

Need to Talk

Issue 4

Newsletter

Having someone who understands what you're going through makes a difference

If you or a loved one are experiencing sight loss, having someone who understands what you're going through can make a huge difference. During these times, many people find it helpful to talk through their feelings with someone outside their circle of family and friends.

Through the Need to Talk (NTT) project, sight loss charities RNIB (in Scotland and Northern Ireland) and Fighting Blindness (Republic of Ireland) are working together to support people of all ages, as well as family and friends, to access the emotional and practical support they need to adapt to life with sight loss.

Although the project is working across the three regions, there is a specific focus on providing support to those living in more rural areas of western Scotland, Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland, where access to public transport and other support services can be limited.



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Introduction

At the beginning of this year I don't think anyone could have predicted just how 2020 has turned out. It has been a difficult time for most people with the onset of the pandemic and perhaps more so for the blind and partially sighted community.

One of the major features that people talk about when they are blind or losing their sight is isolation. Lockdown has left a lot of people feeling isolated but for blind and partially sighted people this period has been doubly isolating. People with a visual impairment often build up highly effective support mechanisms which may rely on other people and what we experienced was that many of these disappeared or were disabled overnight.

The Need to Talk project was in a good place to respond quickly to this new environment. Our counselling services carried on as normal, with staff relocating for home-working. However, we noticed that on top of the normal issues regarding living with a visual impairment, the community were presenting with Covid 19 based issues that needed immediate attention.

In response to this need, we developed Emergency Mental Health Sessions, which gave someone an hour with a qualified counsellor to talk through, find support and strategies for what was impacting them at this very strange time. Some of the issues were:

- Isolation
- Loneliness
- Fear
- Concern over eye appointments
- Not being able to connect with loved ones
- How to get food

All of these are major life issues and we want people to get the support they need as soon as possible. If you have been affected by any of these issues or know someone who has, these sessions will continue to run until June 2021. You can access an emergency mental health session by phoning the RNIB Helpline on: **0303 123 9999**, or by emailing: **needtotalk@rnib.org.uk**.

The sessions are normally turned around within 72 hours.

Our Living with Sight Loss courses also had to adapt from running from hotels and such venues where we could chat and get information on some of the useful integrations we could adopt into our lives. However, because of Coronavirus, these courses are now being held online using video conferencing technology. There has been a great response to this allowing people to connect and get support because although life as we know it has stopped for a while, the sight loss we experience has not. You can read more about these courses further on in the newsletter.

I know we are about to enter the darkest months of the year and perhaps these will be a little more challenging due to the continuation of Coronavirus, but please be reassured that RNIB, Fighting Blindness and especially the Need to Talk project is here for you. Please get in touch if you want help, advice and support.



Amanda Hawkins
Specialist Lead for
Counselling and
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Talk Project Lead

Counselling offer more important than ever

This is an incredibly difficult time for everyone, but we want you to know we are here to offer advice and support with our counselling services.

Our Need to Talk team offers free and confidential counselling for adults and young people (over the age of eleven) who are blind or partially sighted, and anyone who supports a person with sight loss. This take place via telephone or video conferencing.

From an emotional perspective, the issues we are hearing about from our clients are about anxiety, disempowerment and isolation and Coronavirus has massively increased these difficulties.

Other key concerns include:

- Keeping yourself healthy
- Attending appointments
- Keeping on top of household chores
- Attending to shopping

We want to focus on different ways of ensuring that people out there are still aware of the availability of this support, when our usual ways and means of interacting have moved away from face to face engagement.

Both Fighting Blindness and RNIB have always extensively linked in with our clients and service users over social media. However, over the last few months it has become clear that increasing numbers of people are regularly checking our Facebook/ LinkedIn/Twitter pages and we thought that this would be an ideal way to get the message out there – that the counselling service is still active and people can avail of this vital support as easily as ever.



We have continued to increase the volume of posts about the project and put a particular emphasis on the emotional and mental health impact of sight loss. This has resulted in a number of radio and newspaper interviews.

