

Oxford VR initialise ground-breaking automated immersive therapy for the first time in the UK to help NHS patients overcome their phobia

- Oxford VR is the first digital therapeutics provider to offer automated VR-enabled immersive therapy for NHS patients with clinical acrophobia (extreme fear of heights)
- Treatment takes an average of just 2 hours, compared to 6-8 hours required for traditional face to face/telephone cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).
- This major service innovation will initially be available to patients in Berkshire, Bristol, Buckinghamshire, Cambridge & Peterborough and Oxford through the NHS IAPT service (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) ahead of an intended phased release planned to other IAPT services later in the year.

In what is a first for mental healthcare in the UK, NHS patients suffering from the potentially-incapacitating symptoms of clinical acrophobia, estimated to affect 3-5% of the population, will now have access to the latest leading-edge and clinically-validated automated immersive therapy treatment programme developed by Oxford VR to overcome their phobia.

Oxford VR's stand-alone immersive therapy uses protocolised, evidence-based VR-enabled cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Development of the treatment was led by Daniel Freeman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Oxford University and Oxford VR Chief Clinical Officer. The approach draws on more than two decades of Freeman's pioneering research in mental health. Averaging at just two hours of treatment time, Oxford VR's immersive modality has been proven to be successful in reducing patients fears by an average of nearly 70%, demonstrating its huge potential to address a variety of mental health problems. These landmark clinical study results were published by [The Lancet Psychiatry](#) in 2018¹.

One of the most prevalent of phobias, clinical acrophobia can be a debilitating anxiety disorder that makes it challenging for patients to lead a normal life, preventing them from doing everyday activities such as taking an elevator in a shopping centre or simply looking out the window from a building. Individuals often experience extreme stress, anxiety and avoidance, impacting greatly on their personal and professional lives. Untreated, clinical acrophobia can become chronic and increase the risk of developing other mental disorders, particularly amongst women².

Speaking about Oxford VR's announcement, Barnaby Perks, CEO of Oxford VR said:

"Ambitious action is needed to tackle the mental health care provision gap. This development is an important milestone in transforming the lives of patients with mental health conditions by putting powerful automated virtual reality therapy into NHS mental health services for the first time. Our vision is to turn the tide on life-interrupting mental illnesses pushing the boundaries of clinical research excellence and technology to transform outcomes. Our future pipeline of evidence-based, disorder-focused treatments will help to drive a major-breakthrough in mental health by giving as many people as possible access to the treatment they need."

Oxford VR's use of pioneering immersive technology for mental health is enabling better patient engagement by creating a superior therapy experience. Using powerful evidence-based VR-enabled immersive therapy, patients gradually and systematically experience simulations of the everyday situations that they find difficult, enabling them to overcome their fears and negative thoughts without the perceived dangers or cost of creating "in vivo" treatment. Oxford VR's environments and activities are so compelling and immersive that patients experience the same emotional and physical response that they would in similar real-life situations. Furthermore, in a field of therapy where patient drop-out is high, both the data and patient testimonies show that users find this new modality easy to engage with and even fun to use.

If deployed fully at scale in the NHS, Oxford VR anticipates significant cost savings and better allocation of resources can be achieved as the treatment programme is automated and does not require the presence of a trained therapist to supervise the treatment. In the first VR application of its kind, an avatar clinical 'coach' guides the patient through the treatment programme, according to the prescribed protocol which means that skilled clinicians who are in short supply can be redeployed to front line care leaving mental health support workers empowered to support the delivery of effective treatments using immersive therapy.

Service provider Vicki Palmer CEO & Clinical Director at Oasis-Talk says:

"Oasis-Talk was delighted to be invited to be the first NHS Provider of VR therapy. Our staff have enjoyed delivering the protocol for height phobia. Service users and staff have been impressed by how effective and quick the treatment has been. So far, 100% of service users have succeeded in fully overcoming their fear of heights; even in very severe cases."

¹ Prof D Freeman, P Haselton, J Freeman, B Spanlang, S Kishore, E Albery, Automated psychological therapy using immersive virtual reality for treatment of fear of heights. *The Lancet Psychiatry*.

² Trumpf J, Margraf J, Vriends N, Meyer AH, Becker ES. Specific phobia predicts psychopathology in young women. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatry Epidemiol*.

Editors Notes

About Acrophobia

- Fear of heights or Acrophobia is a debilitating anxiety disorder that affects 3-5% of the population.
- The word is derived from the Greek word “acron” meaning heights and “phobos” meaning fear.
- Acrophobia is not the same as ‘Vertigo’- this is a common misconception. Vertigo is temporary or ongoing spells of dizziness caused by problems in the inner ear or brain.
- Acrophobia not only affects everyday tasks but professional and recreational activities. For example: driving on a bridge may trigger panic attacks, individuals might find it difficult to attend meetings on higher floors of a building or may experience dizziness on an escalator, railings, and on staircases.
- If left untreated, acrophobia can become chronic and increases the risk of developing other mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

About Oxford VR

- Oxford VR is pioneering the adoption of clinically-validated automated immersive technology applications in mental healthcare transforming patient lives and the mental health experience.
- Founded in 2017, Oxford VR (OVR) develops and delivers clinically-validated digital therapeutics pushing the boundaries to deliver innovative new treatments for mental health conditions.
- Oxford VR's evidence-based, protocolised treatment scenarios trigger the same psychological and physiological responses as in real-life, yet patients know they are safe and secure in a virtual world.
- A spin-out from Oxford University, Oxford VR is built on the ground-breaking work of co-founder and Chief Clinical Officer Daniel Freeman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Oxford University and Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust.
- Led by digital health industry veteran Barnaby Perks, former CEO and founder of Ieso Digital Health, and a world-class team of renowned clinicians, scientist, business strategists and designers with deep expertise in clinical excellence, immersive technology, commercialisation and scale-up.
- To visit Oxford VR website please go to <https://oxfordvr.org/> or Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/314219433>

About OVR Lancet Study, published July 2018

- This ground-breaking study was led by Daniel Freeman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Oxford University and tested the efficacy of an automated cognitive intervention for fear of heights guided by an avatar virtual coach (animated using motion and voice capture of an actor) in VR and delivered with the latest consumer equipment.
- The findings concluded that psychological therapy delivered automatically by a VR coach can produce large clinical benefits. Evidence-based VR treatments have the potential to greatly increase treatment provision for mental health disorders.

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