

PHOBIAS

Virtual Therapy

The bridge suddenly ends at mid-span, and you're standing on the brink, staring down at the icy waters below. Your heart is racing, your palms are sweating. The sole consolation: the bridge exists only on a computer chip.

Welcome to virtual reality, until now, a technology in search of a purpose. Psychologist Ralph Lamson, Ph.D., of the Kaiser Permanente Medical Group, says it's just the thing to help acrophobes overcome their fear of heights.

Don the special helmet and the real world is replaced by a computer-generated universe. As you turn your head, the headgear senses the movement and alters the image accordingly. Turn the handgrip and you seem to move forward or

backward, allowing you to tour this cyberworld at your own pace.

More than 60 patients (average age: 54) have explored the bridge in 40-minute sessions. They begin their travels in a cafe and gradually make their way to a raised wooden plank outside. To cross the plank, they must confront the phobia. Patients perceive the plank's height differently—some see it as 10 feet, some as 10 stories—but the experience can be dizzying, even if it isn't real.

"When people look down, their heart rate and blood pressure go up," Lamson says. "They get a little shaky. They say, 'Oh my God, I can't do this.'" Lamson encourages patients to stay where they are until they feel comfortable.

The plank leads to the bridge, where the truly daring can peer over the edge of the truncated span. By the time the patients return to the plank, they are somewhat desensitized and their vital signs are closer to normal. High technology indeed!

After treatment, more than 90 percent of the

participants successfully endured a 15-story ride in a glass elevator and completed self-assigned tasks ranging from cleaning out their roof gutters to diving across the Golden Gate Bridge. Benefits were still apparent after three months.

One woman who wouldn't climb above the second step on a ladder now mountain climbs. Her next destination: Lassen Peak, 10,453 feet.

