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Autism




## Adults with autism get help from 'human simulator' to navigate job interviews

Linda Carroll  
TODAY contributor

May 8, 2014 at 4:00 PM ET

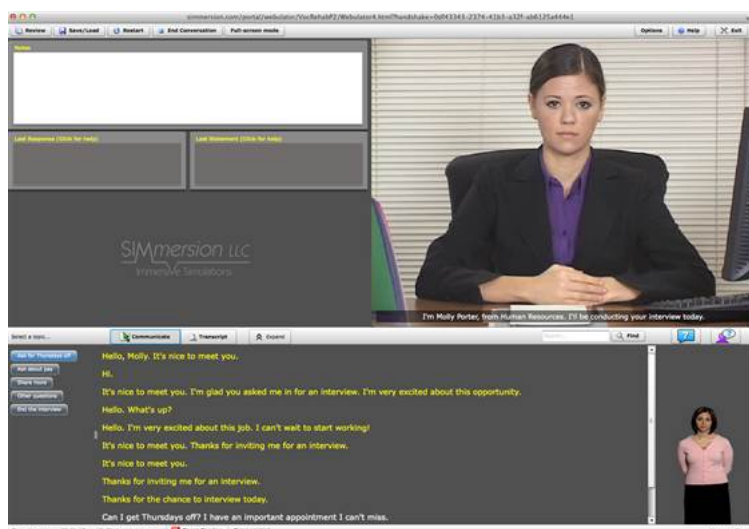
If you thought job interviews were nerve-wracking, imagine the struggle for someone with autism trying to enter the workforce.

 Without the ability to pick up on social cues, it can seem nearly impossible to navigate the social subtleties of an interview and make a good impression on a future [employer](#).

   But a new interview simulation training program might help change that. A [computer](#) program that simulates a job interview can actually improve the way autistic adults present themselves, according to a new study published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders.

The program, which was originally developed to help [train](#) FBI agents to interrogate suspects, allows users to practice job interviews and get feedback on their performances.

“Individuals with autism spectrum disorder have difficulties with social communication and picking up on social cues and empathy,” said Matthew J. Smith, an assistant research professor at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of [Medicine](#). “That makes interviewing a little more difficult for them.”



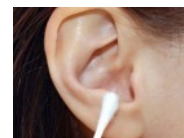
Courtesy Matthew J. Smith

An interview simulation training program gives people with autism feedback on their performance.

Smith and his colleagues randomly assigned 26 adults aged 18 to 31 either to get the virtual reality sessions or to get no extra help. People using the program were greeted by



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a fictitious human [resources](#) person named Molly Porter, who is played by an actress.

Stored in the program are a multitude of possible responses from Molly, who comes in one of three possible personality types: friendly, business-like or curt. Users start out with friendly Molly and if they get better at interviewing, they eventually graduate to curt Molly.

Each of Molly's interview questions comes with 10 to 15 possible answers in varying degrees of appropriateness.

Smith cited an example of an inappropriate response to Molly, "I saw you at the bar last week, do you want to go out sometime?"

"Obviously it's extremely inappropriate to ask Molly out on a date," Smith said. "If they offer up an inappropriate response, Molly will end the interview."

When users answer questions well, they get feedback in the form of a smiling figure with a thumbs up at the bottom of the screen.

At the beginning and end of the study, volunteers had a simulated interview with an actor playing the role of job interviewer. Then an independent human resources person scored the performances.

Those who got the interview [training](#) were judged to have improved in three areas: appearing dependable and hardworking, appearing easy to work with, and sharing information about themselves in a positive way.

"Many adults with autism never get the chance to prove themselves in the work setting because their poor interviewing skills mean they strike out before they ever get a chance," said Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson, an assistant clinical professor at the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior.

"Although most people with autism want to work and live independently, they often struggle with the skills necessary to make this happen. This is why job interview training, like the kind provided in this study, is so important," Laugeson said.

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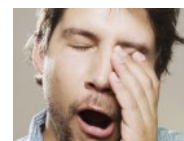
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Rossen Reports

Dramatic experiment shows deadly danger of drowsy driving

Jeff Rossen and Paul Manson NBC News

1 hour ago

Last June, a truck driver for Wal-Mart struck a car carrying Tracy Morgan, seriously injuring the comedian and killing his close friend. According to police, the truck driver had been awake more than 24 hours at the time of the crash.

On Jan. 26, 2008, Virginia Tech University freshman Nicole Lee was killed as she returned to campus after a day of skiing with four friends when the 1999 Nissan Pathfinder they were in hit a tree head-on in West Virginia. State police said alcohol or excessive speed were not factors in the crash and that they believed the driver fell

### asleep at the wheel.

"There were no skid marks or [signs of] braking; [the driver] hit a tree on my sister's side of the car at full speed," said Jennifer Pearce, Nicole's older sister. "My sister was an amazing young woman full of life, and she was taken from us instantaneously." Today Nicole's family educates drivers on the dangers of drowsy driving.

**Video:** Drowsy driving causes an estimated 1,550 deaths and 71,000 injuries every year. To demonstrate the danger, NBC national investigative correspondent Jeff Rossen drove an obstacle course after 30 hours without sleep – with dramatic results.

**Drowsy driving causes more than 100,000 crashes a year**, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. [DrowsyDriving.org](http://DrowsyDriving.org), part of the National Sleep Foundation, says it causes **an estimated 1,550 deaths and 71,000 injuries every year**.

To demonstrate the danger, NBC national investigative correspondent Jeff Rossen tested his skill on a technical obstacle course at the [Skip Barber Driving School](#) in Lakeville, Connecticut. First he drove the course while rested and wide awake, pulling off tight turns and last-minute lane changes without hitting a single traffic cone.

Then Rossen went home and kept himself awake for nearly 30 hours before returning to tackle the course again. Though tired, he said, "Actually, I feel fine. I feel like this is the kind of situation that a lot of people drive in. Maybe I could too."

But this time Rossen failed the course badly, hitting traffic cones — each one simulating a crash — over and over again.

Dr. Charles Czeisler of Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, one of the country's leading authorities on sleep, analyzed video of Rossen's driving tests. "It's a dramatic difference," Czeisler said of the second test. "He's certainly impaired and is struggling to stay awake, and at any moment could lose that struggle."

Just a few moments of what experts call micro-sleep could be the difference between life and death, Czeisler explained. "Most people don't realize that part of the brain can be asleep while another part of the brain is awake. So you may be able to keep your foot full throttle on the accelerator and even negotiate certain turns and yet not have the judgment area of the brain engaged."

In a final test, a fatigued Rossen began driving for several miles, simulating a long highway trip. When he encountered an unexpected line of cones on his final lap, he was unable to avoid them.

"That could have been a car," Rossen said. "That could have been a person. It's scary."

Doctors warn that losing sleep for one night is the equivalent of being legally drunk. And experts say the best indicator that you're about to fall asleep at the wheel is actually having it happen: Many drivers have experienced a moment when they feel themselves nodding off, then jolt awake and get a false sense of security, once their adrenaline is going, that they're good to drive. But doctors say you're likely to nod off again within minutes.

*To suggest a topic for an upcoming edition of Rossen Reports, email us.*

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