Chapter 4
Digital Peer Support for People With Severe Mental Illness:
Key Concepts and Findings Overview

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ABSTRACT

The literature has recognized peer support as a fundamental part of the recovery process for people with severe mental illness (SMI). These populations frequently experience barriers related to (self)stigmatization, social relationship, poor friendship quality, ostracism, isolation, and fear of being rejected or embarrassed. Scientific research suggests those individuals are more willing to share personal and sensitive details through digital technologies, building friendships and using the internet to access health information rather than their peers who do not experience SMI. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the digital-based peer programs and to analyze scientific evidence behind the alternative paradigm, related concepts, intervention designs, and results.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore the new paradigm of digital peer support as an emergent approach in psychiatric interventions due to its potential of accessibility and ubiquity.

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As an alternative psychiatric intervention, peer-to-peer support is presented as a mutual aid provided by people who share similar experiences concerning mental health challenges. This service aims to promote hope through a path of understanding and connection, decreasing social isolation.

In the last decades, traditional face-to-face peer support has reported beneficial effects in a range of mental health dimensions such as re-hospitalization rates, illness self-management and sense of empowerment and belonging. Moreover, recent technologies and Internet-based interventions have integrated general health field with substantial impact on content updates and configurations, breaking geographical boundaries, providing more availability and accessibility as well as promoting engagement. These technologies are remarkably flexible, ranging from mobile devices, like smartphones and tablets, to computerized programs and applications.

The digital world has caused profound changes in the way health care services has been provided. Hence, digital technologies have also reached mental health landscape, trying to overcome traditional settings' barriers. It is essential to highlight that digital tools and programs do not replace traditional care services, but rather augment its capacity and spectrum.

Recently, digital peer support has emerged as a promising intervention modality that congregates technology potential with peer support approach effectiveness. Research has been done to evaluate feasibility, acceptability, and adherence of these programs, trying to expand its scientific evidence.

The body of literature has been relatively heterogeneous concerning both technological format and peer support design. Therefore, digital peer support can assume multiple forms in various contexts. Consequently, the purpose of this chapter is to expose the current evidence-based practice along with its acknowledged results and identified limitations.

BACKGROUND

The majority of people affected by Severe Mental Illness (SMI) — schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, or major depressive disorder — have difficulties accessing care and the largest barriers include lack of trained professionals to comply with the demand, the stigma that mitigates help-seeking and the high cost of treatment (Naslund et al., 2014; O'Leary et al., 2018). Since the demand for care is unlikely to be met by training additional professionals, alternative approaches capable of significantly expand the capacity of mental health care are necessary (Andalibi & Flood, 2021; O'Leary et al., 2018). One way to overcome barriers related to traditional psychiatric services is to provide training and mentoring to develop the capacity of peers with mental health challenges to support each other (O'Leary et al., 2018).

Mental health services have been changed to a recovery-oriented model. Rather than focusing on symptom remission, this movement emphasizes the importance of developing personal goals and values (Peck et al., 2020). Some authors have suggested a framework with five personal recovery topics: 1) social connectedness; 2) hope and optimism about the future; 3) transforming identity; 4) finding meaning and purpose; 5) and finally, empowerment in mental health self-management forming the acronym "CHIME" (Leamy et al., 2011). Within the recovery model, people with SMI have shared their personal recovery experience to help peers increasing a "sense of authenticity, trust, understanding, acceptance and support in developing adaptive self-management strategies, counteracting negative stereotypes of mental illness and making it evident that recovery is possible" (Peck et al., 2020, p. 2). Peer support can