

VR for Anxiety Relief: An Immersive Emotional Regulation Experience

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Abstract

Virtual Reality (VR) has the potential to serve as a tool when it comes to treating mental health. The immersion and interactivity it offers can be beneficial to calming anxiety symptoms from the comfort of one's home. Anxiety is one of the most common mental health challenges people face globally. A common way of dealing with anxiety is stimulation of the nervous system. It can be done through calming visuals and sounds, physical activity, redirecting focus, and breathing exercises. The aim of this project is to design an immersive and calming VR experience for the purpose of educating on what kinds of activities can decrease symptoms of anxiety and calm panic attacks. The application was developed using Unity 6.3 game engine and focuses on three aspects of emotional regulation, each explored through a dedicated exercise. These include a guided breathing exercise, light physical activity and a shape tracing exercise involving slow and controlled hand movements. Each of these exercises is accompanied by calming visuals and audio, which serve as additional calming stimuli, as well as deepen the sense of immersion. A limited user study is conducted to evaluate usability and user experience. This project is intended as a foundational prototype for a functional VR application which demonstrates techniques of anxiety reduction and nervous system regulation. It is primarily intended for educational purposes and serves as a foundation for further research, testing and future improvements.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, Immersion, Emotional Regulation, Anxiety, Mental health

1 Introduction

Mental health, according to the World Health Organization [1], is the “state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn

well and work well, and contribute to their community”. It is an integral part of one's life. Unfortunately, due to genetics, unhealthy environments, or simply the demands of modern life, a significant number of people struggle with mental health problems.

Some of the most common conditions are depression and anxiety. Around 4.4% of the global population currently experience an anxiety disorder. People struggling with anxiety tend to experience excessive worry or fear about a specific situation, or even in everyday situations. There are different types of anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety, and panic disorder. Despite the causes being very different, the symptoms are usually similar. Individuals may experience tightness in the chest, heavy breathing, excessive panic, and heart palpitations [2].

Some people receive treatment in the form of psychotherapy or medication, which might not be accessible to everyone. Therefore, others have to find alternative methods of emotional regulation. Virtual Reality (VR) technology can play a significant role in this context. By providing an immersive environment, VR can simulate calming experiences that promote relaxation, focus, and self-soothing. Using VR for educational purposes can also help individuals learn and integrate self-regulation techniques into their everyday lives.

2 Related work

There are numerous methods of treating anxiety disorders, from different types of talk therapy, somatic exercises, and the practice of “mindfulness”. According to research, anxiety can be separated into three elements: physical reactions, thoughts, and behaviors [3]. No two persons experience it the same way. Some people are more affected by physical symptoms, while others struggle with managing their thoughts. It is recommended for people experiencing strong anxiety to reduce the sensations in the body before doing any other kinds of regulation methods. This new wave of mindfulness has become a popular topic when

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talking about mental health. It is the practice of noticing emotions without judgment, feeling without needing to fix the situation immediately, and achieving relaxation in the body [4].

There are different techniques of reducing bodily symptoms of anxiety. One of the most beneficial ones is spending time in nature. It offers different kinds of engagement, such as visual exposure to natural environments, walking in nature, and engaging in physical exercise. Research has shown that visual exposure to such environments can regulate blood pressure, enhance attention restoration, and reduce physical discomfort [5]. These environments also offer auditory exposure to calming nature sounds, such as the rippling of water or the song of birds. Calming sounds capture the “involuntary attention” of humans and allow for “directed attention” to restore, decreasing stress and mental fatigue [6]. However, auditory and visual stimuli are not the only methods of anxiety and stress reduction. Intentionally directing one’s attention into a single task and being absorbed in it, or the so-called state of “flow”, can be a good solution for some. There is not a lot of research covering this topic related to anxiety. It was mostly discussed in the context of ADHD and autism. However, one research project conducted at Birkbeck University of London concluded that attention control can be trained, and improving it can reduce symptoms of anxiety [7]. Exercise and body movement can also improve one’s state of mind. The mind and body are connected. Exercise produces endorphins, which reduce stress. The exercise can include higher intensity workouts, stretching and mobility, or even brisk walking. According to the Anxiety & Depression Association of America (ADAA), physically active people tend to experience lower rates of anxiety compared to people with a sedentary lifestyle [8].

