

WWW.thelowdown.co.nz: Using ICT to target depression and save young lives

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Abstract

WWW.thelowdown.co.nz is a Ministry of Health funded website that is designed to engage, educate, empower and encourage young people in the process of self-help or seek appropriate help for depression for themselves and others when required. It forms part of the National Depression Initiative that aims to reduce the level of depression related suffering and suicide experienced by New Zealanders. Lifeline Aotearoa provides the real-time dynamic interactive functionality of the website, including the ability to communicate via email, text, and a message board. A Web videoconferencing e-coaching service is also in planning for the site. The development of the website was a combined effort of a consortium of providers, including DraftFCB, Lifeline, Phoenix Research and the Ministry of Health. It utilises a range of social marketing techniques and the latest multimedia web technologies. The development provides some insights and inspiration as to how ICT can be leveraged to reach an important at risk community, and forms part of an integrated continuum of care across community and primary care providers.

Introduction

WWW.thelowdown.co.nz is a Ministry of Health funded website that aims to reduce the suffering resulting from youth depression and suicide. The site was launched on Dec 3rd 2007 and forms part of the National Depression Initiative which aims to reduce the impact of depression on the lives of New Zealanders. The key objectives of the NDI are to strengthen individual, family & social factors that protect people from depression and to improve community and professional responsiveness to depression. The Lowdown site was developed with the help of DraftFCB, a creative marketing and communications agency that specialises in social change. The site is an interactive website which helps young New Zealanders understand, manage and recover from depression, and enables visitors to become part of an online supportive community.

Lifeline Aotearoa is New Zealand's leading provider of integrated telephony and ICT based helpline services in the mental health and addictions sector. As part of the Lowdown project it provides the real time interactive functionality of the website. The site utilise a range of psychological and social marketing techniques and leading edge technologies, to engage and facilitate communication. Users can contact trained counsellors via email or text or share experiences via a message board with peers. Evaluation conducted by Phoenix Research have identified these modes of communication as the most effective way to connect with the 13-24yr old age group which is the targeted demographic of the site(1-8). The website was created using, flash built on Actionscript 3, LowRa and the Sandy 3D engine (4)

1. Why target Youth Depression

Depression and suicide are major health issues for New Zealand. Approximately 500 people kill themselves each year and the suicide toll is now higher than the road toll. Although completed suicide is a complex multifactorial entity with at times no clear causative factors, there is often a high correlation with unrecognised or non optimally treated depression or other major mental illness. As well as suicide, depression can also be associated with significant negative functional and developmental impact, with deterioration in family and social relationships, poor school or work performance, and comorbid anxiety and substance abuse

New Zealand has particularly high rates of depression and suicide among its youth. Approximately 1 in 8 experience a mood disorder and suicide is the second most common cause of death. Indeed approximately 1 in 4 of all deaths among 15-24 yr olds is attributable to suicide (1,2).

Young people are recognised as a priority for the campaign. It is known that young people are less likely to seek professional help if they are depressed. There is good evidence for internet-based strategies as young people interact and communicate extensively via the internet.

The Lowdown aims to:

- To communicate effectively with young people aged 13 to 24 years, including:
- Encourage early help-seeking
- Improve knowledge about depression, including how to recognise it, appropriate treatments (including self-help strategies) and where to go for help
- Improve knowledge and skills about supporting other people who might have depression

1.1. Using ICT to empower the National Depression and Suicide Prevention Strategies

Like a road fatality a completed suicide typically results from a complex mixture of interacting factors. Suicide needs to be considered in the context of so called wider determinants of (mental) health. The interaction and complexity of apparent simple causative factors can have detrimental consequences to ones mental health. Similarly depression can be a complex multifactorial disorder.

WWW.thelowdown.co.nz seeks to leverage the power of ICT and associated human networks to utilise and enhance these factors. Although depression and suicide may be complex multifactorial disorders, perceived damage to ones concept of self, sense of competency or control over one's life and, and sense of connectedness to others may increase the risk of depression and suicide and the associated morbidity.

