

Need to Talk

Issue 6 November 2021

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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Reflecting on our progress as time flies by



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As we approach the end of 2021, a year that seems to be going by far quicker than many of us could have imagined, we've taken a moment to reflect on the progress of the Need to Talk project so far.

Since the project's launch four years ago on World Sight Day 2017, we have been able to provide dedicated one to one counselling support over 420 people.

More than 290 people have been encouraged by the project to take the opportunity to find out what Living Well with Sight Loss looks like for them at one of our (currently online) courses of the same name.

Over 350 friends, family members and professionals have completed our Emotional Support Vision Champion eLearning course so they can better understand how they can support their clients, customers and loved ones who are blind or partially sighted.

Most recently, at this year's World Sight Day on 14 October, two of our Living Well with Sight Loss course participants – who are now firm friends – Petrina Finn and Conor Lennon (pictured right), from the border counties of Ireland, were featured in a video series highlighting the spectrum of sight to thousands. This series has been encouraging people to reach out for help if they need it and can be found

online at: **Fighting Blindness – YouTube** (bit.ly/3mOqtCd)

For World Mental Health Day on 10 October 2021, one of our NTT counsellors Collette also used video to encourage people to seek support, highlighting that people don't need to shoulder their worries or concerns alone. Her plea was directed at parents and carers of children with sight loss in particular and can be found at: **Mental Health Support For Families video** (bit.ly/3ELIWqs).

While we reach out to people who need us, we hope to continue being able to be there when people need us most, ensuring any waiting list is as short as possible. If you contact us, you can currently expect to speak with a counsellor through one of our Mental Wellbeing Check-ins within 72 hours. If further counselling be deemed suitable, sessions should start within one month.

For those who would just like some tips on improving your mental health, RNIB has also produced some **helpful guides to good mental health** (rnib.in/GoodMentalHealth), which supply lots of different ideas to help – from breathing exercises to tips for sleeping well and building your resilience.

Remember, if you need to talk, we're here to listen.



Introducing our Focus on Coronavirus Living Well with Sight Loss courses

Over the summer period we introduced a telephone course lasting an hour and a half focusing on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, giving people an opportunity to meet and share their experiences of how they have been managing. Family and friends are also invited to join.

The course provides the opportunity to learn more about face coverings, guiding and social distancing based on current guidelines. We also discuss how we can maintain good mental health during this time.

Eileen Diver, who attended the last Focus on Coronavirus course, told us:

“It was encouraging for me to hear from other people – in a similar situation as myself – who experience challenges such as social distancing when out and about.

“I felt comfortable talking with others in the group and could empathise with those who shared their experiences of not being able to get appointments related to their eyes or treatments being postponed due to the pandemic.

“Richard (the course leader) took us through services providing support – such as the RNIB’s Mental Wellbeing Check-in sessions – which is reassuring to know that if I’m struggling and need to talk to somebody, I can just pick up the phone and speak with a counsellor.”

Details on further Focus on Coronavirus or Living Well with Sight Loss courses can be found on our website: **Course Calendar – RNIB – See differently** (rnib.in/LWSL-CourseCal)

Alternatively, email Richard at richard.craig@rnib.org.uk



Beneficiary testimonials

Our journeys with counselling – Shirley and Meggie's stories'

Shirley's story: For the past 20 years Shirley has lived with a condition known as Dry Eye Syndrome, meaning that her eyes are unable to produce enough tears to keep them comfortable and pain-free. Shirley had been able to manage the condition well with the use of punctal plugs, artificial tears and drops, until summer 2020.

"One of my plugs came out and thus began a downward spiral of constant pain in both eyes, continual eye infections and being unable to open my eyes first thing in the morning, as my eyelid and cornea would literally be stuck together."

"Throughout these five months, my eyes deteriorated greatly and I contacted and attended appointments with numerous healthcare professionals and Ophthalmologists who I hoped would be able to help me, but, all without success.

"During that time, the emotional distress of the situation caused me to become totally withdrawn from family and friends and was having a profound impact on my mental health.

I was feeling like I really couldn't live like this anymore.

"Mercifully for me, when I was eventually diagnosed with recurrent corneal erosion in January, that Consultant recognised that I needed emotional support as well as treatment for my eyes, and she referred me to the RNIB Eye Clinic Liaison Officer (ECLO). The Liaison Officer rang me the very next day, and told me about

the RNIB Need to Talk counselling service.

"That conversation with the Liaison Officer proved to be a godsend, as it was then I realised that I wasn't totally alone with this problem anymore.

"I began my weekly telephone counselling sessions in early-May. My counsellor was a lovely, caring lady who encouraged me to take my time and tell her my story. I was able to share it with her openly and honestly – all the thoughts and fears about my condition, plus the frustration I felt at not being able to find anyone who could help me resolve my eye problems. I was able to confide in her all those things I had not dared to share with anyone before.

"By the end of the first few sessions, I began to feel calmer and hopeful.

