



Intersecting Research on Opioid Misuse,
Addiction, and Disability Services

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Connecting People with Disabilities and Opioid Use Disorder to Technology-Based Peer Support

Summary

Computers and mobile devices may help provide targeted approaches to peer support, especially if those approaches are designed to address the individual access needs of people with disabilities. While we focus in this brief on developing supports for people with psychiatric disabilities and substance use disorders, these principles can also apply to people with other disabilities.

What are peer support and peer support technologies?

People with disabilities receive peer support from people with the same or similar experiences who have navigated the service system and made progress in rehabilitation or recovery. Computers, the internet, tablets, and smartphones can be used to connect peers with each other to provide advice, encouragement, and resources.¹ These supports include professionally moderated forums, chatrooms, and social media groups, as well as informal connections online or via text messages.

How can practitioners use tech-based peer supports with people with psychiatric disabilities?

Tech-based peer support for people with psychiatric disabilities is progressing rapidly. People with psychiatric disabilities use computers, smartphones, and tablets in their everyday lives, creating an avenue for practitioners to connect them with peers online.² Nearly 300 mental health peer specialists in a 38-state study also said that smartphones and tablets could enhance the services they deliver.²

Technologies for Receiving Peer Support



Computers



Tablets & Smartphones



The Internet

Methods for Receiving Peer Support



Social Media Groups



Chatrooms



Discussion Forums

Tech-based peer support has several advantages for people with psychiatric disabilities, their supporters, practitioners, and researchers, including:

- **Making it easier for people to access support** without having to manage difficult transportation or appointment schedules.
- **Allowing more people to get the help they need.** Some people with disabilities or substance use disorders struggle to talk to other people about what they need or what might help them. They may not know people who understand their conditions, or the people around them may discriminate against them because of their disability.³
- **Helping people overcome the fear of stigma or unpredictable interactions** that sometimes occur in face-to-face support groups.³
- **Using methods that can accommodate the needs of people with psychiatric disabilities.** Some software designers have developed recommendations for accessible software considering the ways that serious psychiatric disability may affect people's thinking, attention, and memory.⁴
- **Facilitating research by generating large amounts of data** and tightly controlling the features of peer support software.

Some forms of online peer interventions are peer-to-peer social networking, peer support, and peer coaching.⁵ People with psychiatric disabilities have begun to create their own online communities on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.⁵ Peer-to-peer social networking allows people to exchange information on their health condition and treatment, share their experiences, offer emotional support, and talk about practical issues.^{4,5} In a study of YouTube videos, researchers found that peer support helped people with psychiatric disabilities minimize isolation, feel more hopeful, share coping strategies, and learn from others' experiences with medication and treatment.⁶

Advantages of Tech-Based Peer Supports



Removing access barriers, including transportation, communication, and time constraints



Reducing stigma and discrimination



Accommodating participants' individual needs



Generating large amounts of research data

Some studies have used online approaches, including social media, to help people with psychiatric disabilities meet health goals and take their prescribed medications; in one study, participants in a group lifestyle intervention used a private Facebook group to provide additional support.⁶⁻⁸ Online education and self-management programs that include peer support have been found to work for people living with serious mental illness.^{4; 9-11}

What have researchers learned about technology-based peer support in substance abuse treatment?

Treatment that incorporates technology is becoming increasingly common, but researchers have only recently started to explore using technology to help people with substance use disorder receive support from their peers. In one study, Harnessing Online Peer Education (HOPE), researchers examined the use of social media to help pain patients receiving chronic opioid therapy

avoid addiction and overdose. All participants met DSM-IV criteria for opioid dependence and received treatment with buprenorphine.

Participants' Primary Themes



Online social support was crucial to reducing pain and improving outcomes



Participants valued offline interventions like 12-step groups, but noted the conflict between the groups' strict drug-free policies and medication-based treatment



Tailored online peer support interventions can improve outcomes

Participant interviews revealed three primary themes:

- Online social support was crucial in reducing pain and improving outcomes.
- Participants found value in offline social support interventions like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous; however, they noted that the strict drug-free philosophy of AA/NA and pharmacotherapy limited their benefit.
- Tailored, online peer support interventions may improve clinical outcomes.

Online interventions can also create opportunities to receive peer support that would not have existed otherwise. People with highly specific needs and those who have limited access to in-person groups can still talk to people with similar experiences online.¹²

What are the challenges to using technology-based peer supports?

A significant barrier to adopting tech-based peer supports is cost.¹³ While people who already pay for their own mobile phones and data plans may be able to shoulder the costs, not all potential users of technology-based supports can afford these costs. One study that integrated substance use disorder and primary care treatment through a peer support app found that follow-up rates decreased significantly after research funding stopped covering participants' data plans.¹³ In addition, researchers noted that lower-cost pay-as-you-go data plans may not have enough data capacity to evaluate a tech-based approach.

Conclusions

Though researchers have studied the development and use of technology-based peer support in behavioral health, there are comparatively fewer studies on similar approaches for spinal cord injury, autism, and traumatic brain injury. People with various disabilities and health conditions are using online and mobile tools and resources to find formal and informal support, gather information, and communicate with their family, friends, and healthcare providers. This existing user base provides a potential opportunity for developing targeted approaches to peer support, particularly if program directors can reduce costs for participants.

Conclusions



People with a variety of disabilities and illnesses use technology to communicate with their family, friends, and healthcare providers.



Researchers can develop tech-based peer support interventions based on the ways people already communicate in their daily lives.

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