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# Therapists take services online to help people cope with pandemic

**Arlene Harris**

IT'S been a difficult year for everyone, but some have been affected more than others and many have found it difficult to cope with the ongoing restrictions and the uncertain future.

While many mental health facilities were operating on an emergency-only basis, others took their service online and offered virtual sessions to those who needed to talk.

So important is this facility, that Mary McHugh, of the Irish Online Counselling & Psychotherapy Service (IOCPS), has just won Network Ireland Businesswoman of the Year 2020 for the way in which

she ramped up her business and took services and free supports on to social media to help people cope throughout this year.

With 22 online counsellors, providing services around the globe to people who can't or don't want to access conventional face-to-face psychotherapy, the service has proven invaluable during the crisis.

Since March 15, she began offering Loving Kindness Meditation Live daily at 9.15am and then she and her team hosted a six-week Emotional Freedom Techniques programme to help viewers reduce their stress levels.

Other colleagues hosted a

domestic abuse series and a programme on suicide.

"It was very difficult to sustain all this, but we felt it was necessary," she said. "We also knew there were many therapists who were struggling as their anxiety levels were too high to work online, so we did a series of support videos to help normalise the transition for them.

"I believe, wholeheartedly, that online counselling can be as effective and, in some cases, more effective than face-to-face. Of course, it's not for everyone, but for many it works extremely well."

The psychotherapist started on her career path after

volunteering for a suicide prevention online service. Ms McHugh realised how many people were struggling and how some found it very difficult to share their feelings in person, so she began her online counselling service.

"We modelled it on how we work in private practice and it has gone from strength to strength," said Ms McHugh.

"We realised that many people were getting lost in society and would only be seen if they presented at A&E. But we knew that if we could connect with them (virtually) there was some chance they would not wait until they reached crisis point before seeking support."

**'We knew if we could connect with people, they would not wait until crisis point'**



**Reducing stress:**

Mary McHugh has a team of 22 online counsellors to help people during the pandemic