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Helping Combat Veterans with a Virtual World

Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.—Combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder can now enter a virtual world and use a Department of Defense virtual space to learn about PTSD causes, symptoms and resources for information and care.

The virtual space, created by the National Center for Telehealth and Technology (T2), takes visitors through interactive and immersive areas of the T2 Virtual PTSD Experience on the Web. Visitors use an avatar, a graphic image that represents a person, to enter virtual reality areas, experience simulations of combat events that are common causes of PTSD and talk with other visitors. They can take a plane to “return” from the combat experience and visit areas, such as a shopping mall, to help them adjust to life at home by learning about the symptoms of PTSD.

All of the areas display information to help the visitor understand the effects of the deployment experience and show them resources for care.

“We believe this is the first time DoD has used interactive simulations with the Web to help our military community with PTSD in the privacy of their homes,” said Dr. George Peach Taylor, Jr., the principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for Health Affairs.

Visitors are anonymous, which reduces the perceived stigma of asking for help with PTSD. Research indicates that almost 50 percent of service members who have psychological health issues after deployment do not use available care or services.

“We created an environment that lets people learn by doing, rather than reading text and watching videos on two-dimensional web sites,” said Dr. Kevin Holloway, the psychologist who led T2’s virtual world development. “They can learn something new each time they visit.”

T2 also designed the virtual world experience to help family members and friends of veterans better understand how PTSD affects combat veterans.

The virtual PTSD experience is built in the Second Life® virtual world platform. Detailed information for entering T2’s Virtual PTSD Experience is at www.t2health.org/vwproj/. Second Life may not be accessible from computers on a military network. The Virtual PTSD Experience was designed to be used in the privacy of homes.

The National Center for Telehealth and Technology, located at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA, serves as the primary Department of Defense office for cutting-edge approaches in using technology with psychology. It is a component center of the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.

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