



Episode 5: Disrupting Mental Health Services – Dervla Loughnane

Speaker 1 ([00:02](#)):

This is a podcast by Lumina, the perfect space to innovate, collaborate, and grow in health, science, and tech.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([00:09](#)):

Dervla Loughnane, welcome to Health Tech Talks.

Dervla Loughnane ([00:15](#)):

Thanks. Great to be here.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([00:17](#)):

You've been a psychologist for more than 20 years, and you have degrees in industrial psychology, clinical psychology, and sports and exercise psychology. In addition to this, you have a background in IT. You describe yourself as a proud female entrepreneur. And in that capacity, you merged your two vocations to start Virtual Psychologist, of which you are the founder and CEO. Your company is saving and changing lives around the world. Dervla, can we start by painting a picture of mental health? How many people are experiencing anxiety and depression? And what is the demand on services?

Dervla Loughnane ([00:55](#)):

Mental health is really a global problem. One in every two people over any 12-month period will experience some sort of anxiety and depression. And an actual fact, over COVID or during COVID, those figures are creeping up and up. So there's a huge demand on services globally. And the unfortunate part is, there's just not enough trained people to meet this demand. What we're seeing during COVID is actually a rise in trauma. There's probably something that we hadn't anticipated, but anxiety and depression has always been an issue, but with COVID, we've seen a huge rise in that.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([01:32](#)):

What about the barriers to seeking help? Are there some people who are reluctant to ask for help because of the stigma around mental health?

Dervla Loughnane ([01:40](#)):

So certainly. And we see that globally. Here in Australia, there's certain percentage of the population that just find current services like phone and face to face to be too confronting, too embarrassing, too inconvenient, or in the places like rural and remote communities, it's just not even available. And when we look at Asian countries, mental stigma is far greater. So it's really problematic. For a lot of people that need help, they don't know how to reach help, or they just won't reach out for help.



Rebecca Griffin (host) ([02:11](#)):

A few years ago, after supporting police who had responded to a critical incident, you quit your job. And from this experience, came up with a new way of reaching people in crisis. Can you tell us about that please, Dervla?

Dervla Loughnane ([02:23](#)):

Actually, that was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back. What I started to notice around about 2017 was there was a real strong engagement of people and their mobile phones. I would travel to Brisbane each day and see everyone on the train just locked to their phones. And then in late 2017, I got called into the suicide of a young man. And working with the police, we checked his phone records and what we realized is he had made no attempt to reach out for help whatsoever. And I asked myself, what was so confronting for this man that he just didn't reach out for help?

Dervla Loughnane ([03:01](#)):

And I wondered, could a simple text message have saved his life? Would that have been less confronting? And I decided there and then to quit my job, I went back into work that day, I quit my job and I went, I really need to see, can I offer a service that does save lives, that's less confronting, that people will use?

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([03:20](#)):

So you think some people would be more likely to reach out for help if they could do it via text rather than in person?

Dervla Loughnane ([03:27](#)):

Initially, I just didn't know. It was a theory that I had, and I had seen the rise of mobile phones and an engagement with mobile phones. At that stage, it was something that I just had to test. And I had made a hypothesis that only the youth, only young people would reach out. But what's actually happened in the five years that we've been running is that idea was blown out the water. We have people of all ages up to over 80 engaging via text. Although the 22 to 29 are the highest engagement, that's followed by 30 to 40. And then we have ages across the range. And when we look at countries like Philippines that we deliver services to the age range, again, there is completely different. So it's not just a youth thing, it's really about people finding another way to seek help.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([04:16](#)):

And then out of this experience, you started Virtual Psychologist. How does Virtual Psychologist work?

Dervla Loughnane ([04:23](#)):

It's really easy. Basically, what ends up happening is, obviously, today we are predominantly QR code driven. So we've provided a service where it's generated by a QR code. You scan a QR code and you might find that on the internet, on a poster, on a stress ball. So you scan that QR code, and straight away you come through to a psychologist. Now, you might come through, depending on your channel of choice, you



might come through via WhatsApp, maybe Facebook Messenger, maybe SMS, and you come straight through to a psychologist. And from there, you can either have an appointment straight away for one hour real time with a psychologist, or you can book an appointment for a time that's more convenient for yourself.

Dervla Loughnane ([05:03](#)):

You get the same psychologist over a number of sessions and you get a treatment. So it's not a one and done model, it's not so much of a crisis model, it's about getting cognitive behavioral therapy or acceptance and commitment therapy over a range of sessions to treat whatever presenting issue you have.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([05:22](#)):

And so the entire session is via text message?

Dervla Loughnane ([05:25](#)):

Absolutely. Everything is done via text. So you text backwards and forwards, whichever channel that you've chosen, you text backwards and forwards, and that's how you have your session.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([05:36](#)):

You started out offering text counseling to farmers. Why did you start there?

