

## Virtual reality helps people overcome phobia of heights

### Level 1 • Pre-intermediate / Intermediate

#### 1 Warmer

- Which four phobias do you think are the most common?
- Scan the article to check the answers given in a 2014 survey.

#### 2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then, find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers will help you.

therapist

encouraging

virtual reality

phobia

research

1. someone whose job is to help people with physical, mental or emotional problems  
\_\_\_\_\_ (para 1)
2. the detailed study of something to discover new facts \_\_\_\_\_ (para 1)
3. images and sounds that are produced by a computer to make you feel as if you are in real 3D space  
\_\_\_\_\_ (para 1)
4. a very strong feeling of disliking or being afraid of something \_\_\_\_\_ (para 3)
5. giving you hope \_\_\_\_\_ (para 4)

effective

avatar

face to face

assessment

treated

6. used medicine or medical methods to cure a patient or an illness \_\_\_\_\_ (para 5)
7. a figure representing a particular person in a video game, internet forum, etc  
\_\_\_\_\_ (para 7)
8. the process of deciding what level someone is at or how much progress they are making  
\_\_\_\_\_ (para 7)
9. in a situation where you are meeting and talking to another person directly \_\_\_\_\_  
(para 10)
10. when something works well and provides good results \_\_\_\_\_ (para 13)

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#### Automated virtual reality therapy helps people overcome phobia of heights

Nicola Davis

11 July, 2018

- 1 People could end their fear of heights with the help of a virtual therapist, new research suggests. Experts hope that virtual reality (VR) could also help other mental health problems.
- 2 According to a 2014 survey, a fear of heights is more common in the UK than a fear of spiders, snakes or flying. 23% of British adults said they are "very afraid" of heights and 35% are a little afraid.
- 3 "It is the most common type of phobia and one we know a lot of people do not get help for," said Daniel Freeman, professor at the University of Oxford. Freeman also started the company Oxford VR, which was involved in the research.
- 4 He said that it is very encouraging to see how much the therapy helped people.
- 5 Freeman says a fear of heights has already been treated with VR. But in the past, VR was only used to help during therapy with a trained therapist. The new system means a therapist does not even need to be there.
- 6 Freeman and colleagues report how they put 100 adults who had a phobia of heights into two groups: 49 were asked to use VR for half an hour, two or three times a week for two weeks. The other group continued as usual with no treatment.
- 7 At the beginning of the therapy, an avatar did an assessment. Then, each person was asked to choose a floor of a virtual building and to do things, such as rescuing a cat from a tree, and to explore the thoughts behind their fears.
- 8 The people's fear of heights was assessed through questionnaires at the start of the study, at the end of the two-week therapy and again another two weeks later.
- 9 The results show that everyone in the VR group had a big improvement in their phobia. They said that their fear of heights fell by 68% on average.
- 10 "The results are better than if you saw a therapist face to face," Freeman said. The team also said the benefits were still seen two weeks after the VR therapy.
- 11 Freeman said that some people might prefer to see a therapist but the results show that people benefited from the VR therapy. He added that some people do not get treatment for mental health problems because they do not want to talk to a therapist.
- 12 But the study had weak points. For example, the 68% average reduction in a fear of heights was based on a self-reported questionnaire and it was not clear which parts of the virtual therapy were helpful. The study also did not look at whether effects continued over the longer term.
- 13 Dr Warren Mansell from the University of Manchester, who was not involved in the study, said he was not surprised the VR therapy was effective but he said it was not yet clear whether it was "better" than face-to-face therapy with a therapist.
- 14 But, Mansell added, VR is useful because people can carefully control the situations they experience in their therapy. This can be difficult in the real world but, he says, is an important part of therapy.
- 15 Mansell was also optimistic that this technology could be useful for other problems that involve fear. "We need new solutions to help people with more unusual problems," he said.

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#### 3 Comprehension check

Are these sentences true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Some people do not get treatment for their phobias because they don't want to talk to a therapist.
2. The study wanted to see whether people's fears could be treated by VR.
3. Forty-nine people took part in the Oxford VR study.
4. The VR group were asked to do tasks that would make them afraid in real life.
5. An avatar assessed people's fear of heights before they started the study.
6. Everyone said that their fear of heights reduced a lot after the study.
7. Results are better when people speak to a therapist.
8. In the future, VR therapy could be used to treat other mental health problems.

#### 4 Facts and figures

Find these numbers and state what they are used to talk about in the article.

1. twenty-three per cent
2. thirty-five per cent
3. forty-nine
4. sixty-eight per cent
5. one hundred

#### 5 Discussion

Do you know anyone who has a fear of heights? How does it affect their life?

He/She  
can't ...

He/She  
panics when ...

He/She would  
like to ... but ...

Would you try VR therapy to help you with a phobia? Why? Why not?

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#### KEY

#### 1 Warmer

heights, spiders, snakes, flying

**Teacher's tip:** If possible, read out the question or copy it onto the board for students to discuss before handing out the worksheets so that they aren't influenced by the title. Tell students they may either write the words if they know them or draw simple pictures of the things they think most people are scared of.

#### 2 Key words

1. therapist
2. research
3. virtual reality
4. phobia
5. encouraging
6. treated
7. avatar
8. assessment
9. face to face
10. effective

#### 3 Comprehension check

1. T
2. T
3. F – 100 people took part in the study.
4. T
5. T
6. F – The VR group said that their fear of heights reduced a lot after the study.
7. F – Results are not as good when people speak to a therapist.
8. T

#### 4 Facts and figures

1. the percentage of British adults who are very afraid of heights
2. the percentage of British adults who are a little afraid of heights
3. the number of people who were asked to use VR to help end their fear of heights
4. the percentage reduction in the fear of heights in the adults in the study who had VR therapy
5. the number of adults that took part in the study