



Exploring the Possibilities of a Peer Support Group in the ongoing Global Pandemic COVID 19

Dhwani Agarwal

Student

Jayshree Periwai International School

Abstract

Peer support groups are initiatives where people sharing similar mental conditions come together to cope with the same better and offer social and emotional support. They are either properly organized and managed by various organizations, groups and individuals who are professionally trained; or they are run informally again by organizations, groups or individuals who have had no former professional training in mental health. This paper explores the advantages, limitations and scope of such an informal peer support group in the middle of an ongoing global pandemic COVID 19. The paper highlights that a peer support group can lead to developing shared identities, increased confidence, acknowledgement of mental conditions and provides a safe space for expression. On the other hand, issues of accountability, vulnerability, lack of training and others remain crucial.

Keywords: Peer Support Group, Mental health, mental illness, pandemic

Introduction

Mental Health has gained prominence in the recent times. With the ongoing global pandemic COVID 19, a surge in mental health issues have been observed due to repeated lockdowns, loss of lives, uncertainty around health, unbearable medical expenses, loss of livelihood and social life, and many more reasons. Although the stigma around mental health issues still prevents people from acknowledging their concerns or reaching out for help. Added to this social stigma is the cost incurred that prevents people from accessing mental health professionals to deal with their mental conditions. More often people sort to alternatives such as speaking with family members, friends, colleagues, and others such. At times, these alternatives do prove to be helpful in dealing with a temporary situation than a mental health condition. COVID 19 global pandemic has brought both mental conditions and temporary challenges to people and in their lives. Now it is best advised to see a professional for any mental condition despite all the stigma, it can be a good idea to explore such alternatives, but often people decide not to seek help from anyone due to a fear of judgement (Link et al., 1997). It cannot be overlooked that it is going to take time for people to overlook all challenges and openly seek professional help for issues related to mental health. Nonetheless, it could be a good idea to avail benefit from existent alternatives that not only provide the necessary help but also cater to the existent challenges around the same. An alternative that maintains the integrity of the individual and where s/she has no fear of judgement from whosoever.

One such emergent alternative is Peer Support Groups. Peer support groups serve a range of functions such as providing moral support, providing an open space for sharing and discussion of issues, ideas and traumas and in coping and managing challenges such as chronic illness, mental illnesses such as addiction and many more. (Davidson, et al., 2012). Some countries such as England have formalized and recognized peer support systems as “peer support services, user-led self-help groups, mentoring and befriending, and time-banking schemes, which enable service users to be both providers and recipients of support” (DH, 2011, p.32) and recommend peer support as one of the “roles of mental health organisations in implementing the mental health strategy” (DH, 2012, p.51).

What are peer support groups?

Peer support is when people suffering from similar mental conditions, chronic or temporary, help each other socially, emotionally and instrumentally to bring about desired change. (Gartner & Riessman, 1982). Peer support started from Alleged Lunatics Friend's Society (1845– 63) and gradually emerged. Beginning as self-help groups, we now have reached where we have Internet support groups. Whilst face to face presence was a must in self help groups, internet support groups are exclusive of it (Perron, 2002). These can be open or private, paid-unpaid and anonymous. It can be peer delivered where an individual who is diagnosed with a mental condition and has undergone treatment helps others to deal with their situations (Solomon, 2004). It can also be peer operated where a group or individuals create, plan and operate a self-help groups for people dealing with mental health issues and provide them with necessary support (Stroul, 1993). It can also be peer employees where trained individuals who join groups in various roles (Freses & Davis, 1997). The dynamics of a peer support group can vary and are rarely rigid given the nature of objectives it aims to accomplish.

Underlying Principles in the functioning of a Peer Support Group

There are five theories that underlie the functioning of any peer support group (Slazer et al., 2002) namely *social support* where people aim at providing a supportive environment to the society; *helper-therapy* where the helper benefits from helping others; *social comparison* under which people feel related to someone who is like them and have or had endured a mental condition; *social learning* where people learn from their peers in dealing with similar issues; and *experiential knowledge* under which people aim to learn from each other's experiences especially with reference to a mental illness.

With varying principles that underlie the workings of a peer support group, there have been an emergence of informal peer support groups that comes up by themselves without any planning or organisation (Bradstreet, 2006). This paper focuses on exploring the possibilities, challenges and benefits of one such Peer Support Group - *Peersonall* based in Delhi, India.

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Research Objectives

- To understand workings of an informal Peer Support Group
- To explore the possibilities, benefits and challenges of an in formal Peer support group

Research Questions

- How does the informal peer support group Peersonall function?
- What are the benefits of such a peer support group?
- What are the challenges that are faced by people who engage with this peer support group?

