TAPPING INTO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT ONLINE

There has been a great response to a free new mental health service to support people working at the frontline during Covid-19. The initiative has been provided by turn2me – the first organisation in Ireland to provide professional mental health support services entirely online, with funding from Sláintecare.

This instant messaging service is available for a wide range of frontline workers, from those working in the healthcare sector, the retail trade, to teachers and tradespeople.

Each session is facilitated by a mental health professional and supported by trained volunteers. There are 20 groups available each week, with job specific groups available, as well as those with shared issues such as stress, burnout and maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Groups are scheduled at different times each day throughout the week to accommodate shift workers, and participants can remain anonymous when online. The content and timings of the groups were developed following consultation and discussion with frontline workers from different disciplines.

EXPERIENCES TAKE THEIR TOLL

Launching the service, Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly TD said; "While the majority of people were asked to stay at home, our frontline workers went to work, including our healthcare professionals who acted selflessly, putting their own health at risk, in order to care for their patients."

Laura Magahy, Executive Director of Sláintecare, said; "One of the main goals of Sláintecare is to support innovative initiatives that help people engage in their own health and the stepped model of care provided by turn2me is a fantastic example of just that, providing the right care, at the right time and in the right place.

Brian Holohan, Clinical Manager with turn2me, said; "Demand for our services increased significantly; at the peak of the pandemic in early 2020.. It has been challenging for everyone, but especially our frontline workers.

"The adverse psychological impact of working in such stressful circumstances, while at the same time dealing with the reality of Covid-19 in their personal lives, should not be underestimated. There's a large evidence base that peer support is effective and can also act as a helpful gateway for people who haven't reached out for help before."

IMPORTANCE OF PEER SUPPORT

As well as being facilitated by a mental health professional, peer support is an important part of the turn2me model.

Kerry's Elaine O'Donoghue is a community builder volunteer with turn2me, and having worked as a teacher for more than 10 years she understands the pressures facing frontline workers only too well.

"Like many people, I struggle with my mental health sometimes and living in a rural part of Ireland I found it hard to find a service that was accessible. Making that first step to seek help can be hard but the anonymous nature of the service means that you can be completely honest and open, in a non-judgemental environment. There's a real comfort in that when you're feeling vulnerable or mentally unwell, as it unburdens the mind.

"Many frontline workers feel the need to maintain a brave face, and to act like they're always confident and in control. Admitting you're stressed or struggling can feel like a sign of weakness but it's not. Talking to other people in the same situation can really help."

If feeling unwell, her advice on where or how to start is to log on to **turn2me.ie** on a phone or laptop. "The thought catcher and support groups are like a scaffolding to help you take the first step and provide a starting point for conversation," she says.

"A community of people are there to provide support, and who know what you're going through. There's also the option to access professional counselling," she added.

Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly TD, pictured with Jennifer Griffin, General Manager, and Brian Holohan, Clinical Manager of 'turn2me' outside the offices of the Department of Health.