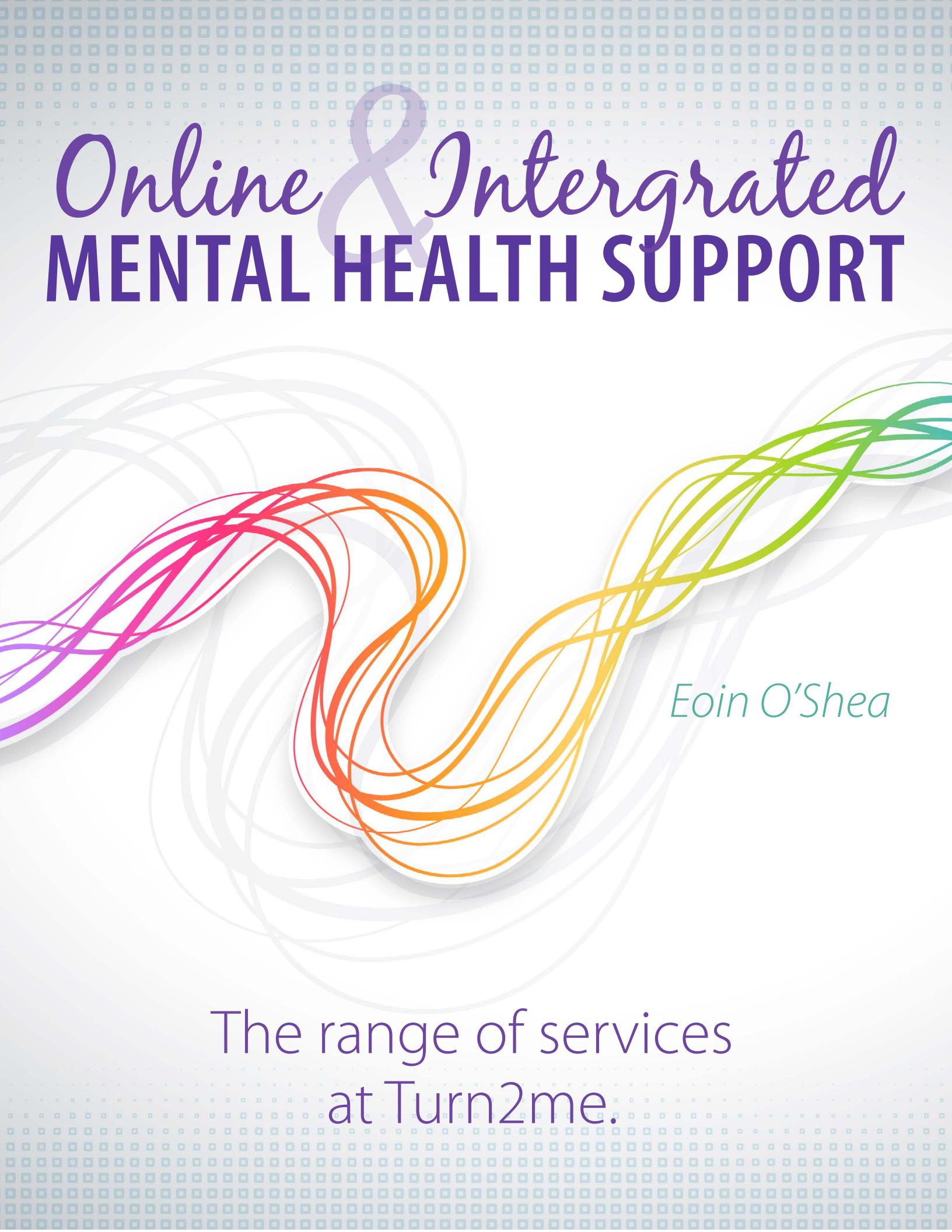


# Online & Integrated MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT



Eoin O'Shea

The range of services  
at Turn2me.



**THE INTERNET** provides unique opportunities as well as challenges for effectively engaging those experiencing psychological distress, including suicidality (Shah, 2010). Barak et al. (2008) have conducted one of the largest reviews and meta-analyses examining the effectiveness of online mental health interventions. This study found, among other results, that online methods are broadly comparable to face-to-face therapy on a range of measures. Furthermore, research (e.g. Cook & Doyle, 2002) suggests that measures relating to factors such as therapeutic relationship/alliance – so often assumed to be more amenable to development through face-to-face sessions – are comparable through online contact. Turn2me's own user survey responses posit us as an already-successful organisation in this regard with 75% of our members suggesting they are

either satisfied or very satisfied with the site (O'Reilly & Scollard, 2012).

