Peer Support Specialists within Mental Health Services: A brief review.

Mental health services are beginning to recognise potential benefits of peer support in recovery and improved care for mental health service users. Traditional models of care have primarily focused on medication, symptoms, and care co-ordination. In recovery-focused services, the goal is to increase care and support that focuses on service users’ goals, preferences, and quality of life measures (e.g. access to stable accommodation, employment, and social supports). A key feature of recovery focused services is that of Peer Support. Peer support is founded on core values, such as empowerment, taking responsibility for one’s own recovery, the need to have opportunities for meaningful life choices, and valuing the lives of people with mental health problems as equal to those of people without mental health problems.

Peer support has been noted to be a particularly powerful component of efforts to implement recovery focused services. While recovery is an internal process of hope, healing, empowerment, and reconnection for individuals, mental health services can foster these processes with services provided in collaboration between mental health professionals and peer support specialists. Although many peer support services were originally formed as alternatives to traditional mental health services, a recent survey of mutual support groups, self help organisations, and user-operated services found that less than 1% reported that participants view the peer services as a substitute for mental health professional services.

Peer support specialists can help move mental health services toward a recovery focus in several ways. They often serve as an unofficial liaison to mental health professionals, interpreting, and in some cases mediating, between staff and service user. They can challenge unacknowledged stigma, discrimination, bias and emphasize full community inclusion over a singular focus on symptom management whilst instilling hope for recovery by role modelling that recovery is possible, help service users navigate systems and teach successful coping strategies. Peer support specialists have been successful in improving patient satisfaction with traditional mental health services, in part because they facilitate the development of a collaborative model of treatment. Also, Peer support specialists may be better able to empathize, to access wider support services, to appreciate service users’ strengths, to be tolerant, flexible, patient, and persistent, and to be aware of and responsive to clients’ desires. For example, peer support specialists have been employed to engage people who are homeless and have co-occurring psychiatric and substance disorders. Finally, peer support specialists have re-established their own social networks and can help service users do the same, often through mutual support activities.

To date, there have been several randomised control trials and a range of quasi-experimental studies comparing service user outcomes of peer support services to traditional non-peer support services. The studies with peer support specialists assigned to case management teams showed service user outcomes favouring peer support. However, all studies show that peer support can provide services
that yield at least equivalent service user outcomes while also offering the benefits of a mutual support approach (e.g. role modelling, hope for recovery, practical skills training, engagement, support and assistance with community integration). Individual service user benefits include:

- Higher service user satisfaction with services
- decreased risk of relapse
- fewer hospitalisations
- decreased length of stay in hospital
- decreased symptoms
- increased self image
- increased self esteem
- reduced stigma
- decreased alcohol use
- increased hope
- increased control over the future
- development of problems solving skills
- increased community involvement
- decrease in major life problems
- decrease in physical health needs
- improved quality of life
- enhanced well-being
- increased social support and networks
- increased employment

In addition to the effect on individual service users, important impacts have also been documented on the wider mental health system (reducing costs, improved outreach and engagement, improved provider attitudes and quality). For example, an evaluation of a peer support service providing hospital avoidance and early discharge support to service users of adult mental health services in Australia received more than 200 referrals resulting in more than 900 bed days savedix.

This review has focused on peer support specialists working with of adults of working age. However, it should be noted that in addition peer support specialists work in Adolescent mental health servicesxi along with family peer support specialistsxii, Addiction servicesxiii, forensic servicesxiii, and in perinatal mental health servicesxiv.

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