In the past few years, there has been a rise in unique approaches to treating health-related problems by including technology. One popular method is using virtual reality (VR). Despite it being initially designed for gaming, research has proven that VR can be applied in other fields as well. According to an article by A. Hamad and B. Jia, VR refers to “a computer-generated, three-dimensional virtual environment that users can interact with”, projected via isolated screens or a wearable display.[9] Besides gaming, it has been used for prototyping, simulations, education, medical training, and therapy.

A key concept in understanding VR’s therapeutic potential is presence - the subjective feeling of actually being inside a virtual environment, rather than in one’s physical surroundings. Presence is closely tied to immersion, which refers to the degree to which a system generates sensory stimulation consistent with real-world experience. [10] Research has shown that a strong sense of presence is central to VR’s effectiveness in mental health contexts, as it allows users to engage with therapeutic content in a way that feels authentic and meaningful. [11] The higher the level of immersion, the greater the user’s sense of psychological engagement, which enhances the therapeutic

value of the experience. Fully immersive VR systems, such as head-mounted displays, are particularly effective in achieving this, as they block out real-world distractions and replace them with a controlled virtual environment. [12]

VR allows for controlled and immersive environments and experiences. The concept of presence and the illusion of something being “real” portray VR as having the potential to make the treatment of mental health more accessible. Studies have shown VR experiences being designed and used to treat mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and eating disorders, however, mostly through exposure therapy. For example, VR has been used to treat patients suffering from PTSD by recreating triggering traumatic events, but in a safe and controlled environment [13]. A recent meta-analysis of 33 randomized controlled trials involving over 3,000 participants confirmed that VR therapy significantly reduces anxiety symptoms compared to conventional interventions, further supporting its growing role in mental health care. [14]

However, exposure-based approaches are not the only option. According to research, self-soothing behavior can be beneficial in reducing anxiety symptoms [15]. Self-comforting behaviors such as breathing exercises, self-kindness, and mindfulness can help individuals manage emotional distress and regulate their emotions. VR can be used to achieve a unique meditative experience that will fully block out distractions and create an isolated, calm, and immersive environment which will elicit a state of mindfulness and reduce the effects of anxiety and distress. A study showed that VR meditation was more successful in reducing pre-exam anxiety in students than a regular meditation video [9]. This particular application of VR is promising especially in urban areas, where access to calm environments might be limited due to the infrastructure of the city, insufficient free time, or poor urban planning. It can also be applied in special cases where an individual is unable to leave the house. For example, during the COVID-19 lockdown, people were obliged to stay at home, and those kinds of restrictive environments may negatively affect people’s mental health. This paper aims to address the application of VR for mental health regulation and create a soothing VR experience for the purpose of educating individuals about methods of anxiety symptom reduction.

3 Problem and Requirements Analysis

3.1 Problem Analysis

As stated in the Introduction, mental health disorders represent a global health concern. Anxiety is one of the most common. The symptoms range from cognitive ones, like excessive worry or fear, difficulty concentrating, catastrophic thinking, and avoidant behavior, to physical ones,

such as tightness in the chest, heavy breathing, excessive panic, and heart palpitations [2].

While different types of treatment do exist, including medication and different modules of therapy, not everyone can have access to those. People who rely on the public healthcare system may have to wait a long time to get their spot with a psychiatrist or a psychotherapist, while private sessions are costly. Additionally, psychotherapy, a popular method of treatment, is also a method which takes time to show effect. When in need of immediate relief, people look for alternative solutions, like spending time in nature, exercising, or meditating. However, when stuck in a state of distress, it can be hard to shift one's body to a calmer state. Creating an isolated environment is helpful, however it can be difficult to achieve. VR has the potential to enable such an environment due to its design. It can be helpful for people struggling to shift their focus away from their thoughts by offering a calming and engaging experience. It can also be useful for people in urban areas who lack access to calm and peaceful environments. Since testing on individuals suffering from anxiety can present ethical risks and would require approval from an ethics committee, this application is designed purely for educational purposes and is open to further development in the future.