### *The Development of Turn2me*

Turn2me was founded for very personal reasons by those directly affected by what some might consider to be the ultimate consequence of mental health difficulties: suicide. Two Irish brothers, Oisin and Diarmuid Scollard, suffered the unthinkable in 2003 when their brother, Cormac, took his own life. For a number of years, ideas about how to make some sense, and difference, in the wake of Cormac's loss percolated. In 2009, the two brothers came together from their respective legal, business,

and web design backgrounds to launch Turn2me. What started off as a small group of site users regularly chatting and posting online grew rapidly into a multi-service organisation. Initially, interaction on the site was not moderated but the sense of community among such a small number of people was strong. As time went on, the importance of training moderators to ensure safety of communications and adherence to emerging policies and procedures developed. Turn2me's appeal to a broad range of people with mental health problems did not go unnoticed externally. The

A closer look at Turn2me's range and integration of services reveals an attempt to combine the 'best of both worlds' in terms of the peer-supportive and cost-effectiveness features of volunteer involvement with the professional rigour and supervision of mental health professionals. This combination seems advisable given two strands of research supporting both approaches. For instance, some research suggests the importance of support provided by trained volunteers, even in working with otherwise challenging client groups (e.g. Verinis, 1970). In some instances, such volunteer input has demonstrated comparable effectiveness to that of professionals (e.g. Castro et al. 2011). Other research, however, points to ways in which both the administration of volunteer programs as well as some of the more complex/challenging duties, e.g. supervision of volunteers, would best be handled by professional staff (Vinton, 2012; Abdel-Monem & Bulling, 2005). In any event, it is likely that we can view volunteer efforts in initiatives such as suicide prevention as being complementary to those of professionals (Eldrid, 1993).

organisation has been awarded funding by Diageo, Vodafone, Nua Healthcare, and a generous 'Adwords' grant from Google.

As of today, the site employs no fewer than six professional staff including counselling psychologists, a psychotherapist, and fundraising staff. A Board of Directors meet with the operations and fundraising managers on a quarterly basis to guide the organisation's development. Furthermore, Turn2me utilises the voluntary efforts of between 15-25 moderators who oversee the day-to-day interactions of members on our support forums.

## ***Turn2me's Services and Research Rationale***

Whilst the present article forbids a comprehensive review of research underlying the provision of Turn2me's full complement of services, what follows is a description of these different site features with mention being made of research examples supporting the same. An attempt is made to provide service-focused discussion of how these can be provided in a safe, ethical, and workable way.

### ***Support Forums***

The benefits derived from participation in support forums may be explicable in terms of Reissman's (1965) 'Helper Therapy Principle'; the view that those who help others indirectly help themselves as well. Greidanus and Everall (2010) further suggest that this same principle may account for such helpers achieving an enhanced commitment to recovery, increased perception of importance to others and social status, and a greater sense of independence. Furthermore, studies such as that conducted by Roberts et al. (1999) have empirically demonstrated

support of the 'Helper Therapy Principle'. This study found that, among those in a 'mutual help' mental health concerns forum, those communications characterised by help offered to others were more predictive of a positive psychosocial outcome than help received. This potential mechanism of change of an online mental health community seems important in the provision of Turn2me's service to date.

The forums at Turn2me are peer-moderated by volunteers who have undergone a total of between 18-27 hours of direct training and 'shadowing' – the latter term indicating a period over which trainees observe and are guided by experienced moderators (or 'mods') in responding to members on the site. (The range of hours indicated above reflects the fact that our training has lengthened over time to a point where recently-trained mods will have undergone a

Certificate in Online Mental Health Support). Forums are open to posting between the hours of 12pm-12am; outside of these times, members are free to read others' posts but cannot post themselves because of the premium which Turn2me places on providing a safe and moderated environment for all members.

The role of mods has changed over the course of Turn2me's development. Initially, they were present only to edit and advise regarding breaches in our policy as deemed necessary. Nowadays, however, mods are encouraged through training and on-site duties to intervene, comment, provide support, and facilitate further engagement and deeper exploration of material by members on the site. Support of mods – other than through training and shadowing provision – occurs through two different

resources. One involves weekly moderator-online support groups (M-OSGs). These are support groups for and by mods, led by one of two experienced volunteers. This is a forum in which (a) support from each other can be provided in relation to the strains of the role, (b) information and guidance on issues like policy application on-site can be discussed, and (c) a method of feedback by M-OSGs facilitators exists whereby the Director of Services is informed through a standard Feedback Form of anything which needs to be addressed. A second support in this regard is provided through monthly online supervision. This is provided by a fully qualified counselling psychologist and focuses more on clinical issues which may arise for mods when dealing with certain members, either specific individuals or



broader groups characterised by varied presenting issues.

### **Online Support Groups (OSGs)**

One of the largest reviews to date has been conducted by Barak et al. (2008). The authors found that:

"Personal and interpersonal dynamics, which are central in producing effects in these groups, are induced and accelerated by the powerful online disinhibition effect. These factors, including the very impact of writing, expressions of emotions, collecting information and thereby improving understanding and knowledge, developing social relationships, and enhancing decision-making skills and consequent behavioral actions all serve as possible generators of a sense of personal empowerment for people in distress." (p.1867).

