NEIL O'CONNOR

Online road to self-recovery

A self-help tool created by a mental health nurse offers a lifeline to those with anxiety, says Lynne Pearce

'There are all kinds of reasons why some people find it difficult to access psychological therapies,' says nurse consultant Steve Cottrell of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board in North Wales. 'They might relate to their symptoms or their lifestyle.'

Some people with depression or anxiety feel ashamed of their illness, or fearful of treatment, while people with a phobia may find it hard to leave the house. Then there are those who are hindered by practical difficulties, such as caring for young children while holding down a job.

'Travelling is expensive, and most services are 9 to 5 which doesn't help,' adds Mr Cottrell.

More than a decade ago, the mental health nurse began to explore how he could use new technologies

to help more patients access the help they need. 'No one asked me to do it,' he explains. 'It has been more of a personal interest.'

The Serenity programme (http://serene.me.uk) is the fourth version of a web-based, interactive self-help treatment that Mr Cottrell designed to help those with stress, anxiety and panic disorders. When and how often clients use the Serenity programme is their decision, he says.

'The usual NHS model – based on admittance,

assessment, treatment and then discharge – has limitations, so we have used a chronic disease management model instead. That means there is no time limit – people can use it when they feel like it.

'We have what we call enduring but infrequent contact – people can do it at their own pace.'

Serenity has an open access information area offering a self-assessment tool and tips on managing symptoms. Another password-only part of the website is for members,

with cognitive behavioural therapy at its core. Clients work in a self-directed way with telephone support available from a professional.

'It is about breaking down the barriers between professionals and patients, and helping people to develop their own self-recovery skills,' says Mr Cottrell.

Previously known as Outreach-online, his innovative work has won several awards that have helped to fund its further development. This includes joint first prize for the best project at the annual Welsh Mental Health Nursing Awards in 2010. Since the current version launched in July 2010, it has been used by more than 37,000 people.

The programme has been carefully created to appeal to users. 'Software has a personality,' says Mr Cottrell. 'This is designed to be flexible and have a sense of humour. We have tried to make it less clinical, so clients will want to come back' NS

SUMMARY

People living in the community with mental health problems often have difficulty accessing psychological therapies. Nurse consultant Steve Cottrell has designed an online interactive treatment that has helped thousands of people with stress, anxiety and panic disorders to develop their own self-recovery skills.

Author

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