

Chapter 6

A Content Analysis of an Online Support Group for Survivors of Sexual Violence

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ABSTRACT

Surviving sexual violence has been described as one of the most traumatic life experiences, and social support is an extremely important coping strategy for survivors. With the rapidly increasing number of available online support communities, understanding exactly what kinds of support survivors need in the context of online social support groups is essential. This chapter presents a study of the types and extent of social support posts exchanged by members of an online social support group for survivors of sexual violence. The Social Support Behavior Code framework was used to code 755 messages that were posted over a 7-day period. Overall, emotional support (42.6%) was the most common support contained in posts, followed by information (21.2%), esteem (20.9%), network (13.1%), and tangible support (2.2%).

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has unquestionably had a profound impact on how people seek support and share experiences related to their health and coping. Specifically, it is the interactivity afforded by

Internet communication that has had the most marked impact on virtual communities concentrating on healthcare (Coulson, 2008). Estimates of the number of online support groups range from the hundreds of thousands to millions (Coulson, 2008). Despite this, research specifically examining the role of support groups for survivors of sexual violence is notably lacking.

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By examining 755 messages that were posted over a 7-day period on Survivors Online¹, an online support group for survivors of sexual violence, this study documented the types and extent of social support posts exchanged by members with Cutrona & Suhr's (1992) Social Support Behavior Code framework. The aims of this study were threefold. Firstly, aim 1 was to document the quantity of social support content in the posts. Aim 2 was to determine how the various types of support manifested in the actual posts. The final aim was to contextualize the findings of this study with previous research using Cutrona & Suhr's (1992) coding framework for use with the online coding of support messages. These aims intended to describe the supports that are of most importance to this population of sexual abuse survivors and to inform mental health professionals and policy makers about how online support can be utilized to promote the welfare of survivors.

BACKGROUND

Sexual Violence and Social Support

Social relationships are important and they can be affected by sexual violence; there is a volume of literature demonstrating that stressful life events generate acute and long-term physical and emotional disorders. The literature on stress and coping also suggests that social support acts as a survival mechanism for individuals under stress and that people's coping methods are strongly associated with all types of social support (Ullman, 1999).

However, few studies have focused specifically on how social support is related to recovery from sexual violence. This is particularly surprising considering that social support has been shown to be a clearly important way of coping with stressful life events in providing emotional support and information that may enhance adjustment. This is further substantiated Herman's (1997) assertion that few human conditions carry more negative

weight than surviving rape and that rape survivors are more likely than non-survivors to show subsequent affective and behavioral problems (Rodgers & Gruener, 1997).

While Sanders-Phillips (1997) found that emotional support promoted good adjustment, Popiel & Susskind (1985) established that there were significant differences between the availability of support from different people in their investigation of the role of social support in survivors' subsequent adjustment to sexual assault. In fact, the amount of perceived support varied with how stressful the assault and the amount of overall support did not predict subsequent adjustment. In other words, there were huge individual differences in coping with stress despite a significant relationship between environmental stressors and individual physical and emotional adjustment.

Internet and Social Support

The literature provides compelling evidence that online support groups are beneficial in alleviating the psychosocial sequelae related to sexual victimization; providing emotional support; and facilitating disclosure, all factors which play a key role in successful support and therapy groups on the Internet (Owen, Yarbrough, Vaga & Tucker, 2003; Lieberman & Goldstein, 2005; Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Finn, 1999; Preece & Ghazati, 2001). The Internet provides survivors of sexual violence with ever-increasing access to online support groups and communities. These communities provide survivors with the ability to engage in asynchronous (bulletin boards) or synchronous (chat rooms) written communication 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Finn & Lavitt, 1994). Communication is also not restricted by geography; the only requirements to access the online support groups are a computer and Internet connection (Coulson, 2008). Another major attraction to online support for survivors is the potential to access a large and heterogeneous group of survivors, which may not have been possible

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