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People Are Kicking Phobias With Virtual Reality

People Taught To Overcome Their Fears

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What may seem like a virtual reality game is helping thousands of people overcome debilitating fear and anxiety.

Virtual reality therapy programs across the country are helping people fight their phobias, including fears of flying, crowded elevators and spiders.

Simply starting the car ignites Stephanie Wall's anxiety.

"I knew that I wanted to get back into driving, but just didn't quite know how to go about it," Wall said.

After a near-fatal freeway crash, Wall geared up to get back on the road through high-tech therapy at San Diego's virtual reality medical center.

With the help of heart and breathing monitors, the patient learns how to control his or her anxiety while doing what he or she fears the most.

"We show you on the screen what your breathing looks like. We teach you how to control that. We teach you to control your thought processes and then when you're ready with those coping mechanisms, we put you in the virtual reality world and have you practice these mechanisms," said Dr. Brenda Wiederhold, a virtual reality therapist.

Patients say it really works. The surround-sight and sound therapy has a better than 90 percent success rate for the most common phobias.

"We do fear of flying, public speaking, heights, driving, claustrophobia, panic disorder, agoraphobia, fear of spiders -- that covers it," Wiederhold said.

Realistic road conditions helped Wall literally drive her fears away.

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"I had an ultimate goal of driving to school, which was about 20 miles away on the freeway," she said.

In just eight sessions, Wall had success.

"I still use the breathing techniques to this day," Wall said.

However, now she usually uses her technique to cope with cell phone drivers.




Virtual reality treatment programs are also helping with eating disorders, weight loss and attention-deficit disorders. Because it is considered standard cognitive behavioral therapy, insurance companies will cover the cost in many cases.

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