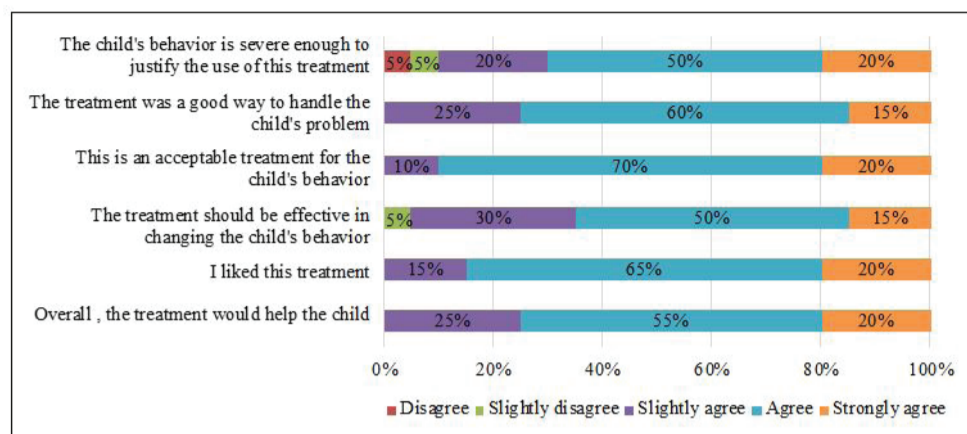
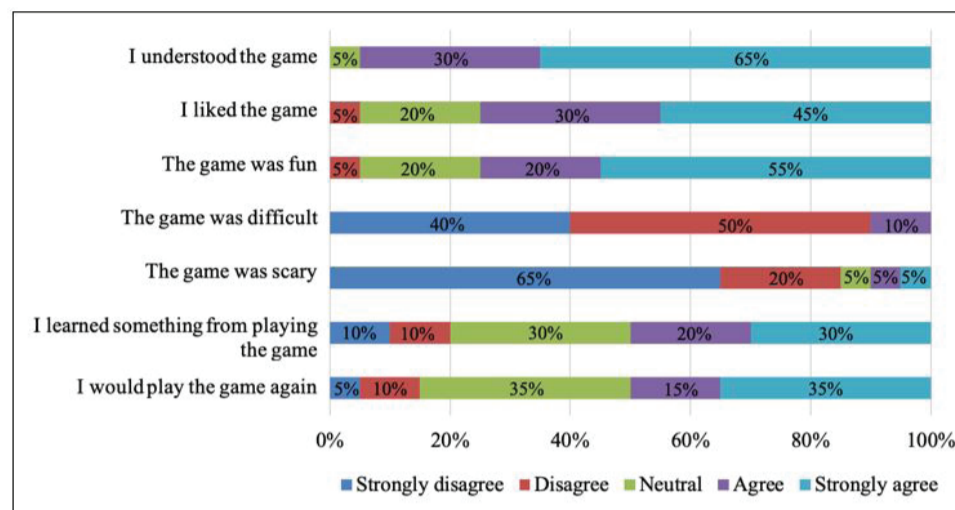


## Feasibility trial of virtual reality exposure therapy for selective mutism

### Parents' Acceptability of VRET



### Child Participants' Acceptability of VRET



Children with selective mutism (SM) present with 'non-speaking behaviour' in social situations, which often represents a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy to reduce anxious arousal during social encounters. Past research suggest that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is effective for SM. Ideally, feared situations are recommended to be replicated during graded exposure to maximise its effectiveness, but they can be difficult and impractical to be conducted in clinic sessions. Therefore, it is important to explore other modalities to conduct exposure exercises in a relatively safe and controlled manner.

Virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET) has been commonly utilised as an extension of CBT. However, most studies examined its effectiveness among adults, with no study focusing on children with SM. We aimed to examine its feasibility and acceptability among children with SM. Twenty children aged 6–12 completed six therapist-guided VRET sessions. The VRET programme consisted of virtual school and classroom environments resembling a typical school setting in Singapore. Participants were offered opportunities to respond to the characters and complete different tasks such as greeting classmates and buying items from a bookstore.

Findings suggested the feasibility of VRET as all participants completed the programme with no attrition. Parents and child participants also reported VRET

to be an acceptable and effective treatment for SM. Significant improvement in overall functioning (as measured by the Children's Global Assessment Scale and Clinical Global Impression Scale) were found at post-treatment and follow-up measures, but there were no significant changes in parent-rated speech frequency and anxiety measures. These support the acceptability of VRET as an adjunct modality (and not substitute) of CBT in SM treatment. Future studies, with more robust experimental designs and larger sample sizes, can be conducted to confirm its efficacy. As technology becomes more sophisticated, tools such as virtual environments can be explored to enhance evidence-based care for children and their families.

Study reference:

Tan, Y. R., Ooi, Y. P., Ang, R. P., Goh, D. H., Kwan, C., Fung, D. S. S., & Sung, S. C. (2022). Feasibility trial of virtual reality exposure therapy for selective mutism. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 27(2), 351-368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045211056920>

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## Psychotherapist: "I think positive mental health is..."

### What does positive mental health mean to psychotherapists in their practice?

Up till recently, psychotherapy largely focuses on correcting deficits and alleviating symptoms associated with a mental health condition. There is, however, gaining momentum to recognize the value in promoting wellbeing. Positive mental health (PMH) reflects a state of mental wellbeing that considers emotional and psychological wellbeing, and also functioning in psychological, social and societal domains, rather than simply the absence of psychopathology. Several studies in the literature have found support for the effectiveness of wellbeing interventions in improving outcomes among clinical samples, and this alludes to the potential use of PMH interventions in psychotherapy.

Nonetheless, it may be critical to first explore the concept of PMH from psychotherapists' point of view and gather an understanding of how it can be applied in clinical practice. In a collaborative study by the Research Division and the Department of Psychology, qualitative data was obtained via focused group discussions attended by healthcare professionals who provide psychotherapy to individuals with mental health issues. **Results from the study revealed five themes related to psychotherapists' definition of PMH: acceptance, normal functioning and thriving in life, resilience, positive overall evaluation of life, and the absence of negative emotions and presence of positive emotion states.**

Pertaining to their attitudes towards PMH, psychotherapists thought that **PMH was a novel concept and valuable for application in psychotherapy, though some expressed reservations** with the terminology and also the relevance of PMH among clients presenting with more severe symptoms.

It can be concluded that PMH is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond symptom management, and there is generally a consensus that it has a place in psychotherapy for clients. It would be worthwhile to further explore the integration of PMH interventions with current psychotherapy practices, and at the same time addressing some of the concerns mentioned in the study.

Study reference:

Chang, S., Sambasivam, R., Seow, E., Subramaniam, M., Assudani, H. A., Tan, G. C., Lu, S. H., & Vaingankar, J. A. (2022). Positive mental health in psychotherapy: a qualitative study from psychotherapists' perspectives. *BMC psychology*, 10(1), 111. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00816-6>

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