

Cornwall

In Cornwall, recognising that there is no ‘one size fits all’, people with multiple conditions have a choice of services to encourage self-management. These are offered in different formats ranging from condition-specific information, personalised care and support planning, social prescribing, peer support groups and psychological and emotional support. The approach taken by public health officials to co-design this model with patient representatives and others was summarised as a [case study](#) in the 2019 Multiple Conditions Guidebook.

In Autumn 2020, to understand how this is working in practice for people with multiple conditions, we spoke to a volunteer at the social prescribing project in St Austell. Social prescribing, which links people into activities and support to improve health and wellbeing, has benefitted over 1,400 people in St Austell, many of whom have complex health issues.

Sharon, now a volunteer, was originally supported by this social prescribing team to help with low mood after a type 2 diabetes diagnosis and living with pain for years caused by hip dysplasia and subsequent surgery. Amongst other things, a diabetes support group really helped Sharon, so much so that she ended up becoming one of the volunteer leaders of the group. We asked Sharon about her experiences and how COVID-19 had affected her and her work as a volunteer.



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Sharon - Volunteer at St Austell Healthcare



Can you tell us about your work as a volunteer before COVID-19 hit?

I did not really set out to be a volunteer but one of the younger volunteers that ran the diabetes support group left to go to university. Many people in the group suggested that maybe I could take over. I was not sure I could do it but one day Hayley, the social prescriber, came to the group. She encouraged me and gave me the confidence to do it. I am not an expert but I put my diabetes into remission and thought that my experience could help others. I taught myself quite a lot about the disease and I have a background in social care so it all came together. I work with another volunteer and we used to run sessions twice a month.

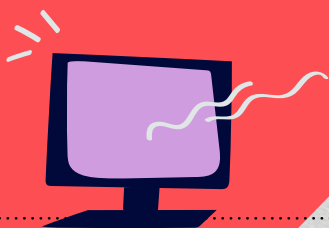
“I am not an expert but I put my diabetes into remission and thought that my experience could help others.”

What happened to the group when COVID-19 hit?

During the first lockdown everyone was really upset when the support group meetings had to stop. I had an idea about doing it online, which we proposed to Hayley who supported us to do it. It took an awful lot of effort to get people online but after trying a couple of different platforms we managed to get between five and eight people online at least once a week and sometimes more.

What impact did you see on people during this time?

I have seen a massive impact on my own life from COVID-19. With my health issues I was too scared to go out and even when lockdown lifted I was cautious because of all of the tourists. A lot of people get very lonely and really miss the opportunity to get together with people. To help with this we started also offering a social quiz every other week on top of the support group sessions. This went down really well. The group also really love seeing my granddaughter on the screen. She is two years old now but has been accompanying me to the support group since I started volunteering so the group has seen her grow from a baby. Some people were in a bad situation – waiting for benefits and not able to get food. The social prescribing team and the council were able to organise food parcels, but I also took people bits and pieces to help – like low-carb bread and sugar free cheesecake.



What helped you keep going?

I knew from early on that I was going to need some support myself. I know from my own experiences that just talking with other people helps. COVID-19, and the lockdown, was obviously quite isolating. I am lucky as I have my children nearby, but you need your friends and other social interaction in life. In this regard setting up the group online probably helped me as much as it helped others. Also meeting Prince Charles and Camilla in July, when they came to visit the surgery and hear about our work, was a great encouragement.

I also found the local social prescribing Help-at-Hand app absolutely brilliant. I have recommended the app to lots of people. When lockdown lifted I found a chair-based exercise class for the over-50s. Our diabetes support group was also the guinea pig for a trial of a six-week health and wellbeing coaching course delivered by a former GP. We had sessions on things like sleep, meditation and mindfulness. This really helped.

What challenges did you have to overcome?

Access to technology is a big issue with a lot of compatibility issues between different brands of tablet and things like Zoom. For some tablets we just cannot get it to work. One lady has a PC that is really old. It took us an hour and a half on the phone to get it set up, but we did it. For other people they just do not have the confidence or skills to get online, or the equipment. This is the biggest issue. If there was a simple affordable tablet that had Zoom built-in that would be great.

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What would you like to be able to offer in the future?

Personally, I really like to see people as I think it is important to have human contact. But the online option is convenient so in an ideal world I would have both. Normally we meet face-to-face twice a month so I am hoping we can continue online on the weeks in between. We cannot cover the hall hire to meet face-to-face more regularly and people are now used to having something once a week so I would not want to take that away if possible. When you have not got a lot going on people need regular opportunities to get together to keep them going.