

Using virtual reality to help disability support workers empathize

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Credit: La Trobe University

A La Trobe University pilot study has found that using virtual reality (VR) technology to immerse disability support workers in an experience of the daily life of their clients helps to build empathy.

The researchers used a custom-built virtual reality program, IMercyVE, to enable a disability worker to have a first-person perspective experience of intellectual disability.

Published in the *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, the study showed that IMeryVE has the potential to be offered as a remotely delivered and flexible staff training tool suitable for building empathy, for use by rural workers and during pandemics.

Co-author and Director of La Trobe's John Richards Centre for Rural Aging Research, Professor Irene Blackberry, said nearly 18%, or 4.4 million, Australians live with disability.

"Being a disability support worker requires many attributes including patience, honesty, and compassion, as well as skills in first aid, administration, [information technology](#), teamwork, providing [personal care](#), and problem solving," Professor Blackberry said.

"Empathy is a vital skill for disability support workers because the presence of empathy may improve the quality of communication and relationships with service users, as well as the responsiveness of workers to the needs of service users."

According to Professor Blackberry, virtual reality is an innovative way by which empathy can be developed.

"Virtual reality allows for immersion in a life-like simulated environment and through interaction with this rich sensory environment, communication and understanding of others' perspectives may be strengthened," Professor Blackberry said.

The impetus for the study arose when Albury-based disability service provider, Mercy Connect, commissioned Valley General Hospital, a

Queensland-based health care software development company, to custom-design IMercyVE for use with Mercy Connect employees to improve their awareness, understanding of, and insight into the experience of living with [intellectual disability](#).

Mercy Connect partnered with La Trobe University to evaluate this newly created virtual reality program with recently recruited staff to the community disability service as part of their onboarding and orientation activity. Nine participants completed online surveys before and after using IMercyVE and took part in a video-conferenced focus group.

The study found that the experience of being in the virtual reality helped the participants develop understanding of how the world might be experienced by a person living with disability. "I felt I experienced a snippet of what being disabled [is like] and the frustrations and the stop-starts of life," one participant said. "It gives a much, much deeper understanding," said another.

"Some participants had prior experience of learning about disability, through personal and professional interactions, however, they considered that the virtual reality experience assisted them to discern the experience of living with disability in a different way than they had previously encountered," Professor Blackberry said.

"Although the cultivation of [empathy](#) can be achieved through several existing interventions, this study found that [virtual reality](#) may offer another viable way to develop this sought-after trait."

More information: Clare Wilding et al, Virtual reality to foster empathy in disability workers: A feasibility study during COVID -19, *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/jar.13042](#)

Provided by La Trobe University

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