

Virtual reality may encourage empathic behavior

October 17 2018



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Virtual Reality could be a useful tool to encourage empathy, helpful behavior, and positive attitudes towards marginalized groups, according

to a study published October 17, 2018 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Fernanda Herrera from Stanford University, USA, and colleagues.

Empathy—the ability to share and understand others' emotions—has been shown to foster altruistic or helpful behavior. Traditionally, researchers have induced [empathy](#) with perspective-taking tasks: asking study [participants](#) to imagine what it would be like to be someone else under specific circumstances. The authors of this study investigated whether Virtual Reality systems (VR) could aid such perspective-taking. In their experiments, involving over 500 participants, a control group of participants only read information about homelessness, while other groups completed a perspective-taking task by reading a narrative about homelessness, by experiencing the narrative interactively in 2-D on a computer, or by experiencing the narrative using VR.

The authors found that participants in any perspective-taking task self-reported as feeling more empathetic than those who just read information. When asked to sign a petition to support homeless populations, VR participants were also more likely to sign than narrative-reading or computer-based task participants. Participants in the information-reading task also signed the petition as frequently as the VR participants indicating that fact driven interventions can also be successful in promotion of prosocial behaviors. Follow-up surveys also indicated longer-lasting positive effects on empathy, of up to eight weeks, for participants in the VR task than for those in the narrative-reading task.

The authors note that participants who had never used VR before may have been confused or distracted by novelty, affecting results. Also, participant attitudes towards the homeless were not measured prior to the study, and participants may have already had set views on homelessness. Nonetheless, this research suggests that VR could be a useful tool to

promote empathy and helpful behaviors.

Herrera adds: "The main takeaway from this research is that taking the perspective of others in [virtual reality](#) (VR), in this case the perspective of a homeless person, produces more empathy and [prosocial behaviors](#) immediately after the VR experience and better attitudes toward the homeless over the course of two months when compared to a traditional perspective-taking task."

More information: Herrera F, Bailenson J, Weisz E, Ogle E, Zaki J (2018) Building long-term empathy: A large-scale comparison of traditional and virtual reality perspective-taking. PLoS ONE 13(10): e0204494. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0204494

Provided by Public Library of Science

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