

A Virtual Joy: VR Therapy Works Wonders

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PEORIA - Some therapy patients are getting an out-of-this-world experience – under the watchful eyes of their therapists. New virtual reality (VR) technology called REAL VR is marrying high-tech activities with traditional therapy needs.

REAL VR provides VR therapeutic activities that focus on strengthening, range of motion, and postural control. The system can also address cognitive functions like spatial and depth perception awareness.

According to Anne Horowitz, an occupational therapist at OSF Rehabilitation in Peoria, Illinois, virtual reality allows patients to practice a number of skills – all in one sitting.

“What I really like about this device is we're working on balance, we're working on arm motion: overhead, eye-level, below the waist. You can actually hold onto an item as if you're painting. You can also do it standing. So working on standing balance and sitting balance. And if they have vision problems you're working on scanning your environment,” says Horowitz.

51-year-old Michael Swayne didn't hesitate when Horowitz suggested he try REAL VR for therapy. For the past 18 months, the Peoria Heights man has been dealing with

severe leg and mobility issues, as well as a loss of grip strength in his hands. After a lifetime of being active and building a successful baking business, his recent struggles have greatly impacted his quality of life and independence.

“I’m needing to depend on others more so than I ever have before,” Swayne reflects. “And I’ve never really depended on anybody. So it’s hard, being an independent person, to do that. But I do have a great team of doctors and family that has pitched in.”

Swayne is determined to get back on his feet, and Horowitz says the REAL VR programming has been instrumental in keeping him engaged and challenged during his therapy sessions.

In a typical session, Swayne will complete tasks like painting virtual pictures while gripping a paintbrush, or by catching and dodging fish as he sits by a virtual lake. With the help of his OSF therapists and the availability of REAL VR, Swayne is making incredible strides.

“He’s going out to eat, going to restaurants. He’s back to cooking a little bit more – not back to fully baking like he wants to – but he’s able to not be as dependent on people as he was before,” says Horowitz.

Keeping up with the latest physical therapy technology is essential, and the treatment landscape is constantly changing. Horowitz welcomes this and says REAL VR is just the beginning. She looks forward to what the future of high-tech physical therapy will hold.

“We’re always wanting anything new and updated to meet our patient population,” she explains. “It’s so important to have different tricks of the trade: different treatment approaches. Whether they are spinal cord injury, Parkinson’s, stroke population, multiple sclerosis, it’s just important for us to always keep updated programs to meet our patient’s needs – and interests, too.”

And for Swayne, he says anyone who has the opportunity should give REAL VR a try. In his words – what have you got to lose?

“I would reach out to anybody who is kind of timid by it to try it out because it’s more beneficial than you think. It’ll work your hands, it’ll work your arms and your upper body and it’s awesome. And then you can get more in tune, so you can help yourself at home or whatever you need.”

OSF Rehabilitation in Peoria is the only rehab facility using REAL VR technology in central Illinois. If you would like to learn more about rehabilitation services, visit osfhealthcare.org/rehabilitation.