



The Computerworld Honors Program

Honoring those who use Information Technology to benefit society

Final Copy of Case Study

YEAR:
2012

STATUS:
Laureate

Organization name:
National Center for Telehealth and Technology

Organization URL:
<http://t2health.org/>

Project Name:
T2 Virtual PTSD Experience

What social/humanitarian issue was the project designed to address? What specific metrics did you use to measure the project's success?

The T2 Virtual PTSD Experience, based in Second Life, is an immersive, interactive learning experience designed to educate visitors about combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It includes a simulation demonstrating how PTSD may be acquired during a combat-related traumatic event, including an explanation of the connections between danger cues and triggers, the role of avoidance in the development of PTSD, and how PTSD is a normal human response to traumatic events. Additionally, this environment includes simulations of PTSD symptoms, helping the visitor learn through interactive activities how PTSD symptoms may show up in a person's life. Finally, the environment includes information to help visitors determine whether they or a loved one is in need of care, and how to access that care, whether a DoD or VA beneficiary. The site tracks user impressions as they move through the experience. Since this is a virtual world, users are able to comment directly where they are by taking surveys and providing commentary as they are going through the virtual experience. Also, as individuals wear a Heads Up Display tracking their anxiety levels and their health, they receive real-time feedback on their behaviors as they move through the PTSD experience.

Please describe the technologies used and how those technologies were deployed in an innovative way. Also, please include any technical or other challenges that were overcome for the successful implementation of the project.

A number of web-based resources aim to educate about post-deployment psychological health issues. Many of these are rich with useful information in the form of text content written by experts, video interviews of other service members dealing with similar issues, self-assessment screening tools, self-help exercises, and information regarding accessing care. And while these are great resources, they are also limited with regards to the experience that they can provide to visitors. The T2 Virtual PTSD Experience aims to be one answer to these limitations. By being based in Second Life, the T2 Virtual PTSD Experience is available to anyone with a basic Second Life account, which is available free of charge. Once opened, there is no need for registration or requests for access, allowing for anonymous access any time of day. The experience is presented as a self-guided exploration, thus eliminating the need for live staffing, while still allowing for real-time interaction between visitors. Visitors can access this information from the comfort of their home, or anywhere that they have broadband Internet access, thus reducing perceived stigma and/or physical access barriers of a brick-and-mortar clinic. But perhaps more importantly, by providing an immersive experience, the T2 Virtual PTSD Experience can serve as a significant adjunct to 2D web-based resources, improving learning through doing rather than merely reading about or watching a video about post-deployment issues. Please note that Second Life is not approved on most government networks. Federal employees who wish to experience the environment will need to do so through other network connections.

Please list the specific humanitarian benefits the project has yielded so far.

It helps engage younger service members who are more familiar with technology such as Second Life or gaming interfaces. A free, online system creates a convenient way for services members to get help when they might not otherwise, especially those who don't have access to clinics. Rural families and service members are particularly enabled by this technology. The anonymity of Second Life empowers soldiers and veterans to find guidance about post-traumatic stress without fear of social or professional repercussions. About 51 percent of officers and enlisted soldiers think that accessing behavioral health services would affect their careers, despite assurances that they would not be held back, according to a September report on Army suicides. Meanwhile, one in five soldiers who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan report symptoms of post-traumatic stress or major depression, according to a 2008 Rand Corp. study. The T2 Virtual PTSD Experience emphasizes that post-traumatic stress is a common reaction to combat. It begins with visitors choosing avatars to represent themselves in Second Life. The Defense Department does not intend to monitor the site; it's up to visitors to decide how much personal information to disclose. The program guides users through a scenario in an Afghan marketplace that could trigger post-traumatic stress. It explains the various emotional connections that might develop over time. Throughout the scenario, users can monitor their stress and click away to a "relaxation room" where they can look at calming images and practice soothing breathing techniques. The program also can guide visitors through a typical suburban mall, a setting that's known to make veterans feel uncomfortable if they're struggling with post-traumatic stress. The mall scenario can be played like a game, with soldiers scoring points for having healthy interactions.

Please provide the best example of how the project has benefited a specific individual, enterprise or organization. Feel free to include personal quotes from individuals who have directly benefited from the work.

The T2 Virtual World Experience provides the opportunity to interact with anyone who is in the virtual world, and it is designed to be anonymous, while allowing individuals to create social communities. Any warrior who goes in there will be able to talk with whoever is in that space. We know that many of the difficulties that our warriors have result in increased social isolation and diminished interest in getting outside the home and interacting with other people. The Technology and Telehealth group designs, builds, tests, and evaluates available and emerging technologies to deploy in support of psychological health and traumatic brain injury recovery in the military

community. Equally important is their work toward eradicating stigma that can deter people in the military from seeking help. They do wonder about the potential in this emerging technology and have dedicated considerable resources and experts to really get some of these folks connected with each other in a meaningful way that might be helpful.