Dervla Loughnane ([05:41](#)):

That was really interesting. I attended my son's school and there was a talk by the Senior Australian of the Year, Brian Egan. And he was talking about the high suicide rate amongst farmers and people in rural and remote communities. This really struck a chord with me. Anytime I hear about a suicide, I think it's very tragic. So I approached him and I said, "Listen, I think we've got a solution for you. Because farmers generally will not reach out for help, what happens if we had a really subtle and less confronting way for them to engage?" So Brian being Senior Australian of the Year said, "That's fine. Let's see what we can do."

Dervla Loughnane ([06:16](#)):

And working with Brian, we ended up jumping on a plane and going to see Greg Hunt. And we sat in front of Greg Hunt and we said, "We need money for this project." And we ended up getting a federally funded grant for two years, over a million dollars, to deliver this to farmers.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([06:32](#)):

And Virtual Psychologist has just exploded from there. Hasn't it?



Dervla Loughnane ([06:35](#)):

Absolutely. From there, we thought, "If this works in rural and remote communities, where else could it work?" And we started looking at the corporate sector, and we realized that there's a lot of corporates, maybe they're sitting at their desk, maybe they're at home surrounded by people, which is a big thing for COVID where you're sitting at a desk with your family around you and you can't talk, maybe this would suit corporates. So we started delivering to corporates. We did about 400,000 employees under corporates, large companies, Coca-Cola and Fujitsu. And that really went global.

Dervla Loughnane ([07:06](#)):

We were very fortunate, we managed to join forces with large telcos. So Globe over in the Philippines started to deliver our service. And we've just got traction from there.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([07:16](#)):

Who else can use the service, Dervla? Is it available to anybody?

Dervla Loughnane ([07:19](#)):

Predominantly it's the B2B market, so a lot of corporates. But we have just launched a B2C, which is under the brand Mental Health Warrior, which allows anyone to purchase a session. So they can just go to Mental Health Warrior website, purchase a session, book the session for whenever they wanted. And this was really about parents that might want the service for their children who maybe just wouldn't engage with the psychologist any other way.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([07:46](#)):

You describe Virtual Psychologist as a disruptive innovator. What do you mean by that?

Dervla Loughnane ([07:51](#)):

Psychology as a whole and treatment as a whole has always been very set in its ways. The gold standard is you attend a psychologist in a face-to-face session. They expanded to include a little bit of phone sessions, but generally the goal standard is always face to face. But we disrupted that, we brought in technology and said, "Why should things be done that way?" I was noticing people weren't reaching out that way. Could we disrupt the industry and allow people to engage in a way that felt more comfortable to them using technology that people use every single day?

Dervla Loughnane ([08:28](#)):

So that's why I consider ourselves disruptive innovator. We brought technology into an area that never really had technology and we've changed the way psychology is done.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([08:39](#)):

And it's really moving with the times, isn't it?



Dervla Loughnane ([08:42](#)):

I think so. The mobile phone is such an important item in everyone's lives. I just felt we needed to move with the mobile phone. And also, I didn't want to create an app that you had to download, that you had to log in, you had to provide your details. I wanted to make the experience as user friendly as possible. And I asked myself, what's already on your phone that you don't have to download, or what are you already using? And it was WhatsApp, Facebook, everyone's got SMS. So I really wanted to decrease any barriers to accessing psychology. And that's why we didn't create an app, we just used what was out there.

Dervla Loughnane ([09:19](#)):

People really rate our service because of their ability to multitask. So you don't have to take an hour out to get to the appointment and all the rest of it, and you can really use it on demand. We have a lot of people that can't talk, moms that are breastfeeding don't want to wake up their baby. We've had them text message, and we've had some amazing stories where people have used our service because they can't talk. So we've had people that have lost their voice, but we've also had cases of domestic violence. We had a very unfortunate case of a lady hiding in a cupboard and said, "He's downstairs, he can't hear me. I'm texting you."

Dervla Loughnane ([09:53](#)):

Certainly people that really can't talk just find texts the only way to communicate and get help.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([10:01](#)):

You're listening to HealthTech Talks, a podcast series delivered by Lumina. To find out more about Lumina, visit the website, luminagoldcoast.com.au and sign up today to receive your Lumina opportunities pack. Dervla, last year, you participated in the HealthTech Accelerator Program, LuminaX, how did that help you advance virtual psychologist?

Dervla Loughnane ([10:26](#)):

What it really did for us, it allowed us to develop new products by forming partnerships with expertise that we wouldn't have gone through mainstream services. So we are looking at our assisted artificial intelligence and we've partnered with Datarwe who's helping us develop a new product that looks at the benefits of artificial intelligence in delivering mental health services in a more scalable and cost-effective way. And without this program, we just wouldn't have had access to that skillset. So really what we're trying to do is we're not replacing the human connection, so we're not developing an artificial intelligence chat bot.

