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How comforting a crying child in virtual reality can treat**depression** in real life  
  
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For people with **depression** it can often be difficult to practice self-compassion. The voices in their heads berate them, exacerbating feelings of hopelessness and despair. Their inner monologue name-calls and degrades. The negative self-talk plays on a loop.

Most would never talk to a loved one, or even a stranger, the way they talk to themselves.

But the distorted view of themselves is their reality, and they feel deserving of the self-criticism. So its often hard for traditional therapy techniques to be enough to break the cycle.

A British clinical psychologist wanted to help his patients stop this vicious self-abuse. He wanted a way to let them experience how good self-compassion can feel without him just telling them or challenging their unhealthy thoughts.

With a team of researchers from University College London and University of Barcelona, he developed a test where patients enter a virtual reality through life-size avatars. Wearing virtual-reality glasses and body sensors, the patients watch their avatars mimic their body movements, making it feel as if they are one in the same. It's called "embodiment."

In the study, the avatar comes across a crying child. The patient was previously given generic compassionate phrases to offer the child and was instructed to deliver them slowly and softly. The child avatar was programmed to respond positively to the patient's kindness.

Then, in a second phase, the patient takes on the role of the child and, in the virtual reality world, sees the adult avatar they just embodied approach them and offer the same words of compassion in their own voice.

After repeating the intervention three more times over a month, several patients said it had helped them be kinder to themselves, and many said it reduced their depressive symptoms. One patient said it made her realize that "we are all human and vulnerable and it's ok to be vulnerable as an adult," according to the study. Others said they reflected on the experience when they were upset and it helped them be more self-compassionate.

Chris Brewin, a clinical psychologist at University College London, who lead the study, said these patients aren't used to hearing compassionate statements spoken to them in their own voice.

"Having it from a first-person perspective is a very powerful experience, it's like one part of themselves is talking to the other," Brewin said in an interview. "I think it's also enabling them to put these things into words and actually have that experience of deliberately saying these things to themselves, which they wouldn't usually do. We've created an artificial situation, which allows them to hear themselves be self-compassionate, and they think, 'Actually this makes me feel good.' "

The test was a small group of 15 patients with varying degrees of **depression**. Because of the small sample size, the researchers cannot say affirmatively that the virtual reality experience was the reason for the mental health improvements.

But Brewin believes that if more research confirms his first study, it could be a revolutionary way to treat **depression**. He imagines adding different scenarios for patients to experience in virtual reality.

There's already a burgeoning movement in the world of therapy to move to Internet-delivered or computerized treatments. There are websites and apps that make getting mental health help as easy as booking a vacation, ordering a meal or scheduling a date - all things most Americans now do online.

Brewin envisions **virtual** **reality** **therapy** as a component of that. As the technology becomes more accessible to the masses, he said, it could be an affordable treatment alternative that people could have in their own homes.

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