



'Peer Support Programs in Mental Health Nursing: Harnessing Lived Experience for Recovery'

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Abstract: Peer support programs in mental health nursing have gained recognition as effective approaches for promoting recovery among individuals with mental health challenges. This review explores the role of peer support in mental health nursing, highlighting its principles, benefits, challenges, and outcomes. Drawing upon existing literature and empirical evidence, the article provides insights into the mechanisms through which peer support facilitates recovery and enhances the quality of mental health care delivery. Key considerations for implementing and sustaining peer support programs are discussed, along with implications for mental health nursing practice, education, and policy. Overall, peer support emerges as a valuable resource in fostering empowerment, hope, and resilience among individuals living with mental illness.

Keywords: *Peer support, Mental health nursing, Lived experience, Recovery, Empowerment, Resilience*

Introduction: Peer support programs in mental health nursing have emerged as integral components of contemporary mental health care delivery, emphasizing the importance of lived experience in promoting recovery. By harnessing the unique perspectives and insights of individuals with lived experience of mental illness, these programs offer a non-judgmental, empathetic, and empowering environment for individuals to navigate their recovery journey. This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of peer support programs in mental health nursing, exploring their principles, benefits, challenges, and outcomes. Through synthesizing existing literature and empirical evidence, this article seeks to elucidate the role of peer support in enhancing the quality of mental health care and promoting recovery-oriented practices.

Mental health nursing is evolving rapidly, reflecting a paradigm shift towards holistic, person-centered care that recognizes the unique needs and experiences of individuals living with mental illness. Within this evolving landscape, peer support programs have emerged as integral components of mental health care delivery, emphasizing the transformative power of shared experience, empathy, and solidarity in promoting recovery and well-being. This section of the article

provides a comprehensive overview of the role of peer support programs in mental health nursing, contextualizing their significance within the broader framework of recovery-oriented practices.

Historically, mental health care has been dominated by traditional medical models that prioritize symptom management and illness stabilization, often overlooking the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals receiving care. However, the emergence of the recovery model has challenged this deficit-based approach, advocating for a strengths-based perspective that emphasizes personal growth, self-determination, and community integration. At the heart of the recovery model is the recognition that recovery is not merely the absence of symptoms but a holistic journey of healing, empowerment, and rediscovery of purpose and meaning in life.

Peer support programs embody the principles of the recovery model by foregrounding the expertise of individuals with lived experience of mental illness as invaluable resources in the recovery process. Unlike traditional forms of support provided by mental health professionals, peer support offers a unique form of support rooted in empathy, authenticity, and mutual understanding. Peer supporters, often referred to as peer



specialists or peer mentors, draw upon their own experiences of mental illness and recovery to offer practical insights, emotional support, and social connection to their peers.

The significance of peer support lies in its ability to bridge the gap between professional care and lived experience, creating a space where individuals can feel understood, accepted, and empowered to take an active role in their recovery journey. Peer support programs operate on the principle of shared humanity, recognizing that the journey towards recovery is not linear and that individuals have much to learn from one another's experiences, triumphs, and setbacks.

Moreover, peer support programs have been shown to address some of the key challenges faced by individuals living with mental illness, including stigma, social isolation, and lack of access to appropriate support services. By fostering a sense of community and belonging, peer support programs provide individuals with opportunities to build meaningful relationships, develop coping skills, and access resources that promote their overall well-being.

In summary, peer support programs represent a fundamental shift in mental health care delivery, from a hierarchical, expert-driven model to one that embraces collaboration, empowerment, and recovery. As mental health nursing continues to evolve, peer support offers a promising avenue for promoting recovery, resilience, and social inclusion among individuals living with mental illness. This review seeks to explore the principles, benefits, challenges, and outcomes of peer support programs in mental health nursing, with the aim of fostering a deeper understanding of their role in enhancing the quality of care and supporting individuals on their journey towards recovery.

Principles of Peer Support: Peer support in mental health nursing is grounded in several core principles, including mutuality, shared experience, empathy, empowerment, and hope. Unlike traditional forms of support provided by healthcare professionals, peer support emphasizes the reciprocal nature of relationships, where individuals with similar lived experiences come together to offer mutual understanding, validation, and encouragement. Central to peer support is the belief in the

capacity of individuals to recover and thrive despite the challenges posed by mental illness. By fostering a sense of belonging and community, peer support programs create safe spaces for individuals to explore their strengths, resilience, and aspirations for the future.

