Medical Xpress

Personalised VR technology could improve and maintain positive mental health and well-being

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Personalised virtual reality (VR) technology that enables new forms of self-reflection could improve and maintain positive mental health.

So a collaborative team of researchers, led by experts from the University of Sheffield, are pioneering a highly personalized, therapeutic VR tool which people with common mental health problems can use to create an immersive version of their journey through life.

The tool allows people to capture life events, upload relevant digital content and reflect on their thoughts and feelings in great detail.

As well as helping with better mental health, this approach could also be beneficial for people in the early stages of dementia, those receiving end-of-life care and those with addiction problems or long-term physical conditions.

Around one in four UK adults has a mental health condition, with depression and anxiety being the most common. There is a widely-recognized urgent need to find approaches to treatment which are cost effective and attractive, particularly for those who do not benefit from existing services.

Dr. Chris Blackmore, from the Mental Health Research Unit at the University of Sheffield's School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR), said: "With more people seeking help with mental health problems, and increasing pressure on existing services, new ways of intervening faster and more effectively to help people are needed, and the use of new technology is one way of improving care; making it more personalized and engaging.

"Previous research has shown that recovery from an experience such as depression is a complex, personal journey and a proactive personalized approach to understanding people's individual needs would be a valuable component of treatment.

"This narrative approach to treatment of common mental health

problems is favored by users of mental health services, but that level of choice is often unavailable. We wanted to develop a tool which puts people's own personal experience at the center of things, and helps them to tell their life-stories in a new way."

He added: "As stated in the NHS five-year forward review, medicine is moving from one-size-fits-all to personalized care, offering higher recovery rates and fewer side effects. This is exactly what LifePathVR is designed to offer."

The Sheffield based team includes experts in mental health and computer science from the University of Sheffield, working in collaboration with designers HumanVR and local mental health charity Sheffield Flourish.

Sheffield Flourish collaborate on innovative digital and community projects, recognizing the untapped strengths of people who've experienced mental health problems.

Josie Soutar, Managing Director at Sheffield Flourish, said: "Sheffield Flourish is a charity that embraces engagement with digital innovations and tools, seeing them as an opportunity to find new ways to help people living with mental health difficulties to live the life they want to lead.

"We were therefore especially interested in being involved in the LifePathVR project, as it has the potential to transform the way people are able to view, engage with and tell their personal story through a virtual journey."

A proof of concept film demonstrating the vision for LifePathVR has been made possible by funding from the Medical Research Council's Proximity to Discovery: Industry Engagement Fund, and a recent award from the Research Design Service Yorkshire and Humber Public

Involvement Fund (a branch of the National Institute for Health Research) is enabling Dr. Blackmore to run patient participation workshops later this year.

At these events, the team will be inviting people with lived experience of mental health conditions to shape what LifePathVR will look like, ready for the development of a full-scale prototype.

Dr. Blackmore said: "In our project, we are co-designing this VR tool with people with lived experience of mental health problems, so that we can understand more about its potential for enhancing mental health, and to ensure that the functionality and design of the tool is based on first-hand evidence of what potential end users would like to see.

"The workshops will be held this October with Sheffield Flourish members and University of Sheffield student groups. Given the level of concern about students and young people's mental health, and their high rates of use of digital technologies, we are also including this group of people in our pilot work."

Provided by University of Sheffield

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