"As I write now, one year on, I cannot overstate the significance of this support, especially given what has happened in the world over the last 18 months, when many of us have felt isolated and almost cast adrift from our healthcare providers, due to COVID.

"I wouldn't normally want to share my personal story, but I really believe more people should know about the Need to Talk service and ask to be referred by their GP, Optician or Consultant. Please, do not hesitate to ask for a referral if you are feeling overwhelmed by your eye condition and need to talk to someone."

Meggie's Story: Margaret 'Meggie' Watt from Oban, Western Scotland, began to lose her sight quite suddenly.

"I woke up one morning about 12 years ago and found I couldn't see out of my left eye," she recalls. "There was massive bleeding. I was diagnosed with the condition Wet Age-related Macular Degeneration."

"AMD gives you a dark blotch in your vision, depending on where in the eye the bleeding is," explains Meggie (87), a retired social worker. "I can't read by sight without aids but I have enough vision to be able to get around."

Like many people who experience sight loss, the overall impact on her mental health made her lose confidence and independence. Meggie became an artist after retiring which she had to give up when her vision deteriorated.

"When I still had vision in my right eye it wasn't so bad as I could still

see with that. But when that started going that's when I felt that this is going to change everything. It was very traumatic. I'm still adjusting to my sight loss. It's a challenge.

"Just having someone to talk to and listen, to know that other people are going through the same thing as you, and realising that you're not alone is so valuable," says Meggie.

"At first diagnosis, people probably aren't at that stage where they can think beyond their condition. When you're ready, that's when you'll feel up to asking other people with sight loss how they cope."

"Like any medical condition you have your find your own way to come to terms with it, but you can do this more easily if the support is there."



Mental wellbeing and exercise

Talking the talk and walking the walk

Did you know exercise is important for our mental health and wellbeing? It promotes changes in the brain, such as neural growth, reduces inflammation and stimulates new activity patterns that promote feelings of calm and wellbeing.

As well as providing counselling and support to those experiencing sight loss, RNIB and Fighting Blindness also facilitate a range of social activities, including walking groups.

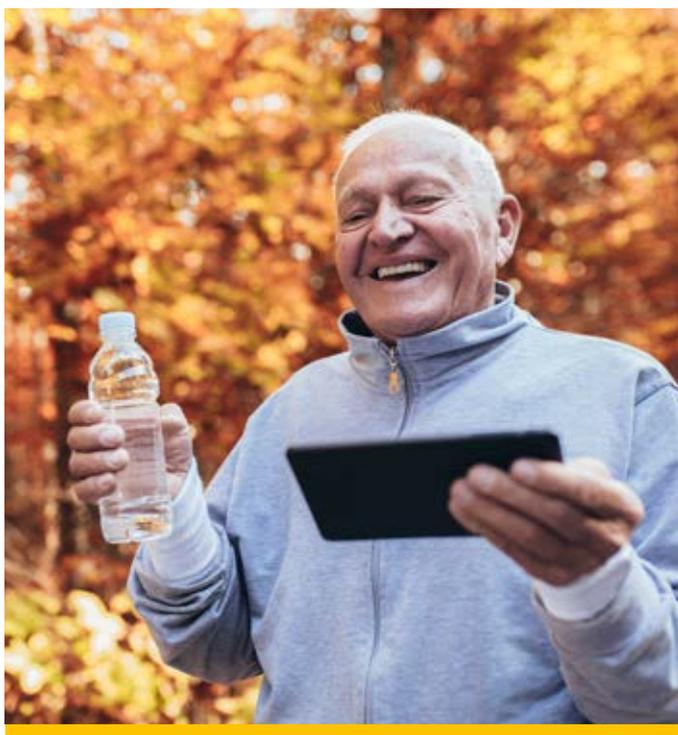
In Ayrshire, Volunteer Anne Fraser (60) has organised monthly walks around Irvine Beach Park as one of these groups and recognises the value of getting out, meeting others with similar experiences and encouraging regular exercise.

"The past 18 months have been particularly difficult for vision impaired people, with restrictions making us feel even more isolated than ever!" she says. "It's so important for us now to rebuild

our confidence and start making those vital friendships and connections that we all need."

Barbara Urquhart, who organises weekly walks in Dean Castle Country Park in Kilmarnock, agrees: "We enjoyed meeting those in person who we 'd previously met on Zoom or by telephone-conferencing on an hour's walk round a lovely park – hearing the sounds of leaves rustling, the river running by, the sound of children's laughter, dogs barking and what a variety of birdsong! It was such an invigorating walk in the company of lovely folks. And where else would you complete your time together but at the coffee shop where we enjoyed a cuppa and nibble together."

If you're interested in getting more active in your local area, contact your local organisation to get some ideas:



NI and Western Scotland:

Contact RNIB on **0303 123 9999** or email: helpline@rnib.org.uk

Republic of Ireland:

Contact Fighting Blindness on **01 678 9004** or email: info@fightingblindness.ie

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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