



depressioNet

Difficult-to-reach clients are making use of a valuable web resource

DepressioNet is an independent, nonprofit organisation providing comprehensive information, help and 24-hour peer support via the web. DepressioNet aims to empower people by helping them make informed choices and find solutions to the challenges of living with depression.

DepressioNet was founded in June 2000 by a private philanthropist. It uses ICT to support people with depression. Using the web, people living with depression can access comprehensive information, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

DepressioNet fills an unmet need in society. By integrating web functions such as chatrooms with mental health practices it provides a safe, anonymous service for people living with depression.

It serves a need in society, giving people reliable, quality information and advice at their convenience.

A web-based 'community of circumstance' for people living with depression

DepressioNet is a mutual aid support model which combines the benefits of being online with the benefits of peer support and understanding. It uses ICT to increase people's understanding of depression and its causes and effects,

and to inform people about their options for effective treatment and management.

The director describes depressioNet as a safe place: 'DepressioNet acknowledges who people are and lets them make their own choices.' The depressioNet team recognises that people seeking health information are outside their comfort zone. People who do not usually use the Internet will go online if they are desperate. The site was designed with particular attention to the needs of people living with depression. It has a chat room and message board.

DepressioNet has won an Australian Information Industry Association (AIIA) iAward for the implementation of IT services. It had become a number one health site within the first six months of its implementation.



Benefits and success factors

Participants on the website feel a sense of community and trust. The community is based on a common circumstance and built through the integration of boundaries and informal rules. Boundaries are developed through a registration system and guidelines for interaction. The site's moderators put boundaries around the discussion. This helps keep the site a place where people can interact safely.

The idea that people share a common circumstance and that they are not alone in their struggle contributes powerfully to the sense of community. A sense of sharing and connection is a vital source of strength for many of the people who use the site and are

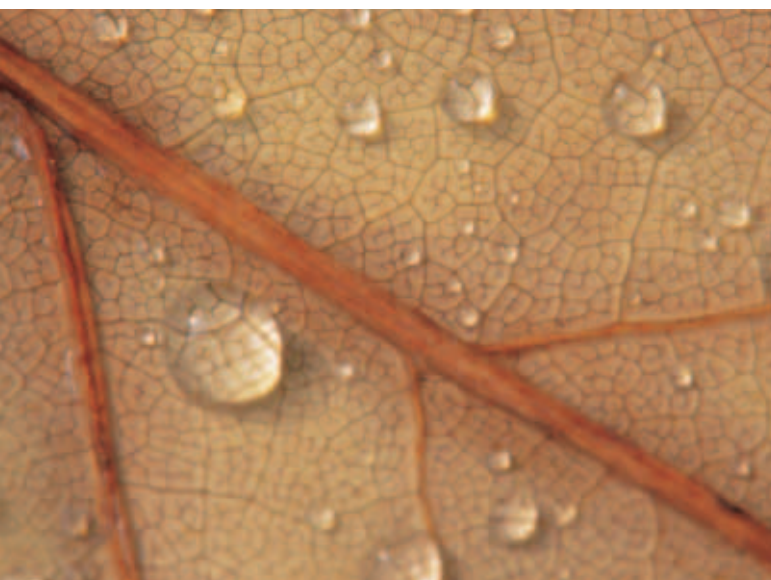
desperate for that connection. One site user believes the depressioNet website saved her life. She found solace in speaking to other people suffering depression, and the friends she made gave her the strength to keep going.

Trust in the broader site and in the interactive community is built in a number of ways including professional integrity and support, boundary-setting and focus.

All information provided on the site is verified and approved by a medical advisory panel, links to external organisations are supported by referrals, and there is constant monitoring of interactive communications.

DepressioNet team members are not medical professionals and do not offer counselling or professional advice. The chat room and message board are cared for (moderated) by a depressioNet team member at all times to maintain the quality and safety of the communication forums, and to ensure that support is available whenever needed.

The depressioNet team provides vital 24-hour peer support. It encourages and facilitates referral to professional treatment and support services in the visitor's local area and throughout Australia. Where immediate professional help and support are needed, people are referred to relevant services while continuing to receive ongoing peer support through depressioNet.



I only found this site three months ago. I felt I had won the lottery. I live in a rural/coastal town and to see my doctor is nearly a six-hour round trip for one hour of consultation.

depressioNet user



Anonymity, availability, flexibility and interaction are seen as the key factors that contribute to this success. Anonymity is a particular feature of the site: rather than a negative, anonymity is seen as a benefit. Because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, it can give help and support to people who would not otherwise be willing to access information. Anyone, including the relatives and friends of those with depression, can access the site.

Accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the site's availability means it does not have the service limitations that constrain many organisations. The site is a valuable resource for those who cannot access other services due to distance or because of mobility problems.

DepressioNet's operators believe they reach people who would not otherwise seek help.

DepressioNet are developing Health-e-People, which provides web-enabled sharing of content and other organisational resources, with the assistance of an Australian Government Information Technology Online grant.

Much of the site's success is due to the entrepreneurial approach and innovative thinking of the founder. She has an empathy for those using the site and an understanding of the illness and the need for such a service. The site's success is also due to depressioNet's investment in quality staff and volunteers and the creative use of partnerships.

DepressioNet is innovative, integrating the web and mental health. It is anonymous, flexible and interactive. Anonymity is particularly useful: because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, people often do not seek help. Through depressioNet, these people now have access to quality information, help and support.

DepressioNet enables people to take the first steps to seeking help:

- It provides a safety net for people who don't know where to turn or who have lost hope.
- It presents credible and reliable information which is constantly reviewed and updated.
- It provides an opportunity for people to communicate with each other and build support networks.
- It is helping build networking and communication opportunities in real life for people using the site.

Establishing and maintaining partnerships with appropriate public and private organisations contributes to depressioNet's sustainability. It has ongoing partnerships with Medibank Private, Wyeth Australia and Grand United Health Fund. The organisation has formal and informal relationships with other organisations in the mental health and health sectors, and several professionals provide their expertise at no charge.

Barriers

The major barrier faced by depressioNet has been getting the right technology. A barrier to developing the service further is the time it takes to change the site. Economic and social sustainability is affected by the technical requirements and the fact that service provision relies on a fairly new medium. Other barriers include:

- the ongoing challenge of financial sustainability
- access to appropriate hardware and software

- managing the relationships with the Internet service provider, the hardware supplier and software developer
- getting the staff mix right
- overcoming initial professional concern about the site as an interactive forum
- lack of resources and support to conduct research to provide the evidence base to gain credibility for the application of the web to this purpose.

Key lessons

- The web allows a service which is safe, anonymous, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and available to all, including those who are socially or geographically isolated.
- Innovative websites must work to attain credibility and sustainability.
- The challenge is to make the technology fit users' needs and circumstances.
- It is essential to develop good relationships with hardware and software suppliers and with the Internet service provider.

References

depressioNet www.depressionet.com.au/

Health-e-People www.healththepeople.com.au

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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