

LETTERS



SOCIAL NETWORKING FOR PATIENTS

Mental health issues need private space for discussion

Simon P Braybrook *general practitioner and partner*

Butetown Medical Practice, Cardiff CF10 5HW, UK

Armstrong discusses how social networking can help patients.¹ I'm a GP with a special interest in psychiatry, and I'm a mental health patient. During my years with depression I've received primary and secondary medical and psychological treatment. I'm very public about it—I've talked frankly about using antidepressants at Healthtalkonline,² and about stress in primary care for Mind,³ as I believe that talking openly about mental health and illness is key to improving it. However, I've also needed a private space where I can get support from other patients.

I joined Elefriends,⁴ a free online peer support network provided by Mind. Structured a bit like Facebook (except without everyone pretending that their life is wonderfully fulfilled), I can post what's going through my mind and can respond to others' thoughts—whether it's discussing my frustration with the side effects from medication or simply saying, "I feel like I can't go on."

People respond, quickly, with kind words, a suggestion, or a click on the "I hear you" or "Thinking of you" links (Elefriends realised long before Facebook that a "Like" is not always the best sentiment to post). I also have the confidence that the group

is anonymous but moderated by experienced peers (collectively, "The elephant" or just "Elly"), who ensure that conversations are safe. If people seem to be in crisis they can be directed to the easy-to-follow links to crisis support at the top of the page.

Mental health professionals will never have enough funding to support everyone in need of support all the time, but, even if they had this, it would not replace what peer support offers: people with lived experience helping you in the dark times to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and struggle on.

We all need that sometimes—especially professionals!

Competing interests: None declared.

- 1 Armstrong S. Social networking for patients. *BMJ* 2016;354:i4201. doi:10.1136/bmj.i4201 pmid:27510525.
- 2 Healthtalk.org. Experiences of antidepressants. www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/mental-health/experiences-antidepressants/simon.
- 3 Mind. Find the words. www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/campaigns/find-the-words-for-gp-practice-staff/.
- 4 Elefriends. <https://www.elefriends.org.uk>.

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