

WeConnect's app helps addicts navigate the journey to recovery

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Daniela Luzi Tudor was running her first tech startup in California when her co-founder confronted her: Tudor needed to get help for a drug and alcohol addiction. Until she did, her co-founder said, their close friendship would have to take a step back.

"It was the first time I really felt unconditional love from another person," said Tudor, who is now 31 and living in Seattle. Her former co-founder and now best friend Adrienne Trewolla truly cared, Tudor felt.

Tudor acknowledged she was using alcohol and cocaine too heavily, a reality that sunk in even deeper when she ran out of money, lost her car and couldn't find a new job. But even when she moved back to Seattle where her parents supported her, she thought she could stop drinking by herself.

For nearly a year, "I tried to stop on my own," she said. "For every few days I could put together, there was a next binge. That's pretty typical because [recovery](#) doesn't work alone."

Tudor now runs a growing Seattle startup, WeConnect, that seeks to address that very issue-recovery needs to be about community. The company's app lets [people](#) track their recovery days and activities, and easily reach out to sponsors or friends when they need help.

The idea for WeConnect, which used to be called Palalingq, first popped into Tudor's head when she was starting an inpatient recovery program in

Kirkland, after a short stint in jail.

She had failed to show up for a court date and landed in jail in Burien. That experience, and her continued bingeing, shook Tudor to her core.

"I felt like every single cell in my body was shaking and I just didn't want to be alive anymore," she said.

Trying the 30-day program at Lakeside-Milam, a Pacific Northwest chain of drug and alcohol recovery centers, was a last attempt to get better, Tudor felt.

She journaled every night during the program, and on the third day wrote about a technology solution to connect people recovering from addiction. She had learned from a counselor that day about the high rate of relapse - which can be as high as 60 percent, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

WeConnect hopes to lower that rate with several tactics. It lets people enter and track their activities, from something as simple as brushing their teeth every morning to going to recovery meetings or getting to work on time.

The app includes location technology to make sure that someone "checking in" to an activity is actually at the correct location.

That's important for WeConnect's main customers, the counselors and mental-health professionals who work with people in recovery. The startup sells licenses to its app to treatment centers and clinics, which then have patients use them as part of treatment. The app sends data to counselors about how well the patients are completing their activities, so counselors can reach out if needed.

The first time Andrea Arany-Kovacs saw the app, she was ecstatic. Arany-Kovacs, an outpatient counselor at Residence XII in Kirkland, has been in recovery for more than seven years and has worked at three treatment centers.

The way she sees it, three factors contribute to a successful recovery: accountability, structure and support. WeConnect provides all three, she said.

Residence XII, a drug and alcohol treatment center for women, is testing out WeConnect for its patients.

"A lot of these women are starting life all over again," Arany-Kovacs said. "So scheduling and structure was not part of what they were doing in addiction. It's a great tool to help build structure."

It also helps Arany-Kovacs do her job. When patients come in for individual sessions, she already has a sense of how many Alcoholics Anonymous or other support meetings they have attended and how well they're taking care of themselves.

The greatest challenge for the women she works with is connecting to other people in recovery, she said.

It can be hard to reach out, but WeConnect makes it easy. People can add friends and family to their support lists, where they can keep up to date on how well they are completing their recovery activities.

If someone is feeling really bad and is considering using drugs or just needs help, they can press an "SOS" button that instantly alerts everyone on their contacts list within the app. That eliminates the extra step it takes to ready yourself and call someone, Tudor said - something that can be hard when you aren't feeling well.

WeConnect is based in the Galvanize co-working space in Seattle. It now has 18 employees and recently raised \$2.4 million from investors.

There are other apps that let people keep a record of their recoveries, but what sets WeConnect apart is its incentive program and the way it tracks outcomes, said Peter Davidson, co-founder of Lighthouse Treatment Center in Anaheim, Calif. People can earn points within the app for completing activities and eventually get rewards, such as Starbucks gift cards, which are sponsored by WeConnect.

WeConnect's dashboards that provide data to mental-health providers could also help prove outcomes to insurance companies, said Davidson, who just started using WeConnect as part of Lighthouse's program last month.

WeConnect also makes a version for individuals to buy directly if they don't want to or can't get it through a treatment center. That costs \$7.99 a month.

Treatment centers can buy yearlong subscriptions for \$98.55 per user.

Tudor and her co-founder Murphy Jensen are both in long-term recovery and committed to helping other people achieve the same.

"Isolation and lack of connection are really what feeds addiction," Tudor said. "The opposite of addiction is really connection."

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