

Practicing assertiveness skills on virtual-reality 'dates' may help women prevent sexual victimization

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SMU psychologists Ernest Jouriles and Renee McDonald.

(PhysOrg.com) -- It's a stormy night when a young man offers a young college woman a ride home. First he makes friendly small-talk. But then he becomes sexually aggressive and angry. Can she get out of this situation without getting hurt?

While this could be a real experience for many [women](#), in this case it's virtual reality. The purpose is role-playing in a psychology laboratory at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Although realistic and scary, the role-playing is nevertheless a safe way

to teach assertiveness skills to young women so they can resist sexual victimization, according to new research.

A pilot project in which women practiced assertiveness skills reduced sexual victimization considerably, say researchers Ernest Jouriles, Renee McDonald and Lorelei Simpson, psychologists in SMU's Department of Psychology.

The researchers tracked participants in the assertiveness program over three months and found that women in a control group were sexually victimized at twice the rate of those who had practiced the skills.

New research in which women practice their newly learned skills on a virtual-reality "date" holds promise for making the program even stronger.

Jouriles, McDonald and Simpson will present the research in November at the annual conference of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies.

Between 25 percent and 50 percent of American women will experience sexual coercion or sexual assault during their lifetime, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Those in their teens and early 20s are at particularly high risk, research shows.

The toll on victims ranges from depression and anxiety to drug abuse, [psychiatric symptoms](#) and chronic medical conditions.

"Sexual assault prevention programs for young women are widely available," says Jouriles, professor and chairman of the SMU Department of Psychology. "However, only a few have been scientifically evaluated. Although some of these programs have been shown to change young women's knowledge and attitudes about sexual assault, they have not generally been shown to prevent actual assaults."

Jouriles and McDonald designed the virtual reality program in collaboration with students and faculty at The Guildhall, SMU's graduate-level video-game design program. They worked with Simpson to develop the assertiveness training program and are currently using the virtual-reality technology to enhance women's practice experiences when they learn assertiveness skills.

To participate, a young woman wears a head-mounted display and earphones that allow her to navigate a make-believe sexually risky environment. It immerses her in a setting that feels genuinely threatening. She faces off against an avatar controlled by a live male actor, who delivers the dialogue and controls the speech and actions of the virtual date.

The department's 10-foot-by-12-foot laboratory room is furnished with two adjoining bucket seats and a couch to replicate either the front seat of a car or a party setting.

Similar to a multi-player, interactive video game, the sophisticated head-mounted display streams computer-generated, 3D images. The perspective is first-person, which tracks and changes with the wearer's head position. Earphones surround the wearer with the sounds of pounding rain and music from the car radio.

The woman experiences the make-believe environment from a seat next to the avatar. In a 10- to 12-minute role-play, the actor challenges the young woman's assertiveness by gradually escalating the conversation from small-talk and flirtation to verbal sexual coercion and anger. The avatar's lips move in sync with the actor's speech, and his facial expressions and movements, such as changing the radio station and drinking beer, make the virtual interaction more natural.

Research by Jouriles and McDonald published in 2009 found that young women who practiced navigating the virtual reality environment had a stronger negative reaction to the sexual threat than did participants in

conventional role-playing without [virtual reality](#) technology.

Although the study didn't evaluate the reason for that difference, Jouriles and McDonald hypothesized that the virtual environment makes it easier for participants to become immersed in role-play. It's possible that women in a conventional role-playing environment feel more self-conscious or that the situation is more artificial than women interacting with an avatar, which results in more guarded responses, they said.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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