

# **CSPP STUDENT LAUNCHES VIRTUAL REALITY PROGRAM to COMBAT FEAR OF FLYING**

Brenda Wiederhold, a PhD candidate at CSPP-San Diego, has launched "Virtual Reality Therapy for Fear of Flying" at CSPP-San Diego's Center for Advanced Multimedia Psychotherapy. As director of the Center, Wiederhold runs one of only five sites in the United States—the only one on the West Coast—that utilizes a virtual reality system to treat common phobias such as fear of flying.

"Virtual reality has been used successfully to treat a number of problems, including fear of heights, flying, driving, and spiders; agoraphobia, and even eating disorders," she says. "The program combines real-time physiological monitoring with graded exposure therapy. It takes about eight sessions—sometimes fewer—to get people to the point where they feel comfortable about flying."

Virtual reality therapy involves the use of a head-mounted display that immerses a person in a simulation of the passenger cabin on a commercial aircraft. Clients are then guided through a set of flight experiences: sitting on the aircraft with engines off and on, taxiing on a runway, experiencing take-off and landing, and flying in both good and bad weather conditions.

One client, a business executive, had been taking powerful sedatives and alcohol before

which would have required him to fly more often. At that point he came to Wiederhold for help. After a few weeks of therapy, he was virtually traveling through thunderstorms and turbulence, and remained calm through multiple takeoff and landing simulations.

Wiederhold is a much sought-after expert in the fledgling field of virtual reality psychotherapy. She was a primary presenter on the use of virtual reality in psychology at the annual California Psychological Association meeting last March, and again in August, at the national meeting of the American Psychological Association. In January 1998 she co-chaired a session on "Virtual Reality and Mental Health" at a conference entitled "Medicine Meets Virtual Reality," sponsored by the UCSD School of Medicine. At this year's conference, sponsored by the Stanford University School of Medicine, she serves as chair of the session.

CSPP's Center for Advanced Multimedia Psychotherapy, funded by the CSPP Research and Service Foundation, is planning to add virtual reality programs that address fear of heights and of public speaking to the other programs now in place. For further information or a demonstration, contact Brenda K. Wiederhold at (619) 623-2777, ext. 415, or email her at [bwiederhold@cspp.edu](mailto:bwiederhold@cspp.edu).