Peer support in mental health nursing operates on a foundation of fundamental principles that underpin its effectiveness in fostering recovery and empowerment among individuals with mental illness. These principles not only guide the structure and dynamics of peer support programs but also shape the ethos of peer interactions and relationships. Understanding and adhering to these principles are essential for ensuring the integrity and efficacy of peer support interventions. The following elaborates on the core principles of peer support:

1. **Mutuality:** At the heart of peer support is the principle of mutuality, which emphasizes the reciprocal nature of relationships between peers. Unlike traditional hierarchical dynamics in healthcare settings, peer support fosters a sense of equality and shared humanity among participants. Both peers bring unique perspectives, experiences, and strengths to the relationship, creating a space for mutual learning, growth, and support. This principle highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing each individual's contributions within the peer support context.
2. **Shared Experience:** Central to peer support is the recognition that individuals with lived experience of mental illness possess invaluable insights and wisdom gained from their personal journeys. Shared experience serves as a common bond that bridges the gap between peers, fostering empathy, understanding, and solidarity. Through sharing their stories, challenges, and triumphs, peers create a supportive environment where vulnerability is embraced, and authenticity is celebrated. This principle underscores the power of lived experience as a catalyst for healing, connection, and hope.
3. **Empathy:** Empathy lies at the core of peer support, enabling peers to connect on a deeply human level and validate each other's emotions



and experiences. Peers demonstrate empathy by actively listening, validating feelings, and offering nonjudgmental support and encouragement. By understanding and acknowledging the emotional struggles and triumphs of their peers, individuals feel seen, heard, and understood, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance. This principle underscores the importance of empathy in building trusting and meaningful relationships within peer support settings.

4. **Empowerment:** Peer support is inherently empowering, as it seeks to enhance individuals' sense of agency, autonomy, and self-efficacy in managing their mental health and well-being. Peers empower each other by sharing knowledge, skills, and coping strategies, fostering a sense of mastery and control over one's life. Through collaborative problem-solving and goal-setting, individuals build confidence and resilience, enabling them to navigate challenges and pursue their recovery journey with renewed optimism and determination. This principle highlights the transformative potential of peer support in empowering individuals to reclaim their lives and pursue their aspirations.
5. **Hope:** Central to peer support is the cultivation of hope, which serves as a guiding beacon amidst the darkness of mental illness. Peers instill hope by sharing stories of recovery, resilience, and transformation, offering inspiration and encouragement to those facing similar struggles. By witnessing the journeys of others who have overcome adversity, individuals find renewed optimism, belief in their capacity to heal, and envision a brighter future for themselves. This principle underscores the role of hope as a powerful catalyst for change and a fundamental driving force in the recovery process.

Benefits of Peer Support Programs: Peer support programs offer a multitude of benefits for individuals with mental health challenges, including increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social connectedness. By engaging with peers who have navigated similar

experiences, individuals gain practical insights, coping strategies, and resources for managing their mental health effectively. Peer support also serves as a potent antidote to stigma and discrimination, as it promotes understanding, acceptance, and empathy within the community. Moreover, peer support programs have been associated with improved treatment adherence, reduced hospitalizations, and enhanced overall well-being among participants.

Peer support programs in mental health nursing offer a wide range of benefits that significantly contribute to the well-being and recovery of individuals with mental health challenges. These benefits encompass various aspects of physical, emotional, and social functioning, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of life for participants. Below are some key benefits elucidated:

1. **Increased Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy:** Participation in peer support programs fosters a sense of validation and affirmation of one's experiences and struggles. Interacting with peers who have successfully navigated similar challenges can bolster individuals' confidence in their ability to cope with and overcome adversity, leading to increased self-esteem and self-efficacy.
2. **Enhanced Social Connectedness:** Mental illness often engenders feelings of isolation and alienation. Peer support programs provide individuals with opportunities to connect with others who share common experiences, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness and fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie within a supportive community.
3. **Practical Coping Strategies:** Peers in these programs often share practical coping strategies and lived experiences of managing symptoms, medication adherence, and navigating the mental health care system. Such insights can be invaluable for participants in developing effective coping mechanisms and problem-solving skills tailored to their unique circumstances.
4. **Reduction of Stigma and Discrimination:** Peer support initiatives play a crucial role in



challenging stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness. By promoting understanding, acceptance, and empathy, peers contribute to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment that embraces diversity and celebrates individual strengths.