3.2 Requirements Analysis

Based on the identified problems and existing research, the design of this application was created. The application must simulate an immersive environment, imitating nature with its visuals and appropriate ambient sounds. The user must be able to successfully navigate the environment with the equipment provided. A range of interactive grounding activities must be provided and explained to the user, including breathing exercises, walking around the given environment, light stretching, and a grounding activity which elicits shifting the user's focus. All activities should be low-pressure, without any time limits or points or penalties. The user should have the freedom to repeat any exercise of choice, or simply exit the environment when they complete all tasks, or when they feel ready.

The application is created in the Unity game engine and must be compatible with the Meta Quest 3 VR headset. It should be intuitive to use and accommodate users without any previous VR experience. The latency should be minimal in order to reduce the risk of motion sickness.

4 Implementation

4.1 Development Environment

The application was developed using the Unity 6.3 game engine [16]. After installation, a new project was created using the built-in VR Core template, adjusted for PC-based development. The application is designed to be

compatible with a Meta Quest 3 headset and its Touch Plus controllers, connected to a PC via Meta Horizon Link.

4.2 Setting up the Scene and Testing Interactions

The first part of the process was constructing the virtual environment. The goal was to build a calming forest-like setting. The 3D models, imported from CGTrader [17], are low-poly, which was intentionally selected for their performance efficiency in VR. A lower number of polygons reduces the computational load during rendering, which prevents latency and maintains a high and stable frame rate. Tree models were arranged around the player's designated play area with a pond in the corner, surrounded by rocks and plants. The grass and water surface materials were imported from the Unity Asset Store [18]. Additional models were placed as props for the interactive activities and appear only during their execution. They include a wooden crate and seven apples, an inflating orb, and a color-changing hoop.

Once the scene was constructed, the headset was connected and the XR interactions were configured. The project uses XR Interaction Toolkit v3.3.1, which provides preconfigured tools for VR input and interaction. The XR Interaction Manager was switched from the OpenXR runtime to the Oculus runtime.

The XR Origin component, representing the player's physical presence in the environment, was placed in the scene and its Tracking Mode was set to 'Floor'. This feature automatically adjusts the virtual environment according to the player's actual height, ensuring that each player has an accurate experience of the environment, without the need for manual calibration. Additionally, the Near-Far Interactor components on the controllers were used for object and User Interface (UI) interaction, with ray-based pointing used for the menu interface.

4.3 User Interface and Activities

The User Interface was implemented using the World Space Canvas so the menu appears as a floating panel in the environment in front of the player. It consists of a main menu panel which greets the player and features three buttons for selecting an activity. The activities include a breathing exercise, apple gathering, and shape tracing (Figure 1). When selecting an activity, the main panel is hidden and replaced by an instructions panel presenting the player with instructions on how to complete the activity and buttons labeled 'Start' and 'Back'. When starting the desired activity, the Canvas features only an 'Exit' button, which serves as the option to quit if the player should feel any sort of discomfort or simply want to leave. Interaction with the UI is achieved by using the Tracked Device Graphic Raycaster component on the Canvas, enabling hovering and pressing on the menu via the controller rays.



Figure 1: User Interface

The first exercise is the breathing exercise. These types of exercises are often recommended in stressful or anxiety-inducing situations, since certain breathing patterns stimulate and calm the nervous system. This particular exercise features Extended Exhale Breathing, which is a pattern where the person inhales for four seconds and exhales for six seconds. When starting the exercise, a blue orb appears in the environment. It expands for four seconds and contracts for six seconds, with the label above it alternating from 'Breathe in' to 'Breathe out' (Figure 2). The behavior is controlled by the BreathingOrb script, which runs a continuous looping animation. The orb's movement serves as a visual aid for the player and guides them until the player exits the activity.



