

Virtual Reality Offers New Hope for Those Plagued by the Fear of Public Speaking

Perhaps Jerry Seinfeld said it best: People fear public speaking more than they fear dying, so if you think about it, people would rather be in the box than give the eulogy. In a recent Gallup poll, public speaking ranked second – behind snakes – as Americans’ greatest fear.

Anxiety disorders of various kinds make life difficult, if not unbearable, for many people. These disorders cost U.S. businesses about \$23 billion in direct costs and an estimated \$29 billion in indirect costs for lost productivity. But one firm is offering new hope to those who suffer from presentation anxiety.

The firm, Virtually Better, creates effective, virtual reality tools for the treatment of anxiety disorders. It uses environments that combine advances in virtual reality technology with advances in clinical application of exposure therapy. Exposure therapy is an efficient way of helping people confront feared situations in a systematic, therapeutic manner – decreasing the fear over time. Virtual environments offer therapists more control over stimuli, an ability to repeat situations as often as necessary, protection of patient confidentiality, and the ability to conduct exposure sessions in the office. This improves efficiency – allowing more clients to be assisted.

Presently, the firm offers Virtual Airplanes, Virtual Heights, Virtual Audiences, Virtual Storm and Virtual Vietnam to help people with fear of flying, fear of heights, fear of public speaking, fear of thunderstorms and post traumatic stress disorders, respectively.

Ken Graap, president and CEO of Virtually Better, spoke to *Advisor* about his firm’s innovative approach to treating anxiety disorders.

Q. We hear a lot about fear of public speaking. Just how serious an issue is it?

A. It’s a very serious problem. According to research, 54 million people in the United States would benefit from some form of intervention to help them with public speaking. For many people, going out to speak in public is really overwhelming – so overwhelming they just avoid it. An upcoming presentation can be on their minds days ahead of time – maybe even longer. In the meantime, they’re inefficient at work because all they are focusing on is that presentation – trying to figure a way out of it, a way around it, or how to do it better. It’s taking up their whole life. In addition, many people don’t want to acknowledge or admit that they are uncomfortable speaking in front of groups. They think it will reflect poorly on them, so they’re not likely to tell their boss or to seek help. It takes a really a very progressive company to recognize that this problem exists, that it’s pervasive, and then brings in experts to help their employees become better and more comfortable speakers.

Q. Help us to understand what's behind this particular fear.

A. It's a social phobia, and it has all the hallmark symptoms of any phobia: irrational fear, avoidance and interference with life. For some people, the fear relates to embarrassing themselves in front of others – friends, colleagues. Another issue is the fear of being evaluated – and evaluated negatively.

Q. If the fear is irrational, why not just help the person recognize that irrationality and then move on from there?

A. Though it is one element, it's not that easy. It's important to recognize that this is not just a cognitive issue. It's not something a person can reason through, such as emotion. You can't just say, "OK, I know if I just do these three things, it will be all better." Put it in the context of someone who's afraid of dogs. Sure, the longer that person spends time with dogs, the easier being around dogs becomes. The problem is that if you told a dog phobic to go get a dog, that person is not likely going to do it. One of the hallmark symptoms is avoidance.

The same is true for public speaking. If you tell people that all they have to do is get up and speak, they typically won't do it. Something will come up – they'll become ill, they won't attend, they'll find some reason not to do the things you're asking them to do. That's avoidance. That's why telling phobic persons to attend programs such as Toastmasters rarely works. They may express a desire to conquer their fear. They may say, "I really need to do this; I know I have to do it." But it's not likely they will follow through. The emotion of the situation overrules the cognitive aspects that they "know" they should do. This is also what happens in the actual speaking situation, making it difficult to "think" one's way out of the problem.

Q. Explain how you use virtual reality therapy to help people overcome their fear of public speaking.

A. Most people who fear public speaking become anxious before they begin to deliver their presentation. We first provide them with some anxiety-management tools. We teach them how to control anxiety through proper breathing, relaxation, and things like that. We also remind them of the importance of preparation, because the more prepared they are, the easier it is.

Q. What happens next?

A. The next step is the most difficult. The person must face his or her fear in a therapeutic manner. To do this in VR, he or she dons a head-mount display – a device that enables a therapist to control what the person sees and hears. The device is similar to those used in virtual reality games. The person stands behind a lectern while seeing and hearing stimuli associated with giving a talk to a group of people – for example, hearing people file into the lecture hall. His or her name could be announced as the next speaker, or you might listen to

another speaker finishing up a talk, knowing you are next. A curtain is drawn, preventing the audience from being seen, but they can be heard talking. Of course, the curtain, the audience, the sounds and the slides exist only in virtual reality.

Next, a therapist opens the curtain, revealing the audience. Through the display, the audience may be scanned. The speaker can look to the left, look to the right – just as he would when talking to a real audience. He begins to deliver his speech – using notes, text material, even a virtual Teleprompter. If the speech includes PowerPoint visuals, those can be used as well, and are imported and displayed in the VR world.

Q. What is the “audience” doing while the speech is being delivered?

A. The therapist controls how the audience will react. Our software can create audience members who yawn, come and go. We can have cell phones ring. The audience can react positively – nodding, affirming, smiling, or they can appear bored, nervous, ready to leave. In all there are 11 different preprogrammed audience behaviors that may be chosen.

Q. So, through the use of virtual reality you are creating an experience that is similar to one of actually delivering a presentation to a live audience.

A. Exactly. And perhaps not surprisingly, virtual reality has the same effect as actually speaking to a group. The person gets very anxious. The idea behind exposure treatment, which is what this is, is to give people the tools to succeed, put them in a particular situation, activate the fear, and help them reprogram it by having successful outcomes over and over again. Essentially you exhaust the fear and replace it with a new learned behavior – you keep them there until their anxiety diminishes.

Q. Talk about the success rate in using virtual reality therapy to treat people with phobias.

A. Until recently, no one really knew if overcoming a fear in a virtual reality setting could be generalized to the real world. But in 1995, a group of researchers at Georgia Tech and Emory University studied people who underwent virtual reality therapy to cure their fear of heights. The results, published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, showed that virtual reality therapy works – not just in the lab, but in the real world.

Eighty percent of the people who were treated were exposing themselves to heights. Today, most of the studies deal with fear of flying, and 93 percent of those treated were flying six months after treatment, and report significantly less anxiety than before. Most of the behavioral treatments have a success rate well over 80 percent over time.

Q. How many sessions are required before someone sees results?

A. Relatively few. The standard treatment protocol we use is about eight, one-hour sessions. It can be a little longer or a little shorter depending on what's happening in a person's life.

Q. Typically, what would a one-hour session cost?

A. This varies by the area of the country or world where one is receiving services. On average, the costs range from \$100-300 per hour depending on the location and the type of service being provided.

Q. How does someone with serious presentation anxiety arrange to get virtual reality therapy?

A. The individual can come to our facility in Decatur, Georgia, or he or she could work with any number of clinical psychologists throughout the country who provide this service. There is a list of VR-based service providers at www.virtuallybetter.com, and The Association for the Advancement of Behavioral Therapy has a Web site (www.aabt.org) with a state-by-state listing of professionals who are qualified behavioral therapists, but may not utilize VR tools.

For more information, contact Ken Graap directly at 404-634-3400 or graap@virtuallybetter.com.