Benefits of social media for nurses and service users

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The last decade has probably seen more changes in nursing than the previous 50 years. With increased workloads and constant change, recent developments in the use of online social networking in healthcare can seem like just another thing for nurses to manage. However, rather than adding to nurses’ workload, social media can simplify and enhance care. Online tools can help patients manage their conditions, engage in peer support and reduce social isolation. In researching our e-book, Social Media in Mental Health Practice, we found that people with mental health problems are already using social media to aid their recovery (Betton and Tomlinson, 2013).

Social media channels enable people to share information and ideas, and interact with each other online. As social networking continues to increase in the UK, it is clear this is not a passing fad; as described by NHS Confederation (2013): “74% of households are online, with the average user spending 14.2 hours a week online; 91% of UK adults use a mobile phone; 30% of all adults use a smartphone, and among younger adults aged 16–24, this rises to 52%.”

Social media include platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and blogging sites such as Wordpress. Many mobile-phone applications also incorporate methods for fast social interaction.

The challenge for nurses

The problems nurses face in dealing with new technology is illustrated by the case of an NHS trust that was forced to apologise to an inpatient after confiscating her smartphone due to unfounded fears she might be breaching confidentiality. This shows how nursing staff can lack knowledge and understanding of new technologies as well as the organisational policies and procedures in place to back them up.

Few mental health practitioners will have learnt about social media as part of their training – Facebook was launched in 2004 and Twitter in 2006, and both took time to become established. However, in researching our e-book it became clear that nurses and other clinicians need to understand the implications of social media for their day-to-day practice. In addition, by being familiar with the potential benefits of social media, nurses can help service users navigate both their online and offline lives as part of their recovery journeys.

Service-user needs

Perhaps the most compelling argument for nurses to start engaging with social media is that users of their services both want and expect this. Mark Brown, editor
Sue Sibbald is a service-user consultant in Sheffield, who has borderline personality disorder (BPD). She trains mental health practitioners, delivers psycho-education for people with BPD and is a governor of her local NHS trust. She set up @OfficialBPDchat in 2012 to help people affected by the diagnosis; each Sunday at 9pm, anyone can take part in an hour-long chat on Twitter (#BPDchat). Topics cover everything from coping skills for the holidays to coping with difficult times.

Ms Sibbald sees the use of social media as a powerful tool for people to support each other and build an online community: “It helps people who may have trouble with interpersonal relationships to feel heard, accepted and not alone.”

She adds: “The stigma associated with the BPD label means people can be scared to talk about it to others, but they can be open in an online environment. People diagnosed with BPD may have limited or no opportunity to meet others with a similar diagnosis. Twitter means they can share experiences and coping strategies, as well as just having fun.”

of One in Four, a lifestyle magazine by and for people with mental health problems, pointed out how satisfying it is for someone who, in everyday life, is seen as a “patient” to become an “expert” when talking to others through social media.

Johnny Benjamin, a finalist at the 2012 Mind Media Awards for his YouTube films about his recovery journey, says people can now use social media to talk about their mental health problems, which can help break down prejudice and help them make connections with others and feel less isolated in their experiences.

Blogging
At little or no cost, anyone can set up a blog. A quick web search shows there are many people blogging about their personal experience of mental health problems – sharing information and experiences, and offering tips to others. One example is The Depressed Moose, a blog about an individual’s battle with depression, his thoughts and feelings and his ideas about improving his state of mind. His posts aim to inspire others, especially those battling depression. He emphasises the importance of being honest and open.

Another example is Leeds Wellbeing Web, a blog run by, and for, people with mental health problems. It is run by a group of volunteer community journalists who contribute information, stories, pictures or films about places and activities in Leeds that help maintain their wellbeing. This blog aims to encourage people to think more positively and proactively about their mental health, thereby helping them maintain their wellbeing.

Staying safe online
The best way to understand how social media works is to try it; this will be time well spent as social media is increasingly likely to become part of a clinician’s role. However, before you – or a service user – go online, there are points to consider:

» How much do you want to reveal about yourself online?
» Who should see what you post? If there is anyone you don’t want to see your updates, how will you manage this?
» What might a future employer see? What might hinder/help you get a job?
» Could anything you write upset your partner, parents or children?
» What will you do if something you see or a conversation you have triggers your own distress? Who can you turn to for support if this happens?
» How will you feel and what will you do if someone says something online that you find hurtful?
» What if your use of social media has unintended consequences?
» When they are well, should service users plan for how they want to relate to social media when unwell?

Nurses may find it helpful to include the answers to the questions that relate to service users in a crisis plan, advance decision, or wellness, recovery and action plan.

Some platforms are more notorious than others for “trolls” – people who post anonymous, negative comments in response to others’ contributions. It is a good idea to think in advance about how you will handle this. It is also important to be aware that some people can feel an increased sense of isolation on social media, particularly when others do not engage with them. Service users should be prompted to think through online relationships as much as they would relationships started offline.

Using Twitter to engage with service users
There are some excellent examples of nurses using Twitter to engage in collaborative discussions with each other and with service users. Box 1 outlines one such example. In addition, @MHnursechat, which takes place on alternate Mondays at 8pm, is a chat for mental health nurses and others interested in mental health. It is part of @wenurses, which was set up independently by nurses to bring together all social-media resources, events and expertise for the vibrant tweeting nursing community, using the hashtag #wenurses.

Mental health nurse chats cover diverse topics and include service users and people with lived experience of mental health difficulties. They create a space for diverse people to come together and discuss topics – something hard to replicate in person.

Nursing Times runs a twitchat (#NTtwitchchat) at 1pm on Wednesdays, which discusses topics currently relevant to the nursing community, while Student Nursing Times runs one (#SNTtwitchchat) on Fridays at 1pm, which gives student nurses the opportunity to discuss issues arising from university or placements.

There are also increasing numbers of private and secure online forums being developed by NHS trusts for clinical interventions and confidential peer support.

Conclusion
Social-media channels will not be right for everyone but trends suggest their use will continue to increase. We believe nurses have a responsibility to become familiar with social media so they can incorporate it into practice where this would be of benefit to service users. NT

Reference

ONLINE RESOURCES
Examples of social media used in a positive way to promote wellbeing:
» Johnny Benjamin’s blog – YouTube films about his recovery journey: www.youtube.com/user/johnjusthuman
» The Depressed Moose – blog about an individual’s battle with depression: www.thedepressedmoose.com
» Leeds Wellbeing Web – blog run by, and for, people experiencing mental health difficulties: www.leedswellbeingweb.wordpress.com
» The Big White Wall – online forum to offer confidential peer support: www.bigwhitewall.com