The RNIB Connect team arranged for a live Q & A session in the RNIB Connect Northern Ireland Facebook group where our NTT Project Manager and Senior Counsellor, Peter O'Toole spoke about the various support services offered through NTT and also the need for self-care and minding your mental health during these difficult times.

The Fighting Blindness team held their own similar Q & A Facebook session the following day and both sessions have been collectively viewed over 700 times.

We will continue to be available to offer confidential support through our counselling service. Initially people will have some preliminary questions to ask before they commit to counselling and we are more than happy to talk to anyone at any time.

“Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.”

Anne Lamott

Anxiety during Coronavirus

– We're here for you

Since March, RNIB's Helpline has seen a significant rise in the number of calls we've been receiving about mental health. We know that coronavirus has brought significant emotional strain and anxiety to many of our lives and that it has caused specific challenges for people with sight loss. We are working hard to remove barriers wherever we can, but most importantly, we are making sure that we are here for everyone affected by sight loss during this time.

Emergency mental health sessions

Many blind and partially sighted people have faced anxiety, sadness and, even, fear about the unique challenges they have experienced since the pandemic reached the UK in March. Of course, these challenges have not been confined to lockdown as problems with social distancing and the difficulties of shopping without guidance have not gone away and they are set to continue for the foreseeable future.



In light of this, in May we introduced free emergency mental health sessions over the phone, to give emotional support during these difficult times. These will remain on offer until June 2021.

What happens during the Emergency mental health session?

In an hour-long session with a counsellor, there is an opportunity to share feelings, explore coping strategies and any further support needs. The session will address some of the feelings created by the current situation including anxiety and distress and help build awareness that accepting these feelings is a positive step.

Accessing an Emergency mental health session

If you are struggling with your mental wellbeing and would benefit from a one-off session of support to deal with difficult feelings generated, or worsened, by the current situation then call us on 0303 123 9999.

Our tips for maintaining your mental health

If you're simply looking for some advice on maintaining your mental health during this time, read our list of top tips or watch our film. They include starting a hobby, keeping active, creating routines, staying connected and asking for help.

Follow this link for more information

<https://www.rnib.org.uk/advice/sight-loss-and-wellbeing/wellbeing-coronavirus>

Living with Sight Loss courses move online

Learning to live with sight loss is a massive challenge. During coronavirus, these challenges have become even more pronounced.

Our Living with Sight Loss course provides practical and emotional support to help you face the future with confidence.

As well as providing an opportunity for people with sight loss to connect with each other, family and friends are also invited to join and participate.

The courses have always been delivered face-to-face but due to coronavirus, the sessions have had to be held online.

However, the courses, which take place once a week over a period of six weeks, have really taken off.

Within the past five months, there have been three online courses.

The course is comprised of a combination of facilitated sessions which talk about what help and support is available and how it can be accessed. A range of different themes are covered including:

- Mobility and daily living
- Emotional support and wellbeing
- Assistive technology
- Eye health
- Peer support
- Leisure time

Dawn Hopper who attended the last online course said:



"I decided to join the online Living with Sight Loss course to see if there was any help out there and there was so much help."

"It was absolutely brilliant. Each week had a different topic and seeing someone online was so reassuring.

"I felt like I had all my questions answered. I learned so much and it opened up so many more avenues for me in terms of services."

Julie Hale also attended the course. She said:

"Richard Craig (who co-ordinates the course) got in contact with me and I started his online course. Each week he picked a subject on living with sight loss, for example, he went through looking at benefits and finances. There was another course about exercising and overall, it connected me with other people in the same position.

"He also told me about the counselling opportunities available. He went above and beyond to help me to let me know about the services available.

"I feel blessed for this, it made me realise, I can do this, and I can cope."

Need to Talk is a five-year project delivered through a partnership between RNIB in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and Fighting Blindness in the Republic of Ireland. The project is supported by the European Union's INTERREG VA Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

All aspects of Need to Talk's counselling services and Living with Sight Loss courses are provided free of charge.

For more information please visit: rnib.org.uk/needtotalk

Get in touch

You can get in touch with Need to Talk's counselling and Living with Sight Loss team by telephoning or emailing RNIB or Fighting Blindness.

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