

Dementia: How virtual reality and experiential 'tours' are helping patients and carers understand the condition

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Unlike most art installations that aim to help de-stress, the one being created at the Schizophrenia Research Foundation (Scarf) in Chennai hopes to distress, disrupt, and even disorient its viewer. The immersive installation features misleading signs (left means right), induction stoves set up in bathrooms, wall clocks with repeating numbers, shoes that feel too big, shirts that feel too small, and a phone that rings incessantly. As lights flicker, recorded voices continuously yell out, “Why can’t you understand?”

Disoriented? Distressed? Disrupted?

“That’s exactly how a person with dementia feels every day, every moment,” says Sudharshini B, who is creating the installation along with Shreenila Venkatesan, both research fellows at Scarf. The installation, ‘Into Their Shoes’, which will be set up at Alliance Francaise on August 23 as part of Demcares, an awareness programme on dementia, hopes to build empathy in carers and the public on the cognitive and sensory overload that comes with the neurological condition.

“We want to show how space, time, even day or night are difficult to tell for someone with dementia. How daily functions such as dressing, brushing, bathing, and maintaining hygiene become frustrating tasks,” says Shreenila.

The installation, she says, was developed using screening tools such as the Montreal Cognitive Assessment to detect mild cognitive impairment and early signs of dementia (such as memory loss, difficulty with decision-making, and changes in mood) as well as interviews with patients and carers.

“One of the tests is drawing a clock face, including the numbers and hands. The clocks we have at the installation, some featuring nothing but random lines, others with repeating numbers, are exactly what patients drew.” A 3D brain model also allows viewers to place their head inside only to be bombarded with gibberish.

While this physical installation is possibly the first of its kind in India, in the UK, virtual dementia tours are being offered at homes and hospitals to create empathy. A few Indian startups in the mental health space are also designing virtual reality modules that help those with dementia with navigation and memory recall. Kerala-based startup Sparshmind, for instance, has VR neuro-rehabilitation modules to help people navigate a virtual version of their own home to relearn how to move between rooms or complete daily activities such as making payments.

“We also use reminiscence therapy where we recreate environments and photographs from a patient’s past to trigger recent memories,” says co-founder Hari Krishnan M, who adds that his interest in dementia is personal as his grandfather, a retired police officer with Alzheimer’s, forgot his sons and believed they were criminals.





“Awareness could perhaps have made everyone in the family more understanding of his condition.” Hyderabad-based ImaginateLab is developing VR and augmented reality versions of Indian airports to assist elderly passengers in moving through the space without anxiety. “We recently showed an elderly client an AR version of the Chennai airport, so he could feel like he was walking through it. We also captured the Hyderabad airport, which was his destination. It was meant to orient him with the airport and flying experience before his trip to reduce anxiety,” says founder Hemanth Satyanarayana, who adds that people are put through the modules with mental health providers by their side.