OSGs at Turn2me provide support in relation to three different presenting issues; those of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts and feelings. The addition of this latter group was deemed appropriate following an event to mark World Suicide Prevention Day 2012 on the 10th of September. This involved 24 hours of support group provision for those affected by suicide, the majority of whom were themselves suicidally distressed. The OSGs are facilitated by mental health professionals and last an hour and a half. They are of an open format, are free of charge, and can be accessed by booking in advance or coming along on the night in question. Our

chat system allows for any challenging or abusive members (a very rare occurrence indeed) to be removed from the group for an hour whilst provision is made, in the group for those who may be suicidal, to be contacted for 1-to-1 support as/when deemed necessary by the facilitator. Anecdotal evidence from our groups suggests that they have occasionally been viewed by attendees as having saved their lives or otherwise kept them going through a particularly tough period in their lives. Attendance is unlimited, meaning that those who are depressed, anxious, and/or suicidal can attend as many groups as they like.

## **Information and Services Directory**

One of the more common uses of the internet to date in relation to mental health support has been the provision of information and various non-staffed resources for site visitors. Turn2me offers its own 24-hour accessible resource in this regard. The Information service includes a Directory of Services, articles, blogs, and other informational resources so that those who visit the site can gain access to other services/information of relevance to them. Only those sites/resources which have been screened by our professional staff are included here under the assumption that incorrect information can be worse than no information at all when it comes to mental health issues.

## **1-to-1 Online Counselling**

Online counselling has shown promising results to date (e.g. Barak et al., 2008) in areas as varied as child psychiatry, depression, dementia, schizophrenia, suicide prevention, posttraumatic stress, panic disorders, substance abuse, eating

disorders, and smoking prevention (Hailey et al., 2008). However, it has also been plagued by doubts concerning safety and effectiveness (compared with face-to-face), especially in relation to factors concerning visual and para-verbal cues in communication and limitations regarding the therapeutic relationship online (e.g. Rochlen et al., 2004). The latter point seems widely-accepted in a manner not consistently supported by research concerning the online therapeutic relationship/alliance specifically. At the very least, it has been suggested that any negative effects of absent visual and para-verbal cues may be offset by disinhibition and a range of other benefits of online contact (Leibert et al., 2006).

The Turn2me online counselling offering is provided by fully qualified counselling psychologists (all are members of the Psychological Society of Ireland). Sessions are reasonably priced and last for 50 minutes. They can be booked by contacting the service by email and every effort is made to revert to that member within two working days to schedule an appointment with him/her. We are careful to screen clients in terms of presenting

issues and level of distress – it is made clear from an early point in time that the counselling service at Turn2me is not a crisis service or for those who are acutely suicidal. If this seems to be the case, every effort is made to provide that member with information and encouragement to contact a local mental health service or their usual healthcare provider, e.g. GP or psychiatrist. Furthermore, we do not work with clients who state that they are already in some form of counselling/psychotherapy elsewhere, such is our conviction that this might cause 'mixed messages' or possible confusion for such clients.

### ***Thought Catcher: Tracking one's progress over time***

A more recent and also interesting feature at Turn2me – and one which can be used in combination with any other service on offer, both internally and externally – is our Thought Catcher. This is basically a thought-, mood-, situation-, and behaviour-tracking tool which is available free of charge to all members. Individuals can submit one entry per day, communicating a certain thought they have in mind, linking this to a feeling which seems to be associated with this

thought, detailing the current scenario implicated in both, and finally commenting on how he/she seems to have responded to all three. The Thought Catcher is based broadly on the cognitive behavioural therapy theoretical underpinning which highlights the extent to which our appraisals of various thoughts, feelings, and events maintain or alter any suffering experienced as a result (Beck, 1976).

The Thought Catcher can be used by members either solely or in addition to any other intervention/support in which they are currently engaged. If presently receiving professional therapeutic support, the tool can be used to help clinicians and clients to monitor patterns underpinning their problems

– and also better ways of coping and responding to life's challenges.

### ***A View to the Future at Turn2me***

At a present membership of almost 17,000 individuals, Turn2me's service seems a welcome addition to mental health support received elsewhere, both online as well as through other modalities. Plans for the future include further research to evaluate and compare our services to others available. Furthermore, a new 1-to-1 offering is being developed which will see our organisation offer a larger range of specific methods on online counselling interaction including synchronous and asynchronous, textual, audio-visual, and telephonic components. Our vision is one in which every individual is entitled, and has access to,

- a seamless range of free and low-cost mental health support options characterised by the cost effective but safe and ethical combination of volunteer and professional support.

## About the Author

**Eoin O'Shea** is Director of Services at Turn2me. Trained as a counselling psychologist, he has worked in various teaching, research, and therapeutic settings. His work at Turn2me will focus on providing online mental health solutions to both the general population as well as specific groups for whom the online modality may represent greater accessibility and effectiveness of service.

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