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Northwestern study: Job-interview simulator works well for veterans

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Blue Sky

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Job interviews can be daunting challenges for veterans suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. Even a closed office door can be a trigger.

But research at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, published Wednesday in the journal *Psychiatric Services*, found that a virtual-reality interview simulator significantly increases a military veteran's chances of landing a job.

"Job Interview Training with Molly Porter" refers to a computer program that stars an actress who reads carefully crafted questions and responses. Developed by Baltimore-based startup SIMmersion, it has been available for general use since last summer.

Northwestern researcher Matt Smith, who said veterans often struggle in the job-hunting process to overcome triggers such as the closed office door, wanted to find out if the simulator helps veterans get job offers. He said the results were striking.

"Our trainees were about twice as likely to get job offers as those who didn't use the platform," Smith said.

Smith said that when he adjusted the results to consider factors such as intelligence, the program was significantly more likely to help veterans.

Ben Allen-Kingsland, business development director for health and corporate programs at SIMmersion, said the simulator originally was developed to help train FBI agents on interviewing skills but has been adjusted as an interview trainer for job candidates. He said other versions are tailored to people with autism-related disorders and to prisoners reentering the workforce.

The Northwestern study focused on veterans but also included non-veterans with severe mental illness.

Adam Navarro-Lowery, who participated in the study, says he doesn't need any more convincing. A U.S. Army veteran who served in combat in Kosovo, he said he suffered from PTSD to the point where he was unemployed and homeless.

Counseling got him back on track, he said, but when he started to think about job interviews, he faced the prospect of

answering questions about his mental illness, plus gaps in his work history.

Molly Porter helped, he said.

“First of all she helped me build confidence,” he said. “That’s the key with a lot of veterans coming out of the military. You feel beaten down.”

Molly Porter appears onscreen as a human resources executive and asks questions calibrated to the trainee’s resume.

“She might say: ‘I see you have a gap in your employment history. Can you talk about that?’” Smith said.

The trainee receives a series of potential answers, some better than others. This allows them to learn which answers are better and to practice the good ones.

The program can be adjusted to three levels of difficulty. At the easiest level, Molly Porter might shrug off an inappropriate response, Smith said. At the most difficult level, she might end the interview immediately.

In some cases, Molly Porter might ask an illegal question, perhaps asking a trainee if they ever have been treated for a mental illness. This gives the trainee the chance to practice handling this situation, Smith said.

Some people choose to talk openly about this subject, while others don’t. Smith said the “research is mixed” on which is the right course of action. The simulator “doesn’t advocate one way or the other” but gives options for different answers, he said.

Navarro-Lowery said he liked being able to drill on questions and answers over and over.

“You realize there’s hope. You think: ‘I can get this on lockdown,’” he said. “When I was done, I felt like I had an edge.”

Navarro-Lowery is now working as a residential leasing agent, learning the real estate business. He said he still has some anxiety problems but that they are manageable. He’s not looking for work but said he’d use the simulator again if he were.

Allen-Kingsland of SIMmersion said the program is available to individuals and through institutions such as hospitals and job-training centers. Unlimited access for an individual costs \$89.95.

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