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Augmenting Group Hoarding Disorder Treatment with Virtual Reality (VR) Uncluttering: A Pilot Study

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To better treat hoarding disorder, we need novel approaches. Many treatments emphasize skills around sorting and discarding possessions, but for many reasons, this can be difficult to practice in the patient's home. Virtual reality (VR) allows for a virtual “home” with 3D versions of patients' actual possessions. Virtual discarding may ease patients into real-life discarding. VR has been utilized in many disorders but tested relatively little in hoarding.

We administered 8 weekly sessions of a VR intervention to augment a 16-week CBT-based group treatment. Adults with hoarding disorder (diagnosed via SCID-5-RV; n=9; age 60-73; 56% female) with clinically significant symptoms (Saving Inventory Revised [SIR]>40) received individualized VR worlds uniquely modeled after their homes. In VR, patients practiced sorting and discarding their virtual possessions.

Open-ended participant responses indicated that VR was well-tolerated by 83% of participants, and 89% found it useful. In describing impact, 86% noted that it helped increase real-life discarding. Examining symptom change, SIR scores (M=57.1, SD=9.9 at baseline) decreased an average of 14.2 points (SD=7.7) from baseline to close, a 25% mean change. Reliable Change Index (RCI) scores indicated that seven of the nine showed reliable improvement (RCIs from 2.01 to 7.05), while none worsened. Across time, 76.6% of the decrease in SIR occurred after the VR sessions began.

This exploratory pilot suggests that VR presents an exciting opportunity to simulate an at-home sorting and discarding experience. It remains an open question whether this improves symptoms more than existing treatments. VR merits further clinical investigation for this population.

Abstract prepared for the symposium:

Ready Patient One: The promise of VR treatments for intractable disorders inaccessible populations