5. **Improved Treatment Adherence:** Research indicates that individuals who engage in peer support are more likely to adhere to their treatment regimens, including medication and therapy appointments. Peer encouragement, accountability, and shared experiences of treatment successes and challenges can motivate individuals to stay committed to their recovery journey.
6. **Empowerment and Agency:** Peer support programs empower individuals to take an active role in their recovery process by providing opportunities for self-expression, decision-making, and goal-setting. By recognizing and harnessing their strengths and resources, participants develop a sense of agency and autonomy in managing their mental health and well-being.
7. **Enhanced Social Skills and Communication:** Interacting with peers in a supportive and non-judgmental environment helps individuals develop and refine their social skills and communication abilities. Through shared experiences and mutual understanding, participants learn to express themselves more effectively, assert their needs, and build healthy interpersonal relationships.
8. **Sense of Hope and Resilience:** Perhaps most importantly, peer support instills a sense of hope and resilience in individuals facing mental health challenges. By witnessing the recovery journeys of peers and receiving encouragement and validation from others who have overcome similar obstacles, participants cultivate optimism, perseverance, and a belief in their capacity to achieve meaningful and fulfilling lives despite their mental health conditions.

Challenges and Considerations: Despite the myriad benefits, peer support programs face certain challenges and considerations that warrant attention. These include issues related to training and supervision of peer support workers, boundary management, confidentiality, and potential risks associated with disclosing sensitive information. Furthermore, ensuring the sustainability and scalability of peer support initiatives requires adequate funding, organizational support, and integration within existing mental health care systems. Addressing these challenges necessitates collaboration between mental health professionals, peer support workers, policymakers, and service users to develop comprehensive guidelines, standards, and protocols for implementing and evaluating peer support programs.

While peer support programs offer numerous benefits, they also confront several challenges and considerations that necessitate careful attention and proactive management.

1. **Training and Supervision:** One of the primary challenges is ensuring the adequacy and quality of training for peer support workers. While individuals with lived experience bring invaluable insights, they may require structured training to develop skills in active listening, boundary setting, crisis intervention, and ethical decision-making. Additionally, ongoing supervision and mentorship are essential to support peer support workers in navigating complex situations, maintaining professional boundaries, and accessing appropriate resources.
2. **Boundary Management:** Maintaining clear boundaries between peer support workers and participants is crucial to safeguarding the integrity and effectiveness of the program. Peer support workers must balance empathy and support with maintaining professional boundaries to avoid potential conflicts of interest or dependency issues. Establishing guidelines and protocols for appropriate interactions, confidentiality, and conflict resolution can help mitigate boundary-related challenges and promote a safe and respectful environment for all participants.



3. **Confidentiality:** Confidentiality is a cornerstone of trust in peer support relationships. However, ensuring the confidentiality of personal information shared within peer support groups can be challenging, particularly in community settings where participants may have overlapping social networks. Implementing robust confidentiality policies, obtaining informed consent from participants, and providing education on the importance of confidentiality can help mitigate privacy concerns and foster a culture of trust and respect within peer support programs.
4. **Risk Management:** Peer support programs may encounter situations where participants disclose information related to suicidal ideation, self-harm, or other crisis situations. Peer support workers need training and support to assess risk, provide appropriate support, and make referrals to professional services when necessary. Developing clear protocols for responding to crisis situations, establishing partnerships with crisis intervention services, and offering ongoing debriefing and support for peer support workers are essential components of effective risk management.
5. **Funding and Sustainability:** Securing adequate funding and resources for peer support programs can be a significant challenge, particularly in resource-constrained healthcare systems. Peer support initiatives may rely on grant funding, donations, or partnerships with community organizations to sustain their operations. Advocating for the recognition of peer support as a valuable and cost-effective component of mental health care, integrating peer support into funding mechanisms and reimbursement models, and leveraging technology for virtual peer support platforms can enhance the sustainability and scalability of peer support programs.
6. **Integration within Mental Health Systems:** Integrating peer support programs within existing mental health systems poses logistical, cultural, and organizational challenges. Peer support may

