

The potential of lucid dreaming and virtual reality to treat combat-related PTSD

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Credit: Shahzin Shajid, Unsplash.

In recent years, experts in the field of transcultural psychiatry have been trying to identify alternative approaches for treating mental health disorders that could enhance traditional Western psychotherapeutic

practices. One of these alternative techniques is lucid dreaming, which entails teaching individuals to become aware that they are dreaming and potentially gain control over a dream's narrative.

Some science fiction movies, such as "Avatar" and "Inception," introduced imaginative examples of how [lucid dreaming](#) or entering virtual realities could help to treat a particular segment of the population: soldiers affected by post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The high-tech and imaginary realities portrayed in these movies inspired independent researcher Susan Smith to write a paper focusing on the potential use of lucid dreaming for treating post-combat PTSD, which was [published in SAGE's *Transcultural Psychiatry* journal.](#)

"My initial academic interest started with looking at disability and the wounded war hero in science fiction, which then led my research to the medical humanities and psychiatry," Smith told MedicalXpress. "In my recent study, I take on a critical medical humanities approach with the main objective of raising awareness about the healing potential of transcultural psychiatry for treating PTSD, while critiquing the inherent bias of war underpinned by military-funded medicine in Western society."

Smith's recent study stems out of her past work focusing on disability, rehabilitation and military medicine, as well as on their relatable representation in science fiction stories. In her considerations, she combines theoretical constructs and ideas rooted in different disciplines, including psychology, psychiatry and media studies.

"Popular science fiction movies 'Avatar' and 'Inception' provide a cultural register for imagining how alternate treatments like lucid dreaming or virtual worlds have the potential to empower soldiers to manage and cope with long-term combat related mental health conditions," Smith explained.

Over the past decade or so, a number of media articles claimed that the United States military is experimenting with technologies and techniques depicted in popular science fiction movies, including "Avatar" and "Inception," assessing their potential in helping war veterans affected by PTSD to better cope with disturbing nightmares "Inception," a renowned sci-fi movie directed by Christopher Nolan and released in 2010, portrays a reality in which experts can alter people's thoughts by entering their dreams using technology that vaguely resembles virtual reality (VR). Similarly, in "Avatar," a movie directed by James Cameron and released in 2009, the consciousness of a disabled soldier is transferred into a genetically engineered body, which acts as his avatar during a war.

In her study, Smith discusses the potential of using similar techniques to assist war veterans affected by PTSD, teaching them to manipulate their unconscious and conscious mind. While her work is primarily based on theories and speculation, it highlights some of the possible benefits that these techniques could have in psychotherapeutic settings. Her considerations could pave the way for further transcultural psychiatry studies aimed at devising innovative therapeutic approaches that integrate the use of lucid dreaming, VR or other techniques resembling to those depicted in [science fiction movies](#).

"My paper suggests that a critical engagement with rehabilitation medicine and military psychology and [psychiatry](#) is essential for confronting western society's culture of war, which continues to present the American soldier as salvageable and invincible," Smith said. "In my future work, I plan to investigate this topic further by analyzing recent media reports on the robot psychiatrist/virtual therapist currently trialed in military medicine for assessing the mental health and wellbeing of soldiers returning from active duty to civilian life.

More information: Susan Smith. Rehabilitating the mind: Avatar (2009), Inception (2010) and the science fiction imagining of lucid

dreaming in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder in the U.S. military, *Transcultural Psychiatry* (2020). DOI: [10.1177/1363461520901638](https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461520901638)

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