

## **BSU Athletes Get Their Wings: VR Mitigates Fear of Flying**

*University Athletes serve as an example of overcoming paralyzing phobias like flying.*

Boise, Idaho (July 18, 2024)—Virtual Reality (VR) is known for gaming systems but is also gaining traction as an effective psychological intervention, namely helping people overcome phobias. Imagine walking through an airport anticipating boarding a plane, feeling crippling fear- inducing sweating, shaking, and panic to the point that getting off the plane - if one makes it that far - is the only option. Fear of flying (Aviophobia) keeps people from living a full, happy and productive life. Whether a star player for a sports team needs to fly to a game (for example, Rori Chartier, Star Athlete for Boise State University Beach Volleyball), a mother wants to attend her daughter's wedding, or an employee needs to fly as a job requirement - the shame can be debilitating.

Boise State University's Director of Athletic Performance and Psychology, Stephanie Donaldson, reached out to Lisa Schiro, LCPC, Founder and CEO of K-Counseling & Anxiety Treatment, about their Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy to help one of their star athletes (Rori Chartier) with a fear of flying. The treatment was successful, and Rori made the event and news spread.

"VR is something people don't take seriously as a therapy; it was life-changing for me to go through the motions of the fear of flying with VR and other tools, being exposed over and over, with my therapist guiding me so by the time I had to get on that plane, I knew what was coming, and could handle the experience," said Rori Chartier, Star Athlete for Boise State University Beach Volleyball.

Many studies have been done regarding VR's efficacy, including what is reported here by the *Cambridge University Press and Assessment*. VR therapy works by allowing people to act out, practice, or revisit situations in an environment that is fully monitored and controlled by their therapist.

"Exposure Therapy is a form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Virtual Reality allows us to manipulate the environment to a granular level, and I thought this would be the perfect tool to implement because getting people past a phobia without actually being in the environment with them is difficult. It is about increasing tolerance to uncertainty. In other words, it's about being okay with not being okay. Not everybody wants to self-medicate with drugs and/or alcohol and they are tired feeling anxious and ashamed. Their body is in a habit of avoidance at all costs," says Lisa.

Many ask what the difference is between gaming with VR and using VR for phobias. In gaming, the user controls their actions, moves their body, and manipulates an environment with their hand-held device. In a therapeutic environment for Phobia Treatment, the therapist fully controls the audio and visual features to which their patient is exposed.

"The clinician or therapist has control over how the patient is experiencing the feared situation or context in the environment with sound and sight. If a patient is in distress, this gets managed by presenting a message to the client on the screen asking what their stress level is, rating it between 1-10. The numbers are all displayed, and the communication comes through eye movement, and we monitor body language," said Anna O'Malley, LPC.

### ***About Lisa Schiro and K-Counseling***

The founder and CEO of K-Counseling & Anxiety Treatment, LLC in Idaho, Lisa Schiro, M.S., LCPC, is a Board-Certified Counselor Supervisor and Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and Coach who has been in the field of psychiatry for over 17 years. She is the author of [Rice Paper Prison: Breaking Free From OCD](#), and has been featured in the Idaho Press during the pandemic. Lisa has coached/trained C-suite and employees at local corporations, like Hewlett Packard and Signature Roofing. Mrs. Schiro has also served on Governor Brad Little's task force as Clinical Supervisor of the Idaho Anti-Trafficking Coalition during the pandemic.

###