Delimitations of the study

The study is based on a small informal peer-support group based in Delhi. Hence the findings cannot be generalised across. The study also does not comment upon the credibility or legitimisation of an informal peer support group but merely explores the functioning, benefits and challenges of such an initiative. The study also does not comment upon formal peer support group and its workings, although similarities between the could be observed. The study is also delimited to the experiences of people while in the ongoing global pandemic COVID 19. Hence the findings might not stand true for a different time period.

Methodology

A total of 8 participants who have been or still are associated with Peersonall either to seek help or as volunteers who wished to help others and who consented to be a part of the study were purposively selected. 4 of them are members who joined in the capacity of an advisee and 4 in the capacity of an advisor. All of them were interviewed over a telephonic conversation with the help of a self-designed open ended questionnaire. A thematic analysis was conducted with the help of various common themes that emerged in the answers given by the respondents. This was then mapped with the existing literature on Peer support groups. The names and identities and other details of the respondents have not been revealed to maintain anonymity.

Findings and Analysis

Peer Support Group seemed to be a more plausible platform to cater to mental challenges that have been induced by the ongoing pandemic COVID 19. Personall has a group of advisors which volunteer themselves as advisors for various reasons. These advisors are based in Delhi and wish to offer help to those who are finding themselves in need of social emotional support.

Both the advisors and the advisees benefitted from participating in a session organised by personall. They reported a general sense of increased confidence and mental strength in coping with the uncertainty and anxiety induced by the pandemic. They could relate with each other and experienced a shared identity as people who are dealing with tough times. They reported feeling more normal. An increase in overall mental health and well being was also reported. They could not only work better but also shared a lot of information with each other around various things such as sports, hobbies, etc. This in turn resulted in developing better skills and capacities in life. They felt more productive and meaningful while dealing with their issues better and helping others for the same. Some challenges were also reported by the participants such as being scared of making inappropriate or wrong suggestions, a lack of formal training made it difficult to decide what to say, judging if one is capable of helping the advisee, fear of hurting others and a difficulty in understanding the person as the person was completely unknown to them. This unfamiliarity, although, prevented a fear of judgement amongst the advisees and they felt more free to share their thoughts. The following these were recurrent across responses of the participants of the study.

Benefits of a peer support group

A Sense of shared Identity

With repeating lockdowns and decreased social activity, people were overcome by a general sense of isolation from the world and society. Engaging in a peer support group made them realise that this sense of isolation, uncertainty and anxiety is shared among all. One of the respondent who was an advisee said *"It was good to know that I am not the only one feeling this and I am not crazy"*. Peer support groups provide its participants with a shared identity where people with similar thoughts and experiences come together and openly share it with each other (Faulkner & Basset, 2012). They feel a sense of belongingness and are more open to accepting their own conditions.

Increased Confidence

Peer support groups provide a boost to the confidence of its participants, both the advisors and the advisees. *"Pandemic was hard but it changed me. Things were difficult, I procrastinated a lot but I eventually became better at it. My session with the advisor really helped me in accepting things and made me more confident"*. Not only the advisee but advisors also reported an increase in self-confidence – *"helping others filled me up with confidence to deal with my own issues and made me feel more useful to the society. Being able to help others felt nice"*. Being able to talk to someone and help them makes people feel more powerful and capable, so does the ability to deal with one's challenges. Engagement with peer support group provides people with this capability and they experience an overall increase in their confidence in general (Faulkner & Basset, 2012).

Helping Others

Experience of this benefit was more restricted to the advisors. They reported a sense of satisfaction and happiness while being able to help someone. Volunteers in any peer support group often feel a sense of gratification and empowerment while being able to help others (Repper & Carter, 2011). The same is also reflected in the underlying principles of a peer support group (Slazer et al., 2002).

Developing and sharing Skills

As suggested by the social learning principle that supports the working of any peer support group (Slazer et al., 2002), developing and sharing skills is another benefit experienced by participants. As shared by one of the advisee respondents, *"My advisor and I happened to have a common interest in acrylic painting. She shared with various the details of a youtube channel that offers tutorials for the same. This made me really excited and it also helped me develop my hobby and painting skills further"*. Another respondent who happened to be an advisor

reported an improvement in peoples and listening skills. *"I have observed a gradual improvement in my behaviour with people in general. I am more understanding and patient now. I am mindful of what I say to people any try to be more inclusive. I listen to people more carefully than I used to"*. While engaging with a person either in the capacity of an advisor or an advisee an exchange and sharing of ideas takes place and people learn a lot (Faulkner & Basset, 2012). Social interaction results in some or the other learning (Slazer et al., 2002)

