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FAST COMPANY

This Video Game Could Help Vets Get Through Tough Conversations

Sometimes it's easier to talk to a virtual human than a real one.

October 20, 2014



[Images: via Kognito]

Shoot 'em up games have been big money-makers for the gaming industry. But when real veterans return from combat, adjusting back to civilian life isn't as easy as turning off a console.

That's why one company wants to use video games to help vets to go seek help when they need it. Kognito, an organization that specializes in using video game simulations to help people get through tough conversations, has just released a new product called "Together Strong" to help vets talk to and encourage one another.

Individuals are more likely to self-disclose to a virtual human," says Kognito co-founder Ron Goldman, who spent three years serving in the Israeli military (as Israeli citizens are required). "You need to have a lot of social cognitive skills, to be able to communicate in an empathic way, and inform trust. It's not specifically with veterans—it's with all of us as human beings. With all the interactivity around us, we build skills like that in an interactive and engaging fashion, one that is serious even though it uses a lot of video game mechanics."

Some experts estimate that hundreds of thousands of veterans who fought in the last 13 years alone have returned to civilian life with post-traumatic stress disorder. Possibly even more have come back with a traumatic brain injury, or some combination of both. Holding down a civilian job can become a lot more stressful if you've already gritted through multiple IED blasts for a living. Even family members can experience secondary stress symptoms—like nightmares and panic attacks—of their own.

But many vets also resist asking for help. In 2012, the Department of Veterans Affairs estimated that a veteran committed suicide every 80 minutes.

"Together Strong" uses three model scenarios for vets who might be initially resistant to seeking treatment. The first shows a vet named Chris who has trouble controlling his anger at work talking to a friend; the second shows a service member named Alisha who's finding it difficult to connect with her husband and kids. In the third scenario, a suicidal vet struggles with the anniversary of the death of a friend. All three use a kind of choose-your-own-adventure narrative to walk the viewer through the best way to handle the situations. A small, month-long study found that veterans who used the software sought help twice as often as those who did not.

Kognito started making simulations in 2003, the same year the U.S. invaded Iraq. Goldman and his partner, Baruch College psychologist Glenn Albright, set out to use video games to help everything from business negotiations to teaching. In the last five years, Kognito's shifted to a focus on developing mental health- and health-related tools, including simulations that help doctors talk to patients about childhood obesity and scenarios that deal with on-campus suicide prevention.

The company's latest tools focus on one of America's greatest tragedies: the ongoing toll of war on veterans' and their families' lives after they come home. "It's a larger issue than just PTSD," Goldman says.