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How the latest VR headsets are being used to cure phobias and treat **depression**;   
From sorting your living space to promoting empathy, the world of virtual reality is getting virtuous, reports Susannah Butter  
  
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According to a university drop-out called Palmer Luckey, "every form of digital communication is generally inferior to face-to-face communication." He would say that because he founded Oculus and crowdfunded the Rift, a virtual reality headset that solves this problem by taking wearers to a new 3D world that feels impressively realistic. He calls it "the first technology that tries to make digital communication not just more efficient but more human".

Oculus Rift is due to be released on March 28, and preorders are higher than expected. Its rival, the HTC Vive, sold more than 15,000 units in 10 minutes when it went on sale this week. HTC will ship it out in April and it costs £425. An Oculus is £560; entry headsets by Samsung are £90.

"Virtual Reality offers the ability to experience anything, real or imagined," says Will McMaster, Head of VR at Visualise, based off Brick Lane. "In this way, it's potentially the most powerful medium humanity has ever created."

Developers say gamers will fall for VR "like a drug", but this goes beyond entertainment. There's also a strong case for virtuous reality, with studies about the headsets used to treat **depression** and post-traumatic stress disorder, inform people about the refugee crisis and improve the legal system. University College London and the University of Barcelona are studying the potential of immersive**virtual-reality therapy.** They gave 15 patients aged 23 to 61 a headset and made them comfort a virtual child so that they stopped crying. Nine patients said that this eased their depressive symptoms.

Tech marvel: the HTC Vive

Chris Brewin, who worked on the study, says: "People who struggle with anxiety and **depression** can be excessively self-critical. By hearing their own words to the child back, patients are indirectly giving themselves compassion." This translates to real situations where they would be harsh on themselves.

A similar logic is used to treat Iraq war veterans with PTSD through a programme called Virtual Iraq, where people are exposed to a virtual environment in which the situation the person is struggling to process feels real. It's about allowing people to do dangerous things without any actual danger - in 1995 early headsets were used to treat phobias of heights. There's potential for people recovering from strokes who need to reacquaint themselves with the world in a safe environment.

McMaster is "excited by the ways VR can be used to influence social good and action". Visualise is working on a series of 360-degree videos with Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières USA about the refugee crisis, "to create a humanising connection".

Ban Ki-moon, secretary general of the United Nations, is in on it too. At the last UN General Assembly VR allowed people to see a camp for Syrian refugees through the eyes of a girl who lived there. They say they "want to eliminate the power distance, to create empathy".

There's potential for juries, and researchers are looking into how VR makes it easier for people to understand a case - think TV show Making a Murderer in 3D.

At the everyday end of the spectrum, Ikea is trying it - if you could see that Billy shelf in your house it could save arguments in the shop. McMaster says: "Other mediums express reality in an abstracted way; VR puts you inside the world of the photo."

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