Figure 2: Breathing Exercise

The second activity is apple gathering and it introduces light physical engagement. Seven apples are sporadically distributed across the ground, and an empty wooden crate is placed among them (Figure 4). This is the only activity with a clearly defined start and goal. The goal is to pick up every apple and place it in the crate. The activity ends when the player gathers every apple; however, the player can quit using the UI whenever they like. The point of this activity is the light exercise enforced by the script running

during this activity. The player must bend down or crouch when picking up an apple, since the script monitors and enforces a certain height threshold that must be met before enabling the XR Grab Interactable component placed on the apples, which allows the actual grabbing action (Figure 3). Since the apples are not placed in close proximity, the player is also required to walk around the environment. When an apple is brought into close proximity to the crate, it can then be placed inside it.



Figure 3: Apple Gathering



Figure 4: Start of Apple Gathering activity

The third activity promotes focused attention and slow, controlled movement, which can help alleviate symptoms of stress. When started, a three-dimensional purple hoop appears in front of the player at eye level. The player then uses one controller to trace the shape of the hoop by moving their hand slowly. Depending on the tempo and accuracy of the tracing, the hoop changes color to green or red in real time. When red, the hoop signals to the player that they should engage in more precise or slower movements, while the green color signals that the player is performing well (Figure 5). This activity is open-ended, similar to the first one, because there is no clearly defined ending. The player exits the activity whenever they wish.

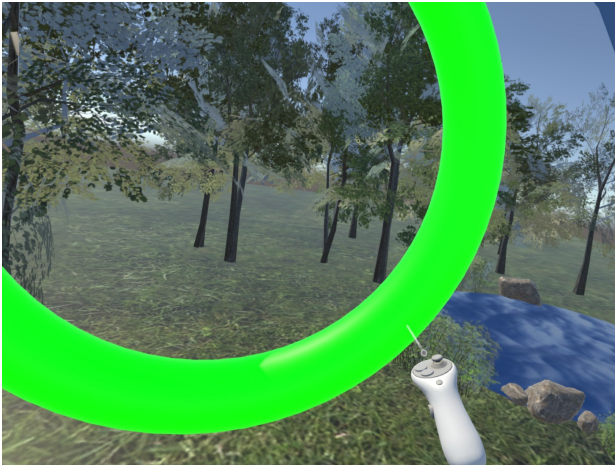


Figure 5: Shape Tracing

5 User Study

The user study was conducted among 30 participants. Testing took place in a 6x6 meter room cleared of obstacles that could prevent roomscale walking or cause injuries. A supervisor was present at all times in case of motion sickness or possible accidents and provided additional guidance to those who needed it. Following the testing phase, each participant completed a structured feedback form assessing usability, immersion, engagement, and possible therapeutic value. The survey is not meant to be interpreted as conclusive or as a clinical trial. That kind of evaluation requires involvement of medical experts. Rather, it should be treated as an indicative user experience evaluation.

The participants were predominantly young, with 70% falling within the 18–24 age range and the remaining 30% in the 25–54 range (Figure 6). Around 60% of the participants had prior VR experience, while the rest were first-time users (Figure 7). Participants also reported the frequency of stress in their lives. Half of participants stated that they occasionally feel stress or anxiety, 40% frequently, 7% always, and 3% never. Less than half had previously used some form of relaxation or mindfulness technique. The majority had not.

