



Coronavirus: online therapy service to offer free sessions across UK

Help Hub aims to help vulnerable older people and others who are self-isolating or struggling

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An online therapy service is to offer free 20-minute sessions aimed at vulnerable older people and others who are self-isolating or struggling, after therapists across the UK volunteered their help.

The Help Hub was originally intended to serve a small area in west Oxfordshire but will expand nationally when it launches this week following an influx of support.

“Thanks to the kindness of therapists right across the country willing to work for free, the idea snowballed in the space of less than a fortnight to the extent that we can now cover the whole of the UK,” said Ruth Chaloner, the founder of the service, who is asking therapists to email her at info@helphub.co.uk if they want to get involved.

Chaloner is now setting up a second scheme to help the hardest-to-reach members of her local community. She hopes this is another idea that could be extended nationally.

“We know there are some very vulnerable people out there who are already isolated, struggling and hard to reach,” she said. “We’ve set up a Facebook page - TheHelpHubWestOxford - where volunteers map out their area and coordinate teams to take responsibility for every street. Those teams will make sure that every single house in every street receives a leaflet from us, offering our help. Then we go back a couple of days later and knock on the door of anyone who hasn’t contacted us.

“I’d love to see people in other areas replicate our Facebook page in their area,” she said. “Getting involved and helping our neighbours will bring people together in a way that our fractured communities haven’t been for years.”

There has been a surge of anxiety since the coronavirus crisis. The National Pharmacy Association and the Company Chemists Association have issued an open letter to customers asking them not to stockpile medications amid fears that the most vulnerable will be left without.

Other pharmacy leaders have said so many people are self-isolating that the unfunded home-delivery services provided for free by chemists across the country will be overwhelmed.

“We understand that people want to feel prepared given the uncertainty that coronavirus is creating. However, it’s important that everyone plays their part in reducing the spread of this virus and helping us to maintain the supply of medicines for all,” said Malcolm Harrison, the chief executive of the Company Chemists Association, which represents large community pharmacy operators.

Leyla Hannbeck, the chief executive of the Association of Independent Multiple Pharmacies, said: “We want to ask the public to be understanding

of the situation, not stockpiling on medicines and to be mindful that medicines delivery to homes is not a funded service and at this current rate without support from the government it will not be sustainable.”

Hannbeck said pharmacies were reporting a massive increase in visits and phone calls from anxious people, mostly over the age of 70 or pregnant women.

“They ask about why some doctors surgeries are closed and what to do next,” she said. “They are worried about their medications when self-isolating and asking for their medicines to be delivered to their homes immediately. This, as you can imagine, has put an incredible level of stress on pharmacy teams who are under-funded and understaffed.”

Reena Barai, a pharmacist in south London and a member of the board of the National Pharmacy Association, said: “We have seen a tsunami effect, with anxiety levels of our customers through the roof. We think it’s only going to get worse: week two of self-isolation is going to be when people have this dawning realisation of what life is going to be like for the next few months. That’s when the peak of anxiety is really going to hit.”

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