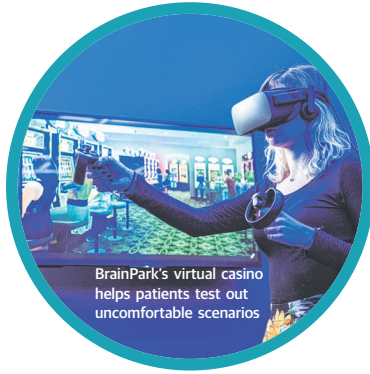
"With VR, your therapist is able to pick up on signals – behavioural, physiological and psychological – much more effectively than if they sent you home to practise techniques and didn't see you again until a month later," explains Professor Murat Yucel, director of the Turner Institute's BrainPark at Monash University.

At BrainPark, Prof Yucel and his team are currently working on VR-therapy programs for people with compulsive behaviours and addictions, and part of this work has been the creation of a virtual casino.

"In the VR environment you can choose any machine you want. There are people, sounds, adverts on posters and TV, you're moving so you can become more present or 'in the zone'," Prof Yucel explains. "By measuring the signals you give off, as well as the environment you're in, therapists are able to lock on to what you're responding to. So if you behave like you've won but you haven't, they can explain why your body is reacting that way. It's an educational tool."

## Bridging the gap

Thanks to the interactive nature of VR therapy, both Prof Yucel and Dr Gelgec are hopeful that it will make therapy more



accessible to a wider range of people in the community. "Although addiction and mental-health clinics are currently overwhelmed with the amount of people seeking help, there are still a lot of people who don't engage with current treatment services because of the stigma or costs associated with them, so we need to provide people with alternatives," Prof Yucel explains.

"Modern technology has allowed us to bring VR into the therapy room and make it more accessible," says Dr Gelgec.

"It's a tool to complement therapy where all you need is a mobile phone, laptop, the head set and an internet connection and you're good to go, and I think that with the popularity of VR gaming, the intrigue of VR therapy is only going to grow," she adds.

## A prevention tool?

While VR's ability to treat mental-health conditions has been the subject of multiple studies, it's also a possible prevention tool.

According to Dr Regine Zopf from Macquarie University, in the future, VR may be able to correct problematic thinking before it becomes an issue.

"VR allows researchers to measure and assess what influences your behaviour, so the idea is that once the experts know how something is being processed, they can use this information to treat you," she explains.

"For example, in the case of eating disorders, VR could be used to update your perception of your body by giving your brain different information."

Although this idea of pre-exposure is still in the early stages, some forms of it are already being used. In the military, soldiers are sometimes exposed to war scenarios to help them build up their resilience, and in the therapy office it can be used to help combat potential stressors.

"I've had clients tell me they have a trip coming up and don't like planes, so we do a session or two with VR before and they then report being able to handle it much better," says Dr Gelgec. "You may have a dislike for something or a fear, but by immersing yourself in the situation – albeit virtually – VR therapy helps you realise it's not as bad as you first thought."

## TRY IT YOURSELF

Many clinics around Australia now offer VR therapy. Ask your local psychologist if it's something you can try, or visit one of the clinics below:

**1 Melbourne Wellbeing Group, VIC**  
VR sessions at this clinic can be used to help with everything from OCD to ADHD and anxiety. [melbournewellbeinggroup.com.au](http://melbournewellbeinggroup.com.au)

**2 Sydney Phobia Clinic, NSW**  
The team at Sydney Phobia Clinic have developed VR programs to help overcome phobias such as fear of flying, blood and needles. [sydneyphobiaclinic.com.au](http://sydneyphobiaclinic.com.au)

**3 ThinkWise Clinical Psychology, SA**  
A mix of VR and CBT, sessions at ThinkWise can help expose you to your fears and help break negative thought patterns. [thinkwise.net.au](http://thinkwise.net.au)

**Remember:** If you're experiencing a mental-health crisis, don't wait for an appointment – call Lifeline on 13 1114.

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