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Debs' story

Debs has been in the mental health system since the age of eight. She has attempted suicide and been told by a psychiatrist that she will always be ill. But Debs changed her life through non-clinical therapy and is now advising on technology that can help others do the same.

She was in the waiting room of a psychiatrist when she picked up a leaflet for an Art for Wellbeing project. This is one of many services that fit under the banner of 'social prescribing', a range of non-clinical local services that a person can be referred to by GPs, nurses or themselves.

For Debs, deciding to attend an art class changed her life. "It started to feel like there was fire in my belly," she says.

She began to advocate social prescribing to other people who use services and professionals and was asked by Elemental, a 'tech for good company', to review its social prescribing software.

The software offers an online referral system for GPs and other professionals, as well as individuals wishing to self-refer themselves to a social prescribing hub. It connects them with opportunities in their community, filtered by location, cost, ability and the type of support needed. It also offers referral makers the ability to track monthly progress of their patients.

Debs offered a unique perspective and identified some initial barriers for people with mental health conditions.

She explains: "Suspicion and paranoia are common symptoms, so coming across anything that asks for personal information can be very off-putting. You have to word things carefully. You have to show that you need information for good reasons, to help them, and you have to put the person in control."

While Debs advocates having different routes into social prescribing for people with mental health issues, she is confident about the benefits of digital

platforms. She believes the accurate and up to date nature of an online system can help to reduce feelings of suspicion and paranoia in people who are using it.

"If somebody with a mental health condition turns up to an activity and it is full, or the doors are locked because it's been cancelled, they could convince themselves that the building has been shut to keep them out," she says.

"They will probably have plucked up a lot of courage to get there, and then to feel 'shut out' will have a huge impact on their mental health.

SO FAR ELEMENTAL'S SOCIAL PRESCRIBING SOFTWARE HAS BEEN USED IN MORE THAN 40 LOCATIONS AND BY OVER 300 GPs TO MAKE AND MANAGE REFERRALS.

"With the online system, it can be kept up to date so that notifications of cancellations or full classes can be added to avoid this kind of situation."

These insights have made Debs' contribution to the development of the software incredibly valuable. She describes them as "things you wouldn't normally think twice about" and believes that her involvement - as well as other people using it - has resulted in true co-production.

OPENING DOORS TO SOCIAL PRESCRIBING