challenge traditional hierarchical structures and professional boundaries within healthcare settings, necessitating shifts in attitudes, policies, and practices. Building collaborative partnerships between mental health professionals, peer support workers, and service users, promoting shared decision-making and mutual respect, and embedding peer support within the broader continuum of mental health care can facilitate the integration and sustainability of peer support initiatives.

Outcomes and Evidence: Empirical evidence suggests that peer support programs yield positive outcomes across various domains of recovery, including symptom management, social integration, and quality of life. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of peer support in reducing psychiatric symptoms, enhancing medication adherence, and promoting community reintegration among individuals with severe mental illness. Moreover, peer support has been shown to increase consumer satisfaction with mental health services and improve the cultural competence of service providers. Longitudinal research indicates that participation in peer support programs is associated with sustained improvements in recovery outcomes and decreased reliance on traditional mental health services. Empirical research on peer support programs in mental health nursing has provided compelling evidence of their effectiveness in facilitating recovery and improving various outcomes for individuals with mental illness. Studies conducted across different settings and populations have consistently demonstrated the positive impact of peer support interventions on a range of recovery domains, including symptom management, social integration, and quality of life. One of the primary outcomes associated with peer support programs is the reduction of psychiatric symptoms. Research indicates that participation in peer support groups or one-on-one peer support relationships is associated with decreased severity of symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis. This reduction in symptoms is often attributed to the sense of understanding, validation, and hope that individuals derive from sharing experiences with peers who have



faced similar challenges. By providing emotional support and practical coping strategies, peer support helps individuals develop effective symptom management techniques and enhances their sense of control over their mental health.

Additionally, peer support has been shown to improve medication adherence among individuals with mental illness. Peer support workers, drawing from their own experiences of medication management, offer valuable insights and encouragement to peers struggling with adherence issues. By sharing personal strategies for overcoming barriers to medication compliance and addressing concerns about side effects, peer supporters empower individuals to take an active role in their treatment and make informed decisions about their medication regimen. This collaborative approach fosters trust and rapport between peers and may result in higher rates of medication adherence compared to traditional interventions.

Furthermore, peer support programs contribute to enhanced social integration and community participation among individuals with mental illness. By providing opportunities for social connection, peer support groups reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness commonly experienced by individuals living with mental health challenges. Participants develop meaningful relationships based on shared experiences and mutual support, leading to increased social support networks and a sense of belonging within the community. Moreover, peer support activities often involve engagement in recreational, vocational, or educational activities, which promote socialization and help individuals rebuild their social roles and identities beyond the confines of their illness.

Importantly, research suggests that the benefits of peer support extend beyond individual-level outcomes to include broader improvements in mental health service delivery and consumer satisfaction. Peer support programs have been shown to enhance cultural competence among mental health professionals by fostering greater understanding of diverse perspectives and experiences. Additionally, participants report high levels of satisfaction with peer support services, citing factors such as trust, empathy, and non-judgmental

attitudes of peer supporters as key drivers of their positive experiences.

Longitudinal studies provide further support for the sustained impact of peer support on recovery outcomes over time. Participants who engage in peer support interventions demonstrate continued improvements in symptom management, social functioning, and quality of life, suggesting that the benefits of peer support are enduring and meaningful. Moreover, longitudinal research highlights the role of peer support in reducing reliance on traditional mental health services, as individuals gain confidence in their ability to manage their mental health and seek support from peer networks.

Implications for Practice, Education, and Policy: The integration of peer support principles into mental health nursing practice holds significant implications for improving service delivery and outcomes. Mental health professionals can benefit from incorporating peer support approaches into their therapeutic interventions, treatment planning, and recovery-oriented care. Furthermore, peer support can complement existing psychotherapeutic modalities by providing additional avenues for social support, validation, and empowerment. In terms of education, incorporating peer support training modules into nursing curricula can enhance the competence and confidence of future mental health practitioners in working collaboratively with individuals with lived experience. At the policy level, advocating for the recognition and funding of peer support programs as essential components of mental health care is crucial for ensuring equitable access and sustainability.

