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US Navy to Study Virtual Reality Therapy for PTSD

From Cathleen Henning,
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Apr 19 2005

The Office of Naval Research (ONR) is funding three projects to study virtual reality therapy for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The goal is to provide therapists with as many techniques as possible for the early intervention and treatment of PTSD, particularly in military personnel.

"Early intervention is key," said ONR program manager Cmdr. Russell Shilling in a [news release](#). "Virtual reality therapy has proven effective in treating a wide variety of anxiety disorders (including chronic PTSD) and we hope that it will be effective against acute PTSD related to combat. We also hope that this type of therapy, with its videogame-like qualities, will resonate well with the current generation of warfighters."

The effects of PTSD can be debilitating, thus causing concern for the U.S.

Department of Defense. Recently, [studies have shown](#) an increased risk for PTSD and other anxiety disorders in combat veterans. PTSD may develop after traumatic or life-threatening events. Symptoms include flashbacks, sleep difficulties, nightmares, depression, isolation, guilt, and irritability. People with PTSD are at increased risk for substance abuse.

The three research projects will include:

- The Naval Medical Center San Diego will evaluate tools to treat PTSD in active-duty military members. Virtually Better, Inc., will help integrate the sights and sounds of combat, as well as smell and other sensory factors. Additionally, the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California will develop a flexible virtual reality toolset for therapists, using assets from the U.S. Army's "Full-Spectrum Warrior" videogame/training application.
- At the Virtual Reality Medical Center in San Diego, experts on PTSD will study the effectiveness of virtual reality for treating acute PTSD in non-combat personnel such as medics and truck drivers. The researchers will take into account the unique stressors of these service members and create different types of virtual reality scenarios as required.
- At the Tripler Army Medical Center in Hawaii, researchers will examine the effectiveness of using a virtual reality based cognitive behavioral treatment for U.S. warfighters suffering from acute PTSD.

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