

Chapter 60

Peer Counseling Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Peers have been supporting one another in a range of internet support groups since the 1980s. A unique feature is the shared social identity among peers, which creates a feeling of solidarity. Three types of online setting can be identified: self-help support groups with similar peers and symmetrical communicative roles; moderated support groups with similar peers and asymmetrical roles; and support groups, which do not share similar experiences, and have asymmetrical roles. Content analyses of these different types of online support have shown that peers offer one another emotional support, esteem support, informational support, and network support. Future studies are needed to generate a greater understanding of the dynamics of peer support and the differences in peer counseling behaviors between the various members of Internet support groups.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s there has been an exponential growth in online services for different target groups and problems where peers meet and support each other online. We find support groups for adolescent self-injury, cancer, depression, diabetes, disability, eating disorders, Huntington's disease, pregnancy, single young motherhood, smoking cessation, teen issues and young widowship, to name just

a few. A key characteristic of these groups is the provision of socio-emotional support by peers in computer-mediated communication, often with a focus on physical or mental health issues. This definition does not therefore include peer tutoring for educational purposes, peer education, electronic group support systems or general networking sites that are not aimed at counseling. Peers may share a non-professional status (e.g. an internet support group where cancer patients share experiences without the presence of a doctor), an age group (e.g. a forum where adolescents discuss

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various teen issues), and experiential knowledge or significant life events (e.g. pregnant women). This shared social identity among peers who are one another's 'similar other' creates a feeling of solidarity, of "mateship" (Caplan & Turner, 2007; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000).

A well-known form of peer support is an internet support group (ISG) where people with the same problem, illness or disability meet and support one another. The participants, who often form a clearly defined target group with a specific problem (e.g. young people with an eating disorder), share the same status and background and have a symmetrical relationship in the computer-mediated communication. Other kinds of peer support, however, involve different communication roles and/or backgrounds. There are ISGs in which some participants have a more active, leading role in the counseling talks than others. Bacon, Condon and Fensler (2000) describe a forum where widows exchange experiences under the guidance of a bereaved nurse, who thus shares the background of all participants but has her own distinct role in the conversations. Participants do not always share the same background, but there may be another kind of match. In the *Share in Trust* project, for example, in which trained young people help peers with various psychosocial issues, the participants' young age is the unifying characteristic (Fukkink, 2011).

Peer support can be roughly divided into three types (see Table 1). ISGs of types (1) and (2) usually involve a clearly defined target group and theme to produce the desired match between peers. In type (2), certain peers are given an active

role in the computer-mediated communication. In ISGs where participants have different roles, types (2) and (3), training in counseling techniques is sometimes given. The equality and symmetrical relationships between peers in all types of peer support is relative, however, and peers may differ in experience, age and/or their role in the conversation (see Fukkink, 2011) and their contributions to the forum (see Bambina, 2007). For example, certain forum members may serve as role models for recovery or for the appropriate use of coping strategies (Winzelberg, 1997). One example of this is a forum where cancer survivors with extensive experience provide social support to those who have just been diagnosed with cancer.

Peer support can also be combined with other kinds of assistance in a multi-component program. An online service may combine peer and professional support in a professionally moderated group, for example by supplementing peer support with a professional psychologist who does not have any personal experience of the subject that is the group's focus (see Zabinski, Wilfely, Calfas, Winzelberg, & Taylor, 2004). Peer support can also be combined with a wide range of other kinds of help (see Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo, & Stern, 2004).

OVERVIEW

Sid Schneider and Jay Tooley (1986) were the first to write about internet support groups, which they called "self-help computer conferencing". As pioneers in a new field, they found that discussions

Table 1. Types of peer support

Symmetrical relationship Living situation	Symmetrical, same role	Asymmetrical, different roles
Similar/shared	1. Self-help support group, mutual-aid group (unmoderated)	2. Electronic support group with moderator (peer counselor with the same background)
Not similar/shared Other shared background	Not applicable (no counseling context)	3. Online-buddy or online-mentor project; (peer counselor with different background)

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