

AXA Hong Kong, CUHK, Oxford VR launch VR therapy solution

18 June 2019 | News

Over 70% of the respondents have experienced at least one symptom of social avoidance due to anxiety and depression



AXA Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and Oxford VR (OVR) have jointly launched a first-of-its-kind advanced psychological therapy using virtual reality (VR) technology to support better mental health outcomes in Asia including the Greater Bay Area. This unique collaboration "Yes I Can", aims to offer a ground-breaking new mental health solution for social avoidance. Social withdrawal is a common symptom of anxiety and depression which can significantly affect functioning at home and at work.

"As a lifelong health partner, AXA strives to offer innovative solutions to promote people's wellbeing in Asia. While there is a growing awareness of the importance of mental health, nearly two-third of respondents (68%) admitted that there is still a stigma associated with having a mental health condition preventing people talking about it and getting professional help," said Gordon Watson, Chief Executive Officer of AXA Asia. "Yes I Can" is about changing the status quo by offering high-quality, innovative and clinically-validated mental health treatment to members of the public in need, and to our corporate customers as part of their employee benefits services. Through this initiative, we aim to make quality mental health care more accessible in Asia, with Hong Kong as a pioneer in breaking new ground."

The social avoidance treatment programme has been designed to help people feel safer and more confident in social situations. In the treatment programme, a virtual coach gradually and systematically guides the user through a series of tasks in environments that reflect everyday scenarios including a Café, Bus, Street, Doctor's Waiting Room and Convenience Store. The scenarios enable the user to experience the same emotional and physical responses that triggers their anxiety and therefore their desire to avoid situations, as they would in a real-life situation. As a result of being exposed over time in virtual reality, users learn that they can confront and engage in these feared situations safely and overcome their social withdrawal.

In Hong Kong and China, there is a shortage of a trained workforce to cater to the huge unmet need. One million people in Hong Kong and 173 million people in China suffer from common mental health conditions. It takes around three years to see

a psychiatrist for six minutes in Hong Kong, with 4.39 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, while in China, the ratio is 2.2 psychiatrists per 100,000 people. The World Health Organisation recommends a ratio of 10:100,000. The programme under "*Yes I Can*" does not require a highly trained professional to operate the service as the delivery of consistently high-quality treatment is already built into the programme.

The "*Yes I Can*" programme provides each participant with six to eight 30-minute VR sessions over a period of three to six weeks. It is intended for use by adults who are aged 18 or above, and the localised version will be offered in both English and Cantonese. The partnership under AXA Hong Kong, CUHK and Oxford VR also includes a clinical research study which involves the recruitment of more than 250 members of the public as participants.