The integration of peer support principles into mental health nursing practice, education, and policy holds profound implications for enhancing the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of mental health care services.

Practice: Incorporating peer support approaches into clinical practice can significantly augment the therapeutic landscape for individuals with mental health challenges. Mental health professionals, including nurses, psychiatrists, and psychologists, can integrate peer support interventions into their treatment modalities to complement traditional therapeutic techniques. For instance, incorporating peer support groups into



outpatient clinics or community mental health centers can provide additional avenues for social support, validation, and empowerment for service users. Mental health nurses, in particular, can play a pivotal role in facilitating peer support initiatives by fostering collaborative relationships between peer support workers and service users, providing clinical supervision, and promoting recovery-oriented care practices within interdisciplinary teams.

Furthermore, mental health nurses can leverage their expertise in therapeutic communication, psychoeducation, and crisis intervention to enhance the effectiveness of peer-led support groups. By offering guidance on effective communication strategies, conflict resolution techniques, and crisis management protocols, mental health nurses can empower peer support workers to facilitate safe, supportive, and inclusive group environments. Additionally, mental health nurses can advocate for the integration of peer support services within inpatient settings, residential treatment programs, and transitional care facilities to ensure continuity of care across the care continuum.

Education: Integrating peer support training modules into nursing education curricula is essential for preparing future mental health practitioners to work collaboratively with individuals with lived experience. Nursing schools and training programs can offer specialized courses or workshops that focus on the principles, practices, and ethics of peer support in mental health care. These educational initiatives should emphasize the importance of cultural humility, trauma-informed care, and recovery-oriented approaches to mental health nursing practice.

Moreover, incorporating experiential learning opportunities, such as supervised peer support placements or peer mentoring programs, can provide nursing students with firsthand exposure to the transformative power of peer support in promoting recovery and resilience. By fostering empathy, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills, these experiential learning experiences can enrich students' understanding of the complex interplay between mental health, social determinants of health, and recovery.

Additionally, continuing education programs and professional development opportunities should be available to practicing mental health nurses to enhance

their knowledge and skills in peer support facilitation, peer-led interventions, and collaborative care models. By investing in ongoing training and skill development, mental health nurses can remain abreast of emerging best practices, evidence-based interventions, and ethical considerations in the field of peer support.

Policy: At the policy level, advocating for the recognition and funding of peer support programs as essential components of mental health care is critical for ensuring equitable access and sustainability. Policymakers, legislators, and healthcare administrators should prioritize the inclusion of peer support services within mental health policy frameworks, reimbursement mechanisms, and quality improvement initiatives. This includes allocating adequate resources for the development, implementation, and evaluation of peer support programs across diverse care settings and populations.

Moreover, policymakers should promote collaboration and coordination among government agencies, healthcare organizations, community-based organizations, and peer-led advocacy groups to support the expansion and dissemination of peer support initiatives. This may involve establishing regulatory standards, accreditation criteria, and outcome measures for peer support programs to ensure quality assurance and accountability.

Furthermore, advocating for policy reforms that address structural barriers to peer support, such as stigma, discrimination, and funding disparities, is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable mental health care system. By championing legislative initiatives that prioritize consumer-driven, recovery-oriented approaches to mental health care, policymakers can help create an enabling environment for peer support to flourish and thrive.

Conclusion: Peer support programs in mental health nursing represent a transformative approach to promoting recovery, empowerment, and social inclusion among individuals with mental illness. By harnessing the lived experience of peers, these programs offer a unique blend of empathy, validation, and practical support that complements traditional mental health services. As the evidence base continues to grow, there is a compelling need to further integrate peer support principles into



mental health care delivery, education, and policy. By fostering collaborative partnerships between mental health professionals, peer support workers, service users, and policymakers, we can create more inclusive, person-centered, and recovery-oriented mental health systems that honor the resilience and strength of individuals living with mental illness.

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