Challenging stigma and discrimination

Peer support groups, especially when informal and online, motivate individuals to reach out for help (Ochoka et al., 2006). People are less apprehensive and comfortable in approaching support that is online or maintains anonymity(Alvarez-Jimenez et al. 2014). Self-help groups that with time eliminate stigma around mental health and as it increases people tend to be more accepting of themselves and others who acknowledge going through mental issues. One of the advisee participant said that *"I was sort of apprehensive of taking a session initially. But after my friend explained all the dynamics I decided to try. Now that I have attended the session and it has helped me a great deal I would be happy to spread word and would really advice others to at least try it out once. There should be no shame in sharing your struggles and reaching out for help and advice"*. Another advisor shared *"my view about mental health and counselling has changed hugely after attending sessions with peeronall. I now look at mental health just as I look at physical health. There is no difference. I am also more mindful while speaking to people, who knows what one is dealing with"*. Peer support groups hence tend to bring about more acceptance and help in destigmatising issues around mental health.

Increased over all Mental Health and Well being

After being a part of peer support group, people are able to deal with their traumas and challenges better. They also provide a safe, judgement free space for one to open up and share. *"It was both cathartic and relieving for me"* shared one of the respondents. *"I could speak freely knowing that it is not going to bear any negative impact on my relationships and life. I felt free to express and just let it out without the fear of judgement or hurting any one's feelings. It not only helped me with my academic challenges but also with my personal life."* he added. Attending a peer support group helps in improving an overall well-being of individuals despite the primary reason of joining one(Faulkner & Basset, 2012).

Improved problem solving skills

Peer support groups provide a platform to openly discuss issues face by one and discuss various possible reasons for the same. *"I could share my anxieties and the fact that I procrastinate a lot. I discussed with my advisor how to deal with it and he patiently listened and made suggestions around points I had overlooked and offered alternative ideas that I could not think of. I now think twice before just jumping to conclusions and try to find if I have overlooked something. I list out all possible solutions and its consequences and then choose that suits my needs the best. I deal with my problems better now."* reported one of the advisees. Peer support groups often lead to improved problem solving skills amongst those who join to seek support(Repper et al., 2013).

Challenges of a Peer Support Group

Power dynamics

It is often probable for the one providing support to feel more powerful. These power dynamics could then be difficult to manage and may lead to apprehensions among the one seeking support (Mead et al., 2001). *"I felt empowered by helping someone in dealing with issues in life but I was also scared that I don't end up in making a wrong suggestion"* disclosed one of the participant advisors. Power dynamics are inevitable can defeat the entire purpose of initiating a peer support group if not managed carefully.

Lack of facilitation skills

Proper training prepares the advisors to be prepared to deal with unsettling revelations and also ensure the safety of the advisee by equipping the advisors proper tools and techniques to move ahead(Dillon & Hornstein, 2013). *"I was scared of how vulnerable the advisee was, I wanted to make sure I do not make a wrong suggestion. There were times when I did not know what to say. I really wish I had some sort of orientation on what to say in those*

moments” shared one of the advisors. A lack of formal training was felt by the advisors as also shared by others that they were scared of the power they had.

Lack of accountability

Another challenge that peer support groups face and that emerged in the present study as well is the lack of an accountability (Mcneil, 2004). It is possible for advisees being in vulnerable positions to get influenced by whatever the advisor says which may or may not be in the best interest of the advisee. Accountability turns imperative especially when the advisee is at risk. (Chinman et al., 2006) The same fear was continuously reflected in the responses of the advisors as quoted in the earlier sections. They were scared of making suggestions. Some advisees also seemed a bit apprehensive when one of them said “I was happy to discuss my issues but I was also conscious of being judged and what if their suggestions turns wrong. Should I listen to them at all. Should I listen to anyone at all. It is my life at the end”.

Deciding boundaries

In absence of formal training, people offering support might get personally involved with the one seeking support maybe as a friend. How close a peer support worker can get is a question of severe importance (Coleman & Campbell, 2009). Boundaries are hence important and must be clearly stated. “My advisor was really friendly and I felt like she is someone I can rely on” mentioned one of the participant advisee. It is important that advisors and advisee keep some distance and the advisee do not start depending on the advisor for all time.

Conclusion

Peer support groups can help a lot in providing required support and guidance to individuals while dealing with difficult times. They bring about a positive influence on the overall mental well-being of individuals by providing them a safe space to share and discuss their thoughts and emotions. People overcome stigma around mental health and feel heard and acknowledged in such set ups. They experience an increase in overall confidence and find facing problems easier. They develop a sense of belongingness and empowered. Nonetheless, an informal peer support group comes with its own set of challenges. It goes unsaid that peer support group cannot be equated with professional help. Hence issues like accountability, lack of training and boundaries can defeat the purpose of any such activity. If not mitigated properly they are a potential threat to the wellbeing of the participants both in the capacity of the helper and the helped.

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