



Virtual Reality App Reduces Common Phobias



Results from a trial published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry show a 75% reduction in phobia symptoms after six weeks of a treatment programme using a combination of Virtual Reality 360-degree video exposure therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy.

The phobia patients were studied using a headset and a smartphone app treatment programme. Study participants downloaded a smartphone app called oVRcome. The app was developed by Adam Hutchinson, a Christchurch tech entrepreneur. The app is designed to treat patients with phobia and anxiety. It allows users to pair a headset and immerse themselves in virtual environments to help treat their phobias, whether they fear flying, spiders, heights, needles or dogs. The app is easily accessible and cost-effective.

One hundred and twenty-nine people participated in the six-week trial and a 12-week follow-up. Participants were emailed weekly questionnaires to record their progress.

Findings show that participants experiencing all five types of phobia showed improvement on the Severity Measures for Specific Phobia scale. The average severity score decreased from 28/40 (classified as moderate to severe symptoms) to 7/40 (classified as minimal symptoms) after six weeks. No participants withdrew from the trial due to any adverse events.

The oVRcome app uses exposure therapy where participants are exposed to their specific phobia in short bursts. This helps them build a tolerance to that specific phobia. The app treatment programme includes psychoeducation, relaxation, mindfulness, cognitive techniques, exposure through VR, and a relapse prevention model. Participants could select their exposure levels from a library of VR videos and were able to level their exposure as per their needs, thus retaining control of the level of exposure that occurred.

The improvements reported in this trial highlight the potential of virtual reality and mobile phone apps to self-guide treatment and help people control their phobias.

Source: [University of Otago](#)

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