WWW.thelowdown.co.nz seeks to identify with youth and various youth cultures and create a sense of community and connectedness for participants. The opening page provides a range of youth celebratory role-models, from which users can pick one to guide them through the site. There are a range of multimedia resources ranging from depression fact sheets, self assessment, and FAQs to songs on related themes by KIWI bands, to Videos where various contributors recognised by youth as role models in the entertainment and sporting world discuss their experiences of dealing with their own depression or that of friends and family. The resources aim to engage, educate, empower and encourage, developing the participants sense of competency and skill base to cope with their situation, and sense of control that there are is a way through it. The central message is one of hope and encouragement to seek appropriate help (1-7). The key to the success of the site is the combination of interactive and multimedia resources backed up and supported by a personalised approach by a trained support team.

The site recognises that although facts are important in bringing about change, they can be greatly enhanced by the power of related music, stories or personal narrative by those with whom we identify or respect. Similarly although we can make positive changes by ourselves, effective change can be enhanced by sharing our experiences with others and participating in a group.

In addition to the current email, text, and message board facilities, a Web videoconferencing e-coaching service is also about to be launched on the site. This will allow selected participants to engage in one to one sessions working through the site materials where the user will be able to see the trained facilitator but can chose whether the facilitator can see them. There are plans to include educational, coaching and skills based videos in a you tube type format that users can access at their own request and pace, and call upon the one-one facilitator if required. There are also plans for computerised cognitive behavioural therapy and the use of play station like games for the treatment of depression

Outcomes for the first 3 months (3 December 2007 – 3 March 2008):

- 43,343 website visits
- 27,552 text messages received and sent and 2411 emails received and sent
- Peer support messages posted – 185+ seperate topics and 400+ support messages
- 17 emergency service contacts for suicide intervention.
- High usage from rural areas

2. Take Home

The reduction in the road toll can be attributed to a massive multi-pronged global investment in a risk identification and management system that extends from vehicle and road safety research and development to driver education and legal enforcement. The hope is that a similar risk identification and management, and building of individual and community empowerment and resilience can lead to a similar reduction in the depression and suicide toll WWW.thelowdown.co.nz, through developing and leveraging ICT developments, aims to play its part in reducing these tolls

The hope is that through research based iterative development we can develop the seatbelts airbags and ABS, road design and driver education of depression, empower users and communities to assess and identify risks and seek help where appropriate, and improve the journey to positive self development and well being.

3. Acknowledgements

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4. References

1) Associate Minister of Health . 2006. The New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy 2006-2016. Wellington: Ministry of Health

2) <http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/indexmh/national-depression-initiative>

3) <http://www.thelowdown.co.nz/ndi/html/aboutus/aboutus.html>

4) <http://dev.webbymx.net/2007/12/20/the-lowdown-website-sandy-3-and-lowra/>

5) <http://www.progressive.org.nz/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=3027>

6) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lowdown

7) http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Getting_the_exclusive_lowdown_on_The_Lowdown

8) CSR, “*Understanding Youth Development: Promoting Positive Pathways of Growth*”, Incorporated for Family and Youth Services Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human

Brief Bio's of the Author and the co-authors

Anil Thapliyal

Anil is General Manager of Lifeline Aotearoa which is the largest telephone and informatics based service provider of Primary and Secondary Mental Health services in New Zealand. Anil has worked in a variety of leadership roles ranging from organizational management, researcher to being a practitioner in the Mental Health & Disability sector in New Zealand. His multi-disciplinary background includes being investigator for Ministry of Health commissioned projects on policy, work force development and has led the development & deployment of several innovative community based ICT solutions in mental health and addictions sector in New Zealand.

Dr Martin Orr

Dr Martin Orr is a Consultant Psychiatrist, Senior Lecturer in Health Knowledge Management, Clinical Director of Information Services for Waitemata District Health Board and Clinical Director of the New Zealand National Institute for Health Innovation. Martin completed his MBA and DBA with a research focus on electronic health knowledge management systems. Martin's key research interests lie in change, innovation diffusion and knowledge management, and how information communication technology can be utilized to minimize health inequalities, and improve the effectiveness of the health sector.

Bram Kukler

Bram was born in the Netherlands where he obtained his bachelor degree of Nursing. Before moving to New Zealand in 1990 he worked in clinical nursing in both the Netherlands and the USA. Since 2001 Bram has worked as the Mental Health & Addictions Funder and Planner for Waitemata DHB and has recently joined the National Depression Initiative (NDI) campaign team as Sector Engagement Manager. Bram gained his diploma in Social Sciences: Psychology, and Master of Business Studies: Management, while living in New Zealand. He is also actively involved in local, regional and national Primary Mental Health development.