Highfield Healthcare offers an exceptional level of treatment for those going through mental health problems. Consultant Psychiatrist Miriam Kennedy discusses their new partnership with Aware Ireland.

Highfield Healthcare was ahead of its time when it first opened all the way back in 1825 – with the facility insisting on compassionate care for patients above all else. Situated in Whitehall, north Dublin, and located in gorgeous grounds, Highfield was founded by the Eustace family and is still very much a family-run centre. Their programme of treatment makes great use of the surroundings, with the healthcare facility providing general exercise, walking groups, nature groups and outings to local parks and botanical gardens, where people can practice mindfulness techniques in a tranquil setting.

Recently, in a drive to strengthen their collaborative approach to mental health, Highfield has partnered with fellow mental health organisation Aware, for one of their Life Skills Groups. Based on the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), the Life Skills programmes are designed to help people learn more about how they think – and how this can influence their actions in helpful or unhelpful ways.

The Life Skills Group Programme is delivered over the course of six weeks in 90-minute evening sessions. With the help of a series of easy-to-follow booklets and expert guidance from a trained facilitator at each session, participants can learn how to better manage the stress of everyday life; recognise and manage unhelpful thoughts; learn new ways of thinking; and ultimately begin the journey to a healthier and more confident life.

“In Highfield in the last three years,” explains Highfield Consultant Psychiatrist Dr. Miriam Kennedy, “we’ve set up a day hospital, which is an alternative to in-patient care. From that came these Aware meetings, which take place on-site every week.”

Aware Support & Self Care Groups offer a unique opportunity to talk openly about depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety and other mood-related conditions. Peers share their experience and understanding, and offer an exchange of thoughts and techniques around self-care and resilience in a supportive, confidential and proactive environment.

“The outcomes have been good,” says Dr. Kennedy. “I think it’s a combination of having a full team there – who are treating people for severe depression or bipolar or OCD – but also meeting peers, working in small groups, and just having that idea of ‘recovery is possible’. So that has gone very well as an initiative from Highfield.”

Highfield have been experts in elderly care and Alzheimer’s Care, but this partnership stemmed from their desire to refresh the idea of helping people within the community.

“We realised that people were really benefitting from peer support,” notes Dr. Kennedy. “We were very aware that we wanted to develop more links with the community. One of those groups that jumped out was Aware, because they’re very successful throughout the country. Not just in education, but also in bringing people together in very innovative ways and giving light.”

The initiative was funded by the Dublin Fingal Rotary Club, members of which were keen to try to understand the mental health problems faced by young people – and how they could help.

“They really had an interest in helping people who had anxiety or depression,” says Dr. Kennedy, “but mightn’t fully need psychiatry. They were trying to understand the younger generation – their kids and grandkids – and the help that they might need. I see it in my work. There are patients who definitely need psychiatry. But then there are also people who need some help just because they have problems around anxiety and stress. If you have those problems in a prolonged way, they can be really detrimental. They can hit you at college or at work or whatever, and you might respond by getting in on yourself or going to a worse place.”

As Dr Kennedy stresses, this partnership is about helping people “overcome lots of life changes.”

“We’re trying to reach out to people aged 18-30, who are trying to overcome lots of life-changes. Aware and Highfield both have a lot of experience, so this is a really great partnership. For a lot of young people, it’s the isolation which is a problem. This gives people an opportunity to connect. It sounds so simple, but actually, the traps that people get into which get them into that cycle, they can be very difficult to get out of. This gives people the tools to understand their problems, talk about them, and work towards goals. That’s hugely important.”

The next Life Skills Group Programme will start on the week beginning November 4, 2019. Registration will open on October 14. For more information, contact: Highfield Healthcare, Swords Rd., Whitehall, Dublin 9.