
'Don't make assumptions - try it out'

Assistive technology can help people with learning disabilities or mental health needs achieve greater independence. Joanna Lyall finds that the latest innovations range from hands-free videophones to 'disco showers' and smart ovens

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Terry Harrison's living room in Worthing is dominated by a huge television. But it's a much smaller screen in an adjoining room that he's keen to demonstrate today. By pressing a button and then touching one of a number of photographs on the screen of his videophone, he can talk to one of his support workers and see their expression at the same time. They can see him, too, and so have more clues to his wellbeing than his voice alone would provide.

"It's reassuring," says Harrison, 54, who suffers anxiety and has mental health needs and physical disabilities. "It's nice to see the person you are talking to - and the set is hands-free, which is much easier for me as I have limited manual dexterity.

"I use the videophone every day, and sometimes more than once because I like to chat. I only wish my mother was on it too, because she's 84 and I'd like to be able to check up on how she's looking each day."

Harrison is one of eight clients taking part in a pilot of telesupport being run in West Sussex by United Response (UR). A national charity supporting 1,500 people with learning disabilities or mental health needs, more than half of whom cannot talk, UR held two workshops in April to test the technology - a stand-alone unit incorporating broadband-enabled telephone, videoscreen and camera - and the feedback was positive.

Users saw the potential for greater independence. One suggested units should be installed in GPs' surgeries to enable consultations about medication, without having to travel to the practice.

"Although telesupport must never replace essential face-to-face support, it is likely to be a highly valuable additional technique as part of an overall care menu," says UR

chief executive Su Sayer. "It is very flexible, and can fit around the schedule of the person requiring support, and their own preferences regarding privacy."

Harrison used the system to discuss arrangements for going to a funeral with his service manager, Kim Campbell, who is based in a UR office in Littlehampton, more than 10 miles away. He also calls her regularly to find out what the visiting arrangements are for the week.

"Telesupport is in its infancy, but it's potential is enormous," says Campbell. "We support people all along the coast in nine different locations and if we can give appropriate advice over the videophone, that can save a round trip of 35 miles."

Residents' wellbeing

A registered general and mental health nurse, Campbell finds it much easier to gauge residents' wellbeing over the videophone than by telephone. And the new technology is also useful when clients need help understanding bills, or letters, as these can be held up to the screen. It can particularly help people who find verbal communication difficult: those with schizophrenia can find it less stressful than using the phone.

Drawing health staff, such as community psychiatric nurses and GPs, into the system would bring even greater benefits to clients, Campbell suggests. Meanwhile Harrison has already seen the potential for social networking: he regularly chats with the other residents on the telesupport system and hopes it will expand. "The bigger the network, the more support I will have access to," he says.

Along the coast in Bognor Regis, 30-year-old Debbie White, who has a learning disability, is preparing to move into a flat where she will live alone for the first time - with telesupport. For now, she is staying in supported housing, with five others, and building her confidence by getting to grips with the technology.

"I'm looking forward to moving on, but it will be a big change and a challenge. It's good to know I will still be able to make contact with the same people when I need them," says White, who works in Boots one day a week and in a charity shop.

The government white paper *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say*, published last year, urged local authorities to make much greater use of assistive technology, including "home touch-screen and video link-ups". It argued: "Remote monitoring enables people to have a different relationship with the health and social care system. It enables people to feel constantly supported at home rather than reliant on occasional visits, or their capacity to access local services."

But Steve Barnard, project director of the Tate programme (Through Assistive Technology to Employment), believes that, as a group, people with learning disabilities have yet to benefit from the imaginative use of technology.

"We've got to do more than just keep people safe and OK, whatever our idea of OK is," Barnard says. "People want independence and a full life. And if they are more independent they are more employable."

Training packages

Launched in 2004, with £4m from the European Social Fund, Tate is a coalition of 18 housing and advocacy groups, educational bodies and manufacturers. The partnership includes charities Home Farm Trust and Carers UK, and the government's Social Care Institute for Excellence, and the aim is to develop new devices to help with a range of daily activities, plus training packages for users and carers. Examples include:

- A client who was in danger of losing his tenancy by playing loud music when others wanted to sleep now has a voice announcer, which prompts him to turn it down when it becomes too loud.
- A man whose dislike of showering was alienating his colleagues now has access to a "disco shower" - when he turns the water on, a sensor in the shower sets off his favourite music.
- A smart oven, which reads barcodes from prepared meals, helps a woman make her supper without fear of overcooking.
- A pre-set telephone, comprising 30 photographs, has been developed for people who have difficulty dialling or reading figures.
- Software helps users of services create their own daily schedules and feed prompts into "PDAs" (personal digital assistants), reminding them of the order of daily tasks.

Tate is hoping for "a major shift towards policies that support assistive technology" for people with learning disabilities. Alan Sinclair, operations manager for learning disability at Oxfordshire county council, thinks there will be increasing take up of telesupport. "This is good value for money for commissioners as it means the already pressured learning disability budgets can be used more effectively," he says. "We are looking at opportunities at each contract review and individual client review."

Two supported living projects in Oxfordshire are equipped with assistive technology, including on-call systems, isolator switches for cookers and movement sensors. One project that introduced an on-call system has reduced the need for staff to sleep in, which has been welcomed by residents. "People living in the project are happily saying goodbye to staff as they leave the house, rather than goodnight as they go to bed," Sinclair says.

It is important to dispel concerns about such changes as early as possible, Sinclair warns. "Listen to the experiences of people using the equipment and get them to tell the good stories. Check that everyone understands how the equipment will work. And don't make assumptions about what will work - try it out."

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Terry Harrison: 'It's nice to see the person you're talking to' Andrew Hasson