

Can virtual reality help treat anxiety in older people?

February 18 2015, by Geneviève Desrosiers



Up to 25% of people aged 65 and over experience varying degrees of anxiety. Although cognitive behavioural therapy is a preferred treatment approach, it has limitations as people age (decreased mobility and visualization skills). Could virtual reality be an effective therapy for anxiety in older people? This novel therapeutic avenue for this clientele seems promising, according to a literature review conducted by the team of Sébastien Grenier, PhD, a researcher at the Institut universitaire de gériatrie de Montréal (IUGM) and a research professor at Université de Montréal.

One technique of [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) consists of getting people to confront their anxiety by exposing them to mental images, objects or

situations that trigger their fear, and continuing the process until this reaction decreases. People may physically travel to a location or just imagine the stressful situation (such as flying or getting sick).

Dr. Grenier explained the benefit of the virtual [approach](#) for older adults: "As people age, their ability to create mental images and their abstraction skills get weaker. For seniors, imagining intangible or abstract situations therefore becomes more and more difficult. Virtual reality exposes people to the source of their anxiety without having to physically go somewhere else or imagine their fear. This could be an additional treatment tool for therapists," he suggested. This novel approach holds particular promise because it is non-pharmacological and free of significant side effects.

Currently, Dr. Grenier is conducting a pilot study to test the feasibility of this approach. However, a number of trials must be conducted before it can be applied in a clinical setting. Will older people be comfortable with this technology? Will they believe in the simulation? Will they be more susceptible to cybersickness?

More information: "Using virtual reality to improve the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in the treatment of late-life anxiety: preliminary recommendations for future research." *International Psychogeriatrics*, International Psychogeriatric Association 2014, [DOI: 10.1017/S1041610214002300](#)

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