

Psychological Health

Treatments and Interventions

Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy to Battle PTSD

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Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) is one of the most effective treatments for PTSD. However, PE requires the patient to revisit their traumatic memory in an emotionally engaging way. Soldiers face unique barriers to care compared to civilian populations. Following combat deployments, many Soldiers suffering from PTSD are emotionally detached and avoid the painful memories associated with the traumatic event, which can limit their ability to engage in the PE treatment process. In addition, some Soldiers report concerns about stigma associated with seeking help through traditional “talk therapies.” Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy (VRET) holds the potential to provide effective therapy for PTSD and to improve access to care for Soldiers who might otherwise avoid treatment due to stigma. VR works by immersing a participant in a realistic computer-generated world that simulates the sources of combat stress. By revisiting the traumatic event in a sensory-rich environment, the investigators hypothesize that participants may experience heightened physiological arousal, and clinical outcomes may be significantly improved compared to those from traditional PE. Dr. Gregory Gahm and Dr. Greg Reger are conducting a randomized clinical trial comparing VRET to traditional PE in the treatment of combat-related PTSD in OIF/OEF Soldiers. Returning Soldiers diagnosed with PTSD will be randomized to receive 10 sessions of either VRET or PE or a

waitlist control group (that will wait several weeks to be placed in a treatment group). The study will compare the efficacy of the two treatments and will also compare psychophysiological arousal during VRET and PE treatment sessions. These data will help demonstrate whether the multi-sensory nature of VRET increases arousal and whether increased arousal contributes to better treatment outcomes. Perceptions of stigma, patient satisfaction, and treatment adherence will be evaluated for the two treatments. The investigators hope that Soldiers will find the gaming aspect of VRET appealing and lessen the stigma associated with seeking help. The study is in collaboration with the Department of Psychology at Madigan Army Medical Center and is currently recruiting Soldiers from that facility. In addition, the investigators are planning to extend the study to Soldiers at Womack Army Medical Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

