

A Day in the Life of an Online Therapist

Each day, when I arrive at work, I set out to plan a therapy session that will impact and influence the lives of my patients.



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As a project coordinator of a research study, there are countless tools at my disposal and each one provides an opportunity to facilitate and measure change. It's up to me to choose the method that I believe provides the best outcome. For me, my tool of choice is a unique online virtual reality program, which provides social training to individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Using this technology I act as part therapist, part research scientist, part community liaison, and part member of a digital development team. Having this virtual tool allows me to seamlessly take on each role with dedicated purpose to help my patients recognize their own social roles that can connect them to their daily life.

As I begin each day, thinking about my patients as a therapist, each one has their own unique circumstances and situation in life. One may be in college looking to make a friend, one may be graduating high-school and worried about their next steps in life, and one may be struggling to interview for a job. My role is to take each person's story and create a social practice session that is meaningful to them. The training must come alive through the unscripted conversation of an avatar and must be standardized enough to follow the research study guidelines. Using the online tool enhances the social practice and eliminates extra effort on my part to help the participants "feel" the realism of a conversation. They become immersed in practice allowing me to step back and simply guide their improvement by giving feedback of how they are progressing.

As I begin each virtual training session logging in as my avatar online, I switch roles and become

a research scientist. I critically evaluate what I see during the session and how the participants respond. I listen to their comments when they tell me that the session was hard for them at the beginning of the practice but became easier when they could finally "get the hang of it." For the first time, they are making small-talk with a friend or inviting someone to go on a date. I feel success with them, because I know they have the tools to take with them to go and connect to someone in their own social world. As a scientist I can ask how they get better and actually measure their progress.

When I get back to my desk, I switch roles again as soon as the phone starts to ring. A parent needs help finding resources for their adolescent son. Their autistic son is about to graduate from high-school and they are terrified about his next steps because he struggles with his social skills. They are concerned how their son will go to college or find a job. As a community liaison, I listen to their worries and share the latest research on young adults with autism so that they can have tools to implement in their own family. Each individual calling with concerns and questions can benefit from learning more information about what help is available to them.

As my outlook calendar reminder pops up, I am reminded to go to my next meeting. I change roles again as I walk to the computer lab. One of the most interesting roles I take on each day is as a member of a digital development team. I share with the team how the participants did that day using the newly developed virtual environment. We discuss the current boundaries of our program, and think creatively on how best to use it and adapt it for the purpose of social intervention. Working

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on a creative technology team, we collectively trouble shoot the use of the virtual reality tool and decide what is currently working and what can be improved for the benefit of the participant.

As I return back to my office, I glance at my therapist license proudly displayed on my wall. The importance of having a “bag of therapy tools” was one of the first lessons I learned when training to be a speech-language-pathologist. I never imagined that a computer and on-line game would be one of those tools that would become invaluable to me. Being able to make a lesson come alive to the patient is paramount in helping transfer learning to everyday life. Daily, I encounter new ways to utilize and transform a lesson or training objective into a meaningful exchange of conversation through a virtual online

platform. One of the advantages of being able to use technology is the flexibility to reach my clients where they are – even if that means transforming myself into an avatar to talk with them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tandra Allen is project coordinator at The Center for BrainHealth at the University of Texas at Dallas. Her work at the Center focuses on evaluating and treating social cognitive disorders in children and adults. She has over 9 years clinical experience as a speech-language pathologist working and residing within Dallas, Texas. Her work with the social cognition research study is featured on The Center for BrainHealth website: centerforbrainhealth.org.