

Reaching out to the web generation

Mental health experts are set to showcase their experiences of successful mental health programmes

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APPROACHING EXAM-TIME in college, Nigel O'Callaghan all too often sees the anxiety, fear and stress building up in his friends and classmates.

"You see people putting themselves under savage pressure," says O'Callaghan, a 22-year-old student in University College Cork.

"Some can handle it, and that's fine. But you see others becoming reclusive, they might stop going out altogether, their health starts suffering. You'd worry about them, really."

Anxiety, depression, self-harm or even suicidal thoughts are well documented by mental health experts who work with students. But one of the biggest problems is that few are willing to share their feelings with friends.

"There's still a big stigma over mental health problems. The old stereotype of the big psychiatric ward or old-style mental hospital is still there, or going to see a 'shrink' in the college is a big deal," says O'Callaghan.

"Too many people bottle it up, which is the worst thing they can do.

"It's a bit of a cliché, but a problem shared is a problem halved. But lots of people feel they can't do that."

It was against this backdrop that Reachout.com was launched last year.

It's an independent, non-profit initiative which focuses on the myth of perfect normality, recognising that every-

one goes through tough times.

It presents mental health issues in an accessible way through fact sheets, blogs and young people's stories about mental health, wellbeing and getting through tough times.

The focus of the service is on empowering young people to get the information and help they need early on. Content is overseen by mental health experts, so young people can be confident of the quality of the information.

Like all good ideas, it's a simple one which grew out of an exchange of experiences between mental health experts in Ireland and Australia at a recent conference.

It's this kind of information sharing which will be at the heart of a major international conference on mental health in the INEC in Killarney next week.

The International Initiative for Mental Health Leadership is, in effect, a giant meeting of minds, a networking for mental health teams about ideas or programmes which have made a difference.

Dozens of mental health experts from the UK, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland will showcase their innovations, as well as trying to learn from emerging trends and promising practice in other countries.

It's cheekily nick-named "brag and steal", but it's becoming a groundbreaking way of making progress in a section of the health sector which, in the past, has been notoriously slow.

For example, representatives from west Cork will show how they are involving service users in the development of local services; a team from New Zealand will be on hand to showcase its work in promoting better standards of physical health for people with severe mental illness; a Canadian team will share how it has improved services for minority groups.

What's also encouraging, say participants, is the fact that the initiative in Ireland is being hosted by agencies - including the Health Service Executive, the Department of Health, the Mental Health Commission and patient groups - which all have a crucial role to play in modernising Ireland's mental health services.

For people like Derek Chambers - director of programmes and policy at the Inspire Ireland Foundation, which runs the Reachout.com website - these types of idea-sharing forums are the way forward.

"Our website was born out of sharing experiences. There were years of conversation between like-minded Australian and Irish colleagues," he says. "That led to a feasibility study and the decision to bring Reachout.com to young people in Ireland."

Latest research commissioned by Inspire Ireland shows the website has a very high recognition rate among young people. The key to its success lies in the fact that the web is, increasingly, the first port of call for young people seeking advice or support.

"We're building a rapidly growing online community where people get together in a positive and supportive way through dedicated forums, blogs and discussion about whatever is on people's minds," says Chambers. "We also use this space to talk to young people about upcoming events and new service features."

But perhaps the biggest tribute to the service is from young people themselves.

Nigel O'Callaghan has been so impressed by the role it has to play that he has become one of its "youth ambassadors", helping to spread the word of the service around the college campus and beyond.

"People of my generation are very comfortable with the web, we've grown up with it. It's much easier to use a site like this as the first step in looking for help and support, rather than walking into a clinic or something like that," he says. "At the end of the day, people need to know they're not alone, no matter how big or how small their problems are."

For further information, visit:

■ The International Initiative for Mental Health Leadership (iimhl.com) takes place from May 17th-21st.

■ Reachout is at: reachout.com

■ For people in need of support or advice, contact: The Samaritans (Helpline: 1850 609 090), Aware (Helpline: 1890 303 302) or 1 Life Suicide Prevention (Freephone: 1800-247-100)

