**GEM SUPPORT TO PARTICIPANTS DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN.**

As a navigator developer on the GEM project, this was always going to be a trying and difficult time to carry on working with our participants.

Not being able to support my participants with face-face meetings has caused me to think out of the box!

To begin with I made sure that most, if not all of them had access to WhatsApp video calling, facetime, messenger video calling or skype.

I then made a list of which of my participants were particularly vulnerable with their mental health, living alone or had other complex needs. These participants were my main priority to keep the channels of communication well and truly open.

I created daily routines for those that need structure around their spectrum barriers.

I’ve enrolled most of my participants onto some online learning, keeping in relevant to our education or employment goal, I’ve also a young adult who is doing his functional skills, so we video call twice a day so I can support him with the terminology as he is from another country. One hour for maths and one hour for English.

Some of my participants may struggle with some of the course contents and terminology so we book video calls daily and I go through the course with them explaining anything they are struggling with. a few of my participants lack focus and motivation so I also book video calling slots so I can support them whilst they are learning, being on hand to encourage them when needed.

A handful of my participants struggle with social anxiety, since working with them on the GEM project we had worked really hard on being out in the community but with the latest government restrictions they don’t appear to be going out at all, so with the use of face time or video calling I am joining a young lady on a short walk, keeping close to our own houses chatting to each other about our different surroundings. This is proving a huge success, it’s giving her fresh air and a sense of reassurance knowing she still has company albeit in a slightly different format.

I also feel this is improving their communication skills and keeping a sense of time.

All the above can still be evidenced by screenshots of all call logs on video calls, skype and messenger as well as the usual emails and texts. I’m also documenting it all in their action plans as normal, I can get their signatures when its safe to do so.

Apart from keeping them engaged with courses and routines its also a time to provide them with some social interaction, just chatting about day to day things and providing them with some much-needed reassurance that we can still progress on our GEM journey, we can still hit our goals but just in a different way and in a slightly different time frame and that we need to continue to be positive and just adapt our plans when needed.

One of the things I’ve done with my participants who live on their own with very little support or outside contact is play games via our phones.

So far, we have played quiz clash, draw something and words with friends. This is purely for the social aspect, breaks up the boredom from just watching films. Gives them a chance for a bit of ‘brain training’ and a giggle.

Laughing is definitely good for the soul….especially through times of crisis.