

Making sense of lockdown life

Strath mum's daily connection with son Louis

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Making the best of it - Kate and Louis are keeping in touch

A Strath mum has highlighted the extra uncertainty faced by those living with mental health issues or additional support needs during the coronavirus lockdown period. Kate Sainsbury's son Louis is severely brain-injured due to neonatal meningitis and needs a full-time dedicated carer. Louis (33) currently resides in the Learning Disability Unit at Carseview in Dundee.

Kate, a lay reader in local churches, said her son was among many who can find it difficult to understand why they can't see their loved ones as a result of restrictions implemented as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. The Comrie resident told the Herald: "It has been hard for Louis not to see me for seven and a half weeks – and hard for me too. "But we were lucky enough to be able to supply Louis with an iPad, a mobile Wi-Fi unit and a broadband connection, so we FaceTime every day. "He has taken to it just like that! "When he comes into view on the screen, my heart swells with love for him, and I think from the grin on his face that he feels the same way too.

“Louis is able to use words and phrases to hold conversations. “We warm up by chatting about the food he’s looking forward to – fish and chips, ice cream, lasagne. He says the word and I echo it. “Then we might move on to the serious thing on Louis’ mind – when is mum going to come and see him? “He might pucker up his face in unhappiness, say ‘Who’s there?’, ‘Open the door’, to which I reply, ‘I can hear you’re asking when’s mum coming, Louis’.

“I help him name his unhappiness, his uncertainty – he is, after all, no different from any of us. “So, I feed back to him, ‘You’re feeling a bit fed up, Louis,’ and he smiles because I have understood what he was saying. “I say, ‘You want to know when you can come home to Comrie?’ And he laughs because I know what he means.

“This last week we’ve had a good breakthrough in making sense of lockdown. “We’d been using a simple guide, produced by a disability group, but Louis is still straining to understand why he is not allowed out.” Kate says that Louis’ understanding is in some ways like that of an 18-month-old toddler, an age where abstract ‘rules’ don’t mean anything. He needs to feel that an actual person, like mum or dad, is telling him he can’t do something.

This week, remembering that Louis hears the news on the TV in the unit’s sitting room, Kate told him: “Boris Johnson says you can’t go out!” “Then he really laughed,” she continued. “He repeated the name. So now we know it is Boris Johnson who says he can’t go home.”

Kate went on to praise all the local volunteers who are ensuring healthcare workers have the scrubs, masks and wash bags they need. She said she felt mental health nurses were being overlooked but, within an hour of putting out an appeal for wash bags for carers at Louis’ unit, her call had been answered.

She explained: “The unit closed to visitors on March 18 – for at least 12 weeks for the security of the residents, some of whom are very vulnerable. “The nurses are doing a wonderful job, empathetically caring for the residents in the unit, some of whom are really struggling to make sense of it.

“For mental health and learning disability nurses, they sometimes feel they are a bit overlooked, whereas we as a family know what a wonderful job they are doing – how it matters that they are feeling upbeat and strong to support the anxieties in those they care for.

“The senior nurse on the ward, Zoe Watt, emailed me to ask if I knew of any community groups who might be able to help by making wash bags for her nurses. “Within an hour there was a fantastic response from Christine Forsyth in Crieff, an individual and another group.”

Kate is currently setting up an innovative residential therapeutic community locally for those with complex and profound learning disabilities, which will be known as the Appletree Community.

She added: “I do feel sure that out of this lockdown there will be silver linings – lots of future laughter and ways of integrating sons and daughters with complex disabilities, like Louis, into our caring communities.” When he comes into view on the screen, my heart swells with love for him, and I think from the grin on his face that he feels the same way too.

Contribution by Kate Sainsbury, Lay Reader