Dervla Loughnane ([11:07](#)):

What we're trying to do is use artificial intelligence to look at the data and go, how quick can we diagnose stress, anxiety, and depression through the information coming in and potentially use less skilled people, but train them up to the level of a qualified psychologist without them needing to do a seven-year degree?



So we're trying to empower our staff to be really accurate in that diagnosis and treatment by using assisted artificial intelligence.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([11:36](#)):

Dervla, can you tell us about the challenges you experienced along the way to launching Virtual Psychologist?

Dervla Loughnane ([11:42](#)):

Gee, we came across a lot. One of the biggest things, the biggest pushback was, people kept saying to us, "You can't seriously think that you can deliver mental health services via text. How can it happen? Surely, you don't get the body language and the verbal cues." And there was a lot of people really challenging us and saying it just won't work. That's probably the biggest challenge that we've had is really educating people and saying, "Well, hang on, I'm pretty sure you text people the whole time. It's a way that we communicate, why can't therapy be done in that way?"

Dervla Loughnane ([12:19](#)):

So that was probably the biggest challenges, really convincing society as a whole, that this is an acceptable way of de of delivering treatment.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([12:29](#)):

It's about making support more accessible, isn't it?

Dervla Loughnane ([12:32](#)):

That's our goal is to really make sure that mental health is more accessible to everyone at any time, regardless of your income. We believe it's more than just mental health, we believe that we provide hope to people. That's our biggest tagline is that we provide hope. I think if it means coming through a mobile phone via text, why not?

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([12:51](#)):

What key message do you have for entrepreneurs with an idea they believe could transform or support healthcare?

Dervla Loughnane ([12:58](#)):

I think you've got to really know, why does your product differ from what's already out there? So know your unique selling proposition and be really clear about that. So review your competitors and know how you fit in and how you disrupt things. So I think that's absolutely essential. Take the time to research globally. Don't just research in Australia, research globally and see who your competitors are and how you differ. And also know your revenue model or whatever metric that you're going to use as your key to success.



Dervla Loughnane ([13:30](#)):

It's really important that you set yourself up knowing what that metric is going to be. Often for us, it is a commercial revenue model, but I think that's really important that you've got an idea, that you know how you're going to measure the success. And if you are going to make money out of it, you know that what that revenue model is, and that it's better be a sustainable revenue model,

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([13:52](#)):

Thinking back five or so years ago when you had the idea for Virtual Psychologist, did you ever think it would be where it is now?

Dervla Loughnane ([14:00](#)):

Do you know, I had always hoped, I had hoped that it would be... I had a big dream that I never wanted to hear someone take their own life because they didn't know how to reach out for help. And that was always my motivator, but I didn't think that it would get to this level. And we've been very lucky along the way. People say, "Is it your hard work or is it luck?" And I think luck plays a really big part. We got the Optus Future Maker, I was awarded the Optus Future Maker. We got money from that. Then we went on to Singtel Regional Future Makers, and we got money from that and we got connected to a global market.

Dervla Loughnane ([14:36](#)):

So a lot of luck has happened to get us where we are. And I've got some amazing people in my life that have really helped me get here. So it hasn't just been me. In fact, it's not me at all, it's just a great village of people that have managed to connect to other people and want to make a difference.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([14:53](#)):

You've seen a lot of the world, Dervla, how does the Lumina development here on the Gold Coast compare to what you've seen elsewhere?

Dervla Loughnane ([15:01](#)):

I think what we offer here, it is just world class. And I think people don't realize the connections that have been set up here are fantastic, I don't feel that I've seen it anywhere else. Even when we talk about Silicon Valley, you don't have what we've got here. So we've got connections to the hospital here, we've got connections to the university, even connections to the Gold Coast City Council and to other councils. So it's that whole ecosystem that if you are a startup, you're able to plug into existing commercial entities that you can really leverage that will help you. And I just have not seen that globally anywhere else.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([15:41](#)):

And finally, Dervla, you've featured in Vogue Magazine, you've won business awards, what's next for Dervla Loughnane and Virtual Psychologist?

Dervla Loughnane ([15:50](#)):



Obviously awards are great and it does a lot for the ego, but I think our underlying drive is our social impact. How many more lives can we change? How many lives can we save? We are really about transforming a life. And at the moment, we want to bring out our service to schools. We really want to target the youth who we feel certainly during COVID might not have access to the support that they need. So that's a really big goal at the moment is bringing our services to school kids and to university students and letting them know that this service that is only a tap of your fingers away.

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([16:30](#)):

Dervla, it's been wonderful talking with you. Thank you for sharing your story with us.

Dervla Loughnane ([16:33](#)):

Great. Thank you very much

Rebecca Griffin (host) ([16:35](#)):

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