

HIPS/25/11 - Improving outcomes for people with problem substance use and poor mental health: co-designing psychological treatment delivered inside Virtual Reality nature

The gap in treatment for poor mental health (MH) in people with problem substance use (PSU), including cannabis, cocaine and alcohol is substantial and disturbing.

How can we deliver psychological treatment, which is key to reducing substance use and cravings, while at the same time, improve MH?

Integrating psychological treatment for PSU and MH could reduce substance use and cravings while at the same time, improve MH. Being in nature (real or virtual) helps people relax, de-stress and improve mood, but is currently under-used during treatment. Digital technology can improve access to treatment by removing barriers to traditional in-person treatment.

We aim to develop an intervention so that practitioners deliver psychological treatment inside Virtual Reality nature (VRn) to groups of people with PSU who can access it at home anonymously (using an avatar) via the Internet using a head-mounted device.

In this project, we will:

1. Run co-design workshops to adapt a subset of SMART Recovery's mutual aid, peer support psychological treatment so that its activities can be delivered inside VRn.
2. Co-produce VRn to deliver the adapted psychological treatment and a Manual to go with it.
3. Have practitioners and people with PSU test the adapted psychological treatment delivered inside VRn in order to find out if it is safe, feasible, accessible, acceptable and improves mood and reduces anxiety.

Our project team includes people with lived experience of PSU, behavioural scientists, Scottish Drugs Forum, SMART Recovery, Change Mental Health and a VR software company.