

Case Study: Moving our training online during Covid-19

By STORM® Skills Training CIC

“Our agility as an organisation and our process of testing new ways to deliver training during Covid-19 has ensured that we can continue to empower people working on the frontline to prevent suicide.”

Bianca Hegde, Managing Director

What does your training consist of?

STORM® is a skills training package developed at the University of Manchester in the 1990s. It offers skills-based training in risk assessment and safety planning for suicide prevention and self-harm mitigation. STORM® also has a suicide postvention module which develops skills and confidence to help those bereaved or affected by the death of someone by suicide. The package is proven by research to improve skills, confidence, and attitudes. Packages and courses are intended for people working on the frontline such as health and social care, schools and higher education, prisons and probation services, addiction services, supported housing and emergency services, who want to improve their ability to help others in distress.

How did Covid-19 affect your ability to deliver training?

All our courses were previously delivered face to face. Our ability to deliver anything reduced to zero. We had to postpone ten scheduled training sessions and were unable to schedule any more. We went from receiving over fifty enquiries in February to zero almost overnight. No training was delivered between 9 March and 5 June. Not only did it affect our ability to deliver training, but it also prevented our licensees from delivering STORM® within their organisations. It was a real

shock. At that point we had no idea how long lockdown would last, but knew that we had to adapt our methods of working, as face to face training was clearly impossible.

What changes did you make to the way you worked?

Our first consideration was whether the STORM® Skills Training could be delivered online with all its elements. Fortunately, the technology existed to give us the flexibility we needed, and we decided it might be feasible, but that a small-scale test was required first to be absolutely sure. Initially, we carried out a pilot with four internal staff, using the Zoom video conferencing platform, before running additional pilot sessions with four, then eight, licensees from Northamptonshire NHS Foundation Trust. We also consulted with our other licensed customers on what would be useful to them during this time. We ended up offering a support package of free training, delivered direct to licensee staff and existing facilitators, to get our customers through these difficult times.

Specific considerations included:

- Online sessions were small, limited to groups of eight participants.
- We ensured we had everyone's email and mobile numbers in case of any technical or emotional difficulties.

- As this could be a difficult time for our participants, we took time to check that this was the right time for them to be doing this type of training, also briefing them on things they could do to manage their own wellbeing.
- Training of any kind can be quite exhausting and being in front of a computer is no different, so we made sure participants were given frequent breaks of five to ten minutes off screen.
- All our online training sessions have been led by pairs of facilitators, so they can provide both technical and emotional support to participants and one another.

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What impact did moving online have?

The most significant impact of the transition to online learning has been sustaining the momentum of training for our licensed customers and being able to offer training safely and professionally to others on the frontline. As one of our licensees recently told us: “We are immensely grateful for your willingness to assist us to sustain STORM learning in this new world – and your commitment to maintaining absolute integrity of the solution on translation to a different format.”

The feedback from our online participants was also just as good as from training carried out prior to Covid-19 by more traditional means – with nearly 100% saying they thought their training was “Excellent” or “Very good”. Some of the comments received also reflected this positive response, such as this from a mental health practitioner who participated in our two-day, level

two Suicide Prevention and Self-harm Mitigation course: “This course was very well delivered via Teams, and the STORM trainers were both very knowledgeable and excellent in their delivery and style. The content certainly gave you food for thought and support in being able to carry this out within your workplace. It was explained so that anyone could understand, whether you have done this before or not, and the skills sessions helped with the practice and understanding the process.”

What were the challenges of moving training online?

Technical and emotional support for participants

- Our initial trial highlighted the need for technical support to enable participants to get online and access materials needed for the training, as well as the things we needed to do to make sure individuals felt safe and emotionally supported while on a call. This could include something simple, like drawing an individual’s attention to the chat facility, training them how to respond, and sending them separate messages to welcome them to the training and to encourage a private line of communication if they needed it.

Functionality of the technology

- Early on we realised that Zoom didn’t have all the functionality we needed to effectively deliver all the elements of our training, so we switched to using Microsoft Teams, which, among other features, allowed us to record sessions and play back instantly.
- We also found that as we ran more training sessions, the more we learnt, so that we could continually tweak and improve how we delivered the courses online.
- However, Microsoft Teams proved to be slightly frustrating at times, due to the rapid rate they are developing the platform. Things change quickly and it takes time to adjust to them.

Access for participants

- Working with our various licensees, it was clear that IT security around programmes varied, as did what employees are and aren’t allowed to do on work devices.

What enabled you to move online effectively?

- We were fortunate that our STORM® Skills Training package proved so adaptable to online delivery. We were pleasantly surprised that all training elements could be delivered virtually, and through testing we were able to identify the right platform to use, as well as the additional support needed for facilitators and participants.
- It helped having a talented and flexible team that were willing to learn on their feet, particularly around technical skills. This helped enormously when it came to setting up the platform for each session, getting participants online and troubleshooting any technical problems they had. Information and technical support provided by Microsoft also proved very helpful.
- Our training courses would normally be small groups anyway (between eight and 12 participants face to face) – eight being a number which worked well for online training and later for when we were able to resume some face to face, socially distanced learning.
- Customers were willing to continue working with us and were genuinely grateful for the support we offered them. In particular, Northamptonshire NHS Foundation Trust, who were willing to run initial pilots with us, which created the foundation for future online work.

What are your next steps?

We are hopeful for a return to face to face training, as this is the preferred option. As the Covid-19 situation is constantly evolving, we will continue to monitor the news agenda, assess the repercussions of possible new restrictions on our business and adapt our offer as much as we can. In that sense, we are good at “planning for the worst and surprised by anything better!”

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