

For people with depression, support groups have built-in benefits

18 February 2011, By Sharyn Alden

People who get together for support with depression may find their symptoms decrease, a new systematic review suggests.

"We're not saying that [peer support](#) can do things for people with [depression](#) that other forms of therapy can't, but we found that peer groups are better than no psychotherapy and may be as good as group cognitive behavioral therapy," said Paul Pfeiffer, M.D., lead study author.

Support groups are made up of people with common experiences and are a place where people can give and receive emotional and practical support. However, Pfeiffer said, peer support "is much less likely to be incorporated into the treatment of depression than for other conditions such as alcohol or substance abuse."

The researcher evaluated data from 10 studies involving 1,269 patients. Three studies compared peer intervention only to standard treatment while another three studies compared peer group support to group cognitive behavioral therapy. In four studies, researchers compared peer support to both usual care and group cognitive behavioral therapy.

The study appear online and in the January/February issue of the journal *General Hospital Psychiatry*.

"Peer groups have some theoretical advantages over some other forms of therapy. For example, peer groups provide patients with a sense of helping others with similar problems, and there's also a sense of cohesiveness, a connection to group members," said Pfeiffer at the department of psychiatry at the University of Michigan.

"Patients are also able to relate to counselors in a way that they don't with clinicians," said Sue Varma, M.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry at NYU Langone Medical Center. "Before medical

school I worked as a life-skills trainer for homeless women with medical and mental issues. I led the group with two peer educators who were formerly homeless and in the shelter system. One of the participants said it was a great message of hope to know that the educator was once suffering and had made it over the other side of the fence."

Varma has often recommended patients to reputable peer-support programs in conjunction with standard care. "I believe patients with psychiatric illness need all the support they can get," she said. "That's particularly true in depression, a chronic illness where each episode increases the chances of reoccurrence."

Gregory Kolden, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry and psychology at University of Wisconsin, said he strongly encourages depression patients to use social resources. "Isolation and loneliness are major factors contributing to the onset as well as exacerbation of depressive symptoms," he said.

Medications can be very helpful in reducing depressive symptoms, Kolden said but added, "Unlike behavioral interventions such as peer support, medications do not typically involve the acquisition of coping strategies or active skills to address life problems."

More information: Pfeiffer PN, et al. Efficacy of peer support interventions: a meta-analysis. *Gen Hosp Psychiatry* 33(1), 2011.

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