

How virtual reality could become a vital treatment to deal with the uncertainty of COVID

A national shortage in mental health clinicians existed before COVID-19. Now, health care organizations must decide how to rapidly scale and deploy behavioral health care to a geographically widespread and increasingly isolated populace. There is no time to wait for expansion of the mental health workforce. Doctors are now turning to an unlikely solution: virtual reality (VR).

When most people think of VR, they think of a gaming technology... But for decades, scientists around the world have been quietly discovering the surprising health benefits of VR for ailments ranging from severe pain, to PTSD, to substance use, to existential anxiety. Over 5,000 studies reveal that VR has an uncanny ability to diminish pain, steady nerves, and boost mental health—and best of all, it can be administered at home without a trained clinician.

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VR does all this by radically changing our perspective of the world. We can imagine being somewhere fantastical and healing. We can practice being the person we want to become. We can see ourselves from beyond and regard ourselves in a new light. We can empathize with ourselves and with others... VR is not just for gamers anymore. It is a new type of mental health treatment that can make things easier when times are hard.

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