

Oxford VR launch social engagement™ - a first-in-class digital therapeutic using virtual reality technology to tackle anxious social avoidance in the NHS.

<https://vimeo.com/396424151/6e6db76f16>

- Anxious social avoidance is one of the most debilitating aspects of multiple mental illnesses.
- For individuals, it imposes a life-interrupting burden including functional disability and social impairment.
- Social engagement™ enables individuals to overcome trigger situations to feel safer, more confident and more in control.



OXFORD, England, Tue 10th March 2020 / [Oxford VR](#) (OVR) announces the launch of OVR social engagement™ a ground-breaking and progressive mental health intervention using virtual reality technology to help individuals overcome anxious social avoidance, prevalent in multiple mental health conditions including agoraphobia, panic disorder, social anxiety, depression, personality disorders, and schizophrenia.

Founded in 2017, Oxford VR's work is at the frontiers of exciting innovation in mental healthcare using powerful virtual reality technology and evidence-based science to improve capacity and outcomes. The company creates automated immersive psychological therapy interventions that build on 20 years of clinical research by Daniel Freeman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Department of Psychiatry, Oxford University.

Anxious social avoidance is a major unmet need in mental healthcare. It is one of the most debilitating features of mental illness. Individuals experience extreme distress and fear in public situations – especially when alone – such as going outside, using public transport, or being in a supermarket. For some, it can progress to a point of social isolation and affect overall health in a way that is comparable to the impact of obesity and cigarette smoking.¹

Anxious social avoidance is also common in individuals with addiction issues. In severe and complex mental health conditions such as schizophrenia, anxious social avoidance leading to isolation is frequently seen.² Studies show that women are more likely than men to experience anxious social withdrawal.³

Developed by OVR clinicians, OVR social engagement™ is a user-centred program that translates evidence-based cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) through immersive virtual reality environments.

OVR social engagement™ is delivered over half-hour weekly sessions. During a session, the user puts on a VR headset and enters a virtual world where they are guided by a virtual coach and required to complete a series of graded tasks, in different situations such as a street scene, a bus, and a shop - reflecting the everyday triggers of anxious social avoidance. Great care has been made to ensure the environments are life-like, interactive, and engaging.

¹ American Psychologist, Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Theodore F. Robles, David A. Sbarra, 2017

² Schizophrenia Bulletin, Studying and Treating Schizophrenia Using Virtual Reality: A New Paradigm, Daniel Freeman, 2008

³ Women are more likely to have the social anxiety (Kessler et al., 2005a). Agoraphobia is approximately four times more likely to be diagnosed in women than in men (Bekker et al., 1996). The prevalence of major depression is higher in women than in men (Cyrankowski et al., 2000). Panic disorder is more common in women than in men (Joyce et al., 1989).

Throughout the program the user gradually faces problematic situations to overcome their extreme distress and fear, to feel safer, more confident and more in control. The program is automated and does not require a qualified clinician and can be delivered by a trained member of staff.

The VR environments give people the reassurance they can try out new things safely. By completing the tasks, users learn that they can cope in these situations and the evidence confirms that the behavioural changes made in the VR environments transfer to the real world.⁴

Speaking about Oxford VR's social engagement™ VR therapy, June Dent, Director, Clinical Partnerships at OVR said: "Our vision is to turn the tide on life-interrupting mental illnesses pushing the boundaries of clinical excellence and new technology to transform lives. The immersive nature of VR provides a powerful new way to engage users and helps them to regain confidence, feel safe and overcome trigger situations. This innovative program has been created with the voices and expertise of people affected by anxious social avoidance and applies proven evidence-based psychological techniques."

Oxford VR's social engagement™ program is now available to NHS patients via providers of NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies and other UK mental healthcare providers.

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About Oxford VR:

- Oxford VR (OVR) is a global pioneer developing automated VR therapy. As a spin-out from Oxford University, OVR's work builds on two decades of groundbreaking clinical research by Daniel Freeman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Oxford University Department of Psychiatry and Chief Clinical Officer and co-founder of OVR.
- As a Tech for Good enterprise, OVR is committed to developing evidence-based, cost-effective and scalable solutions that build mental healthcare capacity using cutting-edge VR technology.
- OVR's automated VR therapy translates evidence-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) through immersive virtual reality environments to provide a powerful new evidence-based psychological treatment.
- Oxford VR's first clinical trial for fear of heights, which was published in [The Lancet Psychiatry](#), shows how automated VR therapy can produce large clinical benefits. Results achieved were significantly better than expected, with the best psychological intervention delivered face-to-face by a therapist. This landmark trial also demonstrated automated VR therapy's capacity to transform mental healthcare by helping overloaded providers to expand access and standardize clinical excellence, ensuring adherence to treatment protocols.
- Mental health problems are inseparable from the environment. In VR therapy, individuals put on a headset and enter VR simulations of the situations and environments that trigger their symptoms. Throughout their treatment, individuals are asked to complete several different tasks that are graded in difficulty and are coached on helpful responses. The VR environments give people reassurance they can try out new things safely and that they're not in any real danger. The great thing about VR therapy is that the behavioural changes made in the VR environment transfer to the real world.
- Because VR therapy is automated, prized therapists can be redeployed to more urgent cases or other aspects of care.
- In February 2020, OVR secured a \$12.5 million investment - a record for VR therapy investment in Europe to advance its real-world impact in behavioural health, and accelerate clinical leadership in the U.S.

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⁴ The Lancet Psychiatry, Automated psychological therapy using immersive virtual reality for treatment of fear of height, Daniel Freeman, Polly Haselton et al, 2018