

# Peer-to-Peer Health-Related Online Support Groups

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years more and more individuals living with long-term conditions are turning to the internet for information, advice and support. In particular, there has been a rapid expansion of the number of online support groups (also known as 'online support communities') and this rise in popularity is arguably related to many of the unique characteristics inherent within this form of communication. Researchers have begun to examine the nature of online support groups (e.g., Wright & Bell, 2003), their role in the lives of those living with illness (e.g., Mo & Coulson, 2010) as well as the activities which are taking place online (e.g., Malik & Coulson, 2010). There is much qualitative and cross-sectional evidence (e.g., Coulson, 2005) describing their impact on individuals but as yet there are few well-designed studies which have clearly tested the effects of peer to peer online communication and support. This entry will consider the current state of knowledge with regards key aspects of this growing online phenomenon.

## BACKGROUND

### Unique Characteristics of Online Support Communities

Online support groups present several unique communication characteristics, which can include anonymity, asynchronous text-based communication and the ability to transcend geographical and temporal barriers (White & Dorman, 2001;

Joinson, 2003; Coulson & Knibb, 2007). These unique characteristics also give rise to a number of unique advantages and disadvantages for individuals choosing to seek support through the medium of online groups.

### Potential Advantages

A number of studies (e.g., Ferguson, 1996; Buchanan & Coulson, 2007) have documented the potential advantages of online support groups over more traditional face-to-face sources of support (e.g., face-to-face support groups).

### Access Support at Any Time

In contrast to a face-to-face group where members typically meet once a week or less frequently, online groups are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Malik & Coulson, 2008) thereby providing opportunities for peer support at any time of the day or night. As a consequence, this introduces considerable flexibility for individuals in terms of when they wish to access support and this flexibility has been shown to be very helpful for those who have work, family or educational commitments (Coulson & Knibb, 2007).

### Asynchronous Communication

The asynchronous nature of many online support groups means that there is no pressure or commitment to engage in real-time communication with other members (Coulson & Knibb, 2007). Instead, members can take their time to read messages and reflect upon their feelings while considering if and

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how to reply, allowing members to control their level of involvement in a way that is not possible with traditional face-to-face communication (Malik & Coulson, 2008). Indeed, it has been argued that asynchronous communication reduces the pressure associated with real-time communication thereby allowing participants time to carefully construct their messages before contributing to the group (Joinson, 2003).

### **Anonymity**

Online support groups also offer a degree of anonymity that would not be possible in face-to-face communication. This may encourage certain individuals, particularly those patients who feel stigmatised because of their condition, to openly discuss their experiences without fear of a negative reaction.

### **Group Composition**

Since participation in online support groups is not restricted by geographical, physical or spatial barriers, members can potentially access a larger and more heterogeneous mix of people with ease (White & Dorman, 2001). This is likely to be of particular benefit to patients suffering from chronic health conditions, as these individuals, may experience difficulties attending a regular face-to-face meeting due to limitations arising from their condition such as problems with mobility or treatment side effects. The Internet thus offers a novel opportunity for individuals to communicate with similar others in the comfort of their own home.

The ability to reach people from geographically diverse locations also increases the chances of finding others with similar experiences (White & Dorman, 2001). This is particularly helpful for individuals with rare conditions who may be unable to locate people with the same problem in their geographical area. At

the same time, due to their diversity, online support groups are advantageous because they can offer participants a wide variety of different perspectives, viewpoints and experiences on issues related to their condition (Wright, 1999; Wright, 2000). Walther and Boyd (2002) argue that for this reason online communication provides numerous opportunities for people with health concerns to seek support from 'weak tie' relationships. 'Weak ties' refer to relationships between people who might communicate on a regular basis but are not necessarily close. Prior to the advent of the Internet, weak tie networks typically incorporated neighbours, service providers or individuals known through other associations. However, the recent growth in the popularity of the Internet has led to a larger and more heterogeneous pool of individuals that could potentially develop into weak tie networks for people with health concerns.

Granovetter (1982) proposed that since weak ties provide access to a large pool of individuals with a range of different characteristics they are extremely useful sources of information. In addition, since weak tie relationships tend to exist outside of traditional social networks they provide a useful alternative for the discussion of taboo topics, which people may feel reluctant or uncomfortable discussing with their close relations. Online support groups, therefore, can potentially increase the chances of individuals forming weak tie relationships that offer access to diverse sources of information and advice that would not be available from close tie relationships. Furthermore, the absence of visual cues in the online environment and the opportunity to remain entirely anonymous may further facilitate the discussion of taboo or highly sensitive topics. Indeed, a frequently mentioned advantage of health-related online support groups is the perception that members attach less stigma to one's illness, thus removing the fear of being judged negatively (Walther & Boyd, 2001; Wright, 2000).

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