

# Editorial: Gaining support online and via digital innovations

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This edition of the journal has four articles with technology and, or online focus. Therefore, Jerome and I felt it would be appropriate for me to write the editorial with this focus in mind. My interest in this area has grown over a number of years, and now my main research focuses on technological and digital innovations for mental health support. Within this edition of the journal, we have an article considering online counselling from a young person's perspective. This is a paper I am a co-author on, "An exploration in to how young-people from ethnic-minority backgrounds interact with online counselling". There are two papers considering support via technology; "Co-production of digital mental health technologies to support individuals in mental health crisis" and "Online self-disclosure and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents: Online social support as a mediator". The fourth technology-focused paper included is another paper I have co-authored, and this paper has an mHealth focus; "The efficacy of mHealth for stress and burnout in clinical settings and supervisions". MHealth refers to mobile technologies to support health, including mobile apps. Future editions will focus on different technological applications to support mental health, in this edition, I will turn attention to online support, specifically online peer support.

Online support offers an alternative to traditional face-to-face support and services. In one of the digital innovations' editions (Vol 26, Issue 3), I focussed my attention on online counselling and therapy. My research has tended to focus on children and young people's perspectives and experience of online counselling and, to a lesser extent, student mental health and well-being. Since the pandemic, many counselling professionals have become open to the possibilities of online therapy and the benefits it can offer in terms of reach and accessibility (Hanley, 2020). Online support can be provided by mental health professionals in terms of counselling and therapy; however, a lot of valuable support that can be found online involves peer support.

In terms of online peer support, it is not usually intended to replace the services of a professional counsellor, but this support can be available as an adjunct to other support services (Hanley *et al.*, 2019, 2021; Xenzone, 2020; Prescott *et al.*, 2019; Ali *et al.*, 2015). In general, research has found online peer support provides a lower level of support that can help children and young people feel less isolated in their experience (Prescott *et al.*, 2019), as well as to normalise experiences for young people (Prescott *et al.*, 2017). The online environment provides people with a way to connect with peers they would not meet offline (Lasanen *et al.*, 2019). The online environment provides a space that research has found particularly valuable for supporting children and young people's mental health and emotional needs.

Young people are adept in a technological world and have grown up with technology, communicating with technology and adapting to the continuing rapid growth and development of technology and ways to communicate via a digital source. Turkle (2012) states that technology has an addictive and seductive quality, "where a faceless other is

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always ready to listen and give advice, especially when we feel emotionally vulnerable and alone” (Evans, 2014, p. 155).

There are, of course, challenges associated with online peer support for mental health, with research suggesting ensuring safety and building feelings of trust being two prominent challenges (Hanley *et al.*, 2019). Research looking at online forums for young people who self-harm found the online space provides a place for advice and discussion around safety and avoidance strategies (Smithson *et al.*, 2011). With further research supporting discussions of self-harm often result in positive mental health outcomes (Blades *et al.*, 2018). Qualitative findings considering the interactions of young people on online discussion forums for relationship breakup support found the interactions built a richly empathetic environment (McKiernan *et al.*, 2017). The decision to use online forums for mental health support can be viewed as a valid and pro-active act of self-care (Kendal *et al.*, 2017).

Within this editorial, I have tended to focus on online peer support; however, digital support for mental health can include a range of supports through different means. Many of these will feature in the “digital innovations” section in future editions of the journal. Such innovations will include mobile games, virtual reality as well as an area I am currently researching, AI (artificial intelligence) and how this can be a potentially valuable way of engaging and supporting people with mental health and emotional needs. I will end this editorial here with a glimpse into the future of technological support and future topics for the Mental Health and Social Inclusion journal. I envision we will see more and more papers within the journal that have a technological focus. We welcome such papers and look forward to providing readers with innovative support from across the world. Hopefully, we will find that as technology develops, it is growing in its reach and support for those with mental health and emotional needs.

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## Further reading

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