How old are you?
30 responses

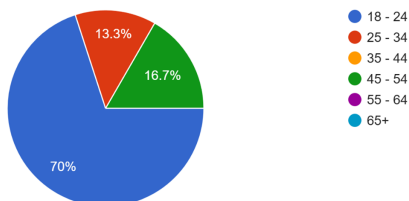


Figure 6: Age Demographics

Have you used VR before?
30 responses

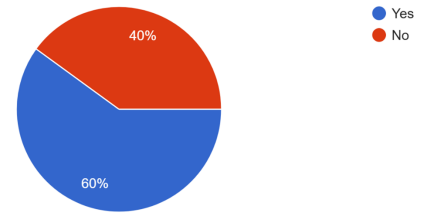


Figure 7: Participants' prior VR experience

5.1 Usability

Usability was evaluated through ease of controlling the headset and controllers, navigating the user interface and the clarity of the instructions. The ratings were predominantly positive. For controller usability, 40% of the respondents gave a rating of 5 (strongly agreed that controls were easy to understand) and 37% gave a rating of 4 (mostly agree). The remaining 23% rated 3 (neutral) or 2 (mostly disagree) (Figure 8). While the majority found the controls intuitive, mostly older or first-time users faced some difficulty. UI interaction was also rated positively, with more than half participants giving a rating of 5. Around 27% rated 4, while 16% rated 3 or 2. This suggests that the design of the UI within the application is quite intuitive and easy to navigate. However, when it comes to the clarity of instructions within the application, the reviews were mixed. Despite the majority giving a rating of 4 or 5, a significant number of people rated 3 or below. Around 23% of respondents reported as 'neutral', while 7% reported that they mostly disagree that the instructions are clear. A possible improvement is to provide users with step-by-step instructions, removing any assumptions about prior knowledge or familiarity with similar applications. The application should ensure that no prior experience or intuition is required to engage with any activity and that each step is communicated explicitly.

The VR controls were easy to understand
30 responses

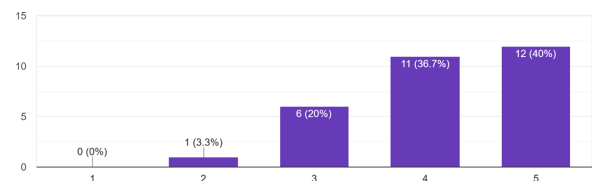


Figure 8: 'The controls were easy to understand'

5.2 Immersion and Physical Engagement

Immersion scores were predominantly high for each question. Almost all respondents stated that they felt present in the environment by giving it a score of 4 (mostly agree) or 5 (strongly agree). A number of qualitative individual comments reinforce this. One participant described they 'got lost in the world and shifted their focus to the new environment'. Regarding realism of the environment, most participants gave high scores, with 77% rating 4 or 5, and the remaining 23% rating 3 or 2. Almost all participants rated physical engagement positively, with over 90% giving scores of 4 or 5. When assessing the level of physical engagement, 83% selected 'Just right', while the remaining few selected 'Too easy' or 'Too demanding'. The first option was predominantly chosen by participants who are regular VR users and are used to more challenging and dynamic actions, while the second one was predominantly selected by first-time users. This suggests that a future iteration of this application should consider the needs of first-time VR users. A short onboarding tutorial at the start of the experience, introducing the basic controller functions and interaction mechanics before any activity begins, could significantly reduce the initial friction and allow users to engage with the content more quickly and confidently.

5.3 Activity Evaluation

5.3.1 Breathing Exercise

The breathing exercise was the most positively rated. Around 47% of participants named it as their favourite. Similarly, 60% of the participants rated it as the most beneficial for their wellbeing (Figure 9). Around 83% of the respondents reported feeling more relaxed after the exercise and all respondents rated the visual cues of the exercise with either a 4 or 5. Regarding educational outcomes, more than 90% gave a rating of 4 (mostly agree) or 5 (strongly agree) when reporting whether they better understand how controlled breathing reduces stress or anxiety. One participant answered: 'This has great potential. I really liked the breathing exercise because I felt weight lift off my shoulders after a few minutes of doing it.' The responses for this section of the survey suggest that breathing exercises have a calming effect on a person, especially when paired with guided instruction.

