

Case study

The Older Adult Mental Health Team

Jess Moss, from the Older Adult Mental Health Team, explains why upskilling staff is a key step in helping more older and vulnerable people to get online.



The Older Adult Mental Health Team supports older people living with dementia and other mental health-related conditions. A part of the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, the team is made up of occupational therapists who support people - both while in hospital and to live independently in the community.

The pandemic caused many people to become isolated, but for older adults and those with dementia, the situation was particularly difficult. These groups were already digitally excluded before the outbreak of COVID-19, and during the pandemic couldn't rely on technology to help them stay in touch with friends and loved ones.

The Health Board partnered with Digital Communities Wales (DCW) and, after connecting through an assistive technology forum, they also joined with the United Welsh housing association to further bring the project to life. United Welsh's housing officers were excited to enhance their skills and help people to get online through the project.

Jess said:

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It was a win-win situation for both of us.

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After working together for a while, the partnership found that staff confidence was an obstacle to getting older and vulnerable people online. As many social care staff might be intimidated by technology, they were unable to support their service users to use technology or recommend digital options that could

improve their quality of life. As well as supporting older people and those with mental health struggles, the project has become an opportunity for those working with vulnerable people to learn new tech skills, so they can better assist the people they support.

Jess explained:



We found that staff confidence is a barrier to digital inclusion. So, by upskilling health and social care staff in using technology, we are enabling them to pass this knowledge along to service users, their carers and their family members.

The technology isn't specialist tools or overly complicated, it's technology that is useful in everyday life for someone with dementia or similar conditions.

An example is an Amazon Alexa. Alexas are affordable and can be picked up easily off the high street or the internet, but can really enhance the quality of life for someone who is struggling with dementia or a mental health condition.

During the pandemic, staff involved in the project reported service users using Alexa for everything from memory prompts, to shopping online to joining virtual coffee mornings.



The Health Board's partnership with DCW allowed team members to learn from their experience of supporting digital inclusion in the local community, to help extend the project's reach.

Jess said:



They understood the project and advised us on everything from Wi-Fi packages to the types of technology and how it can be used in the community to support people with mental health issues or dementia.

They also developed a training package for community occupational therapists and other health and social care workers to show them how to use this technology.



Two occupational therapy students joined the team to deliver workshops as part of a three-month pilot. One student worked across South Gwent and the other in North Gwent, and would visit service users along with their care teams to help them meet digital goals.

Jess said:



For example, if a tablet was available to borrow and a service user wanted to connect with their friends and family, the occupational therapy student would use their digital knowledge to help them meet that goal.

We had 10 calls in total during the pilot, with the majority of service users asking for support to better connect with their loved ones. All 10 achieved their goals, but once they'd become comfortable using their devices for one thing, their confidence grew and they started using them for other purposes.

Most of the service users included have dementia, and the response and improvements to their quality of life have been incredible.



The pilot was so successful, that three new occupational therapy students joined in January to help continue the work of their predecessors and help more people to reach their digital goals. There are plans too for the Health Board to replicate similar interventions for its Mental Health and Learning Disabilities OT Teams. The next step in the process has been to offer loans and demos of devices provided via DCW, as well as supporting information, for older and vulnerable people considering investing in their own digital device.

Jess added:



Our first two students created how-to guides on topics such as 'how to use zoom' and 'how to set up a memory prompt on an Alexa'. The guides were created with the help of Deep, a dementia group that shared advice on how to make content dementia-friendly.

We've also created an information leaflet that breaks down the benefits of different devices for service users, so they're aware and able to ask for support in getting online. But it also covers topics such as safety online and where to find the best device for them if they decide to commit after a demo.





Jess said:



We're still troubleshooting and trying different things, but the programme has raised awareness of how everyday digital devices can enhance the lives of older and vulnerable people.

There is so much that be accessed online, and in this day and age, no one should have to miss out.




Three top tips from the OT Team

1. Teamwork and sharing knowledge are vital
2. Upskilling benefits everybody
3. Digital can improve the lives of older and vulnerable people

Help your community learn life-changing digital skills with our free training. Get involved here:

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