

The “Connect-Well Service” launched by Spring Social Prescribing to adapt to social-distancing regulations imposed by Covid-19 has grown from strength to strength throughout the pandemic.

The 34 Social Prescribers employed by SPRING are helping to support over 1,436 clients in socially deprived areas across Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Throughout the month of May, which marked the 12-week milestone of lockdown in both regions, Social Prescribers were presented with increased challenges to keep clients engaged and supported.

Social Prescribers in Northern Ireland and Scotland noted an increased reliance on their services for emotional and mental wellbeing support. Responding to the increased emotional demand on the health and well-being of Spring Social Prescribing staff, management has provided access to group stress management workshops. Gentle relaxation yoga classes have also been provided for all social prescribers on zoom.

For clients and all members of the public, the prolonged period indoors is having a marked effect on the overall mental health of society. In direct response to the mental and emotional strain of Covid-19 restrictions, the team at SPRING Social Prescribing have provided weekly “Connect Well” online workshops which address the feelings of despondency, isolation, loneliness, stress, despair, financial worry and challenges presented by clients each week. A total of 392 people registered to take part in four workshops.

In May, Social Prescribers continued to contact their client base remotely with a total of 1,436 clients contacted. 154 new referrals were received during May.

A total of 2,385 calls were made, 744 text messages sent, 146 emails and 32 video calls issued which amounted to a total of 3,757 communications made to clients in order to stay connected throughout May. Please note, these figures relate to the National Lottery Community Fund clients.

The overwhelming majority; 62% of clients contacted reported mental health as a main concern during this period. Almost 50% of clients sought access to support services and 40% of clients reported feeling lonely and isolated. 10% of clients were concerned about where their next meal was coming from, 5% were concerned about access to medication and 3% raised concerns about access to household items.

Social Prescribers assisted in the signposting 1,933 clients to other services. Community intervention accounted for 50% of all signposting measures, 17% or 323 people availed of online support services, while 296 individuals were issued with an isolation pack to alleviate the loneliness and sense of isolation associated with shielding. 10% of signposting measures were sought for emotional support. It is significant to note that the numbers seeking emotional support in May have increased by 236% since April. It is also notable that 6% of all signposting measures were still related to assistance with food deliveries, 12 weeks into lockdown. There was a 69% decline in those accessing Emergency services in May, coupled with a 40% decrease in those seeking access to pharmacy services.

Social Prescribers across all regions and areas are facing increased demands on their time, energy and support services in relation to mental and emotional supports. The following case studies exemplify the impact of the pandemic on mental health on people of all ages and in all regions.

Michael, a 23-year-old man living in a small rural village in South Lanarkshire in Scotland, was referred to SPRING Social Prescribing at Heathy Valleys by his GP. Michael lives with his mother in a small isolated community with poor transport links. He has been unemployed since leaving school, with the exception of seasonal work at a nearby motorway service station. He kept in touch with a small group of school friends via social media but did not see them socially. In January, with the help and support of his social prescriber, Michael was taking part in weekly CBT sessions and was referred to a local employment training charity where he volunteered in the on-site café. He had started to feel optimistic about his future and confident about applying for work.

“Since I started seeing my CBT therapist my head is clearer and I can start thinking about the future. I really enjoy my café work and it has given me the confidence to apply for a part time job. I feel more positive about my life now.”

The lockdown measures have exacerbated Michael’s symptoms and he has been prescribed stronger anti-depressants by his GP. Michael has continued to be supported by Healthy Valleys Listening Ear service, receiving weekly support calls which he says have helped him cope with the “COVID-coaster” feelings he has been experiencing:

“Each telephone call reinforces how I need to change my thinking from; Oh no! Not another day like yesterday, to; I’m looking forward to getting out in the sun for a walk with my dog. I’m feeling more in control of my moods and more optimistic.”

Michael has also been connected with stress control and mindfulness classes online to help him better manage his mental health.

At Causeway Rural and Urban Network, (CRUN), Coleraine, Northern Ireland, social prescribers are also working hard to address the growing mental and emotional health issues.

As in each of the 28 Healthy Living centres, CRUN social prescribers are working with community navigators to provide food and supports. They have run a series of online programmes to address physical and mental health issues, with a weekly life coaching session proving to be very popular. They have received 7 new referrals since lockdown.

One female client who had been attending the chronic pain group since January and was known as the “life and soul of the group” has found shielding extremely difficult, particularly as she lives on her own.

She lost interest in all things and had become quite down and said she had “lost her mojo”. Through weekly conversations with her Social Prescriber they were able to identify the issue and she enrolled on the weekly coaching sessions which taught her coping mechanisms. She is now availing of weekly one-on-one sessions with the life coach. She has been able to access the help she needed through the early intervention of her social prescriber.