5.3.2 Apple Gathering

The apple gathering exercise was the second favourite of the participants, which was expected due to it being the most physically challenging and game-like. However, the relaxation ratings were mixed. Around 70% of the participants gave a rating of 4 or 5 when asked whether they felt more grounded and present after the exercise, 17% rated 3 (neutral) and the remaining 13% rated 1 (strongly disagree) or 2 (mostly disagree). One participant reported the

What activity did you find the most beneficial for your wellbeing?
30 responses

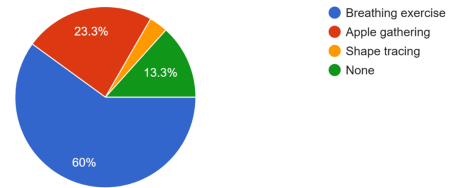


Figure 9: Impact of activities on users

exercise is something they would like to repeat when anxious as it engages them into a different activity and distracts them from thinking about the stress. In contrast, another submitted that they had problems navigating the controls during the picking up action. Another participant suggested that the terrain might be too small, which is noted for any future improvements. Even though the majority of respondents (73%) reported that they felt a positive effect on their mood during the exercise, not everyone seemed to gain educational outcomes. Around 37% of the respondents rated 3 or below when asked whether they understand how to integrate physical movement as a regulation method. The remaining were quite evenly split between 4 and 5.

5.3.3 Shape Tracing

This exercise was the least favourite of the bunch. 37% of the respondents reported neutral as to whether they felt more calm and focused after the activity, 33% mostly agreed, 13% strongly agreed, another 13% mostly disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed. Although the color-changing feedback of the exercise was evenly rated by 3, 4, or 5, the educational outcomes were rated poorly. Around 74% rated 3 or below when asked whether they understand how to integrate focus and slow and controlled movement as a relaxation technique (Figure 10). One respondent stated they don't understand the purpose of this exercise or how it can affect the user, and they suggest a different activity would have made for a better execution.

I understand how to integrate focus and slow and controlled movement as a way to calm down in my everyday life
30 responses

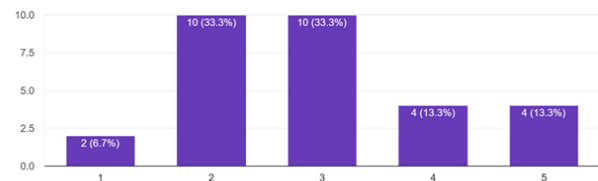


Figure 10: Educational outcome of Shape Tracing exercise

5.4 Overall Rating

The majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed they believe that this application could be a useful tool for people experiencing anxiety. Among participants who reported frequent stress, the ratings were mostly high. Several respondents suggested the application could be used as an easily accessible supplementary tool alongside traditional forms of therapy, highlighting the effects of the breathing exercise, ease of use, and immersiveness of the environment. A smaller number of participants, primarily those not experiencing stress or not open to the idea of VR, gave lower ratings or concluded that they were not the target audience for this type of application.

6 Conclusion

Anxiety disorders affect a large number of people worldwide. They are followed by diverse symptoms which significantly impact one's quality of life. While standard treatments do exist, some individuals may have limited access to those. VR can be a promising solution when in need of immediate relief, due to its immersive nature. This paper proposes the design and development of a VR application intended for educating users about anxiety reduction methods and nervous system regulation.

Three interactive activities, accompanied with calming visuals and audio, were developed to help users understand how to shift their focus from racing thoughts and environmental stressors. Each activity targets a different aspect of emotional regulation. They include a breathing exercise, an apple gathering activity encouraging light physical movement, and a shape tracing activity promoting focused attention and slow and intentional movement. A user study was conducted with 30 participants. High levels of immersion and physical engagement were reported. Usability was rated positively by the majority, though feedback highlighted the need for clearer in-app instructions and an onboarding tutorial for first-time VR users. Among the three activities, the breathing exercise received the strongest therapeutic and educational outcomes. The shape tracing activity revealed a gap in the intended therapeutic purpose and users' understanding of it, suggesting that a different execution of that aspect might be more suitable. Overall, the majority of participants agreed that the application has potential as an accessible tool for anxiety regulation alongside traditional forms of support.

This application is not a replacement for professional mental health treatment, but emphasizes the importance of understanding different methods of self-soothing and demonstrates the potential of VR as a tool for additional emotional regulation in an engaging and immersive format. In the future, the range of activities can be expanded and the impact of long-term use can be assessed.

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