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How peer support can help boost your mental health

Talking about our problems isn't always easy. Sometimes, emotions can feel so overwhelming that it's difficult to find the motivation to talk them out, or we may worry about being ignored or judged. However, talking to someone you trust – and being listened to in an empathetic environment such as a peer support group – can have powerful psychological benefits.

What is peer support?

When people use their own experiences to help each other, it is known as 'peer support'. There are different types of peer support, but they all aim to bring people together to share experiences to help each other through any [worries](#), problems or [difficulties](#).

Crucially, peer support groups provide a space where everyone feels accepted and understood – and each problem is treated equally. "Peer [support](#) is a system where people in the same kind of situation get together and share their experience to help each other," says Yuko Nippoda, a psychotherapist and spokesperson for the [UK Council for Psychotherapy](#).

"It is normally carried out one-to-one or in groups. If it is one-to-one, both parties share their experience and give feedback to each other. If it is a group setting, normally a small number of people get together and share their experiences."

Trained in active listening

Peer support can be casual and carried out with people you know. However, it can also take place with a peer support worker, who will have training in active listening. A skill often employed by [counsellors](#), this involves listening attentively to someone while paraphrasing and reflecting back their feelings and emotions. This aims to help them gain a deeper understanding of their problem, while feeling supported.

Although a trained peer support worker may have [counselling](#) skills, they are not always accredited counsellors.

"Counselling or talking therapy is more explorative. Counsellors who use specific [psychological](#) knowledge not only give support to their clients but also work on their fundamental issues in order to help the client change and grow," explains Nippoda. "Also, counsellors and therapists rarely share their own experiences, so the dynamics of the relationship are very different."

Honing in on mental health

In recent years, peer support groups have become a popular way to help people with their mental health. In 2020, a charity called [It's Worth Talking About](#) was formed to provide peer support groups for men and women across the region and the rest of the UK. It was created at the start of the pandemic after the [suicide](#) of a local 25-year-old man in Keighley, West Yorkshire.

"The simple definition used by It's Worth Talking About is 'everyday people supporting everyday people,'" says Ryan Anderson, one of the charity's founders. "We use this because while we have trained facilitators, the main component of peer support is through the sharing of life's experiences.

"We noticed a lack of accessible mental health support in the local area. The charity now provides many women's groups too, including in Leeds."

What are the benefits of peer support?

A problem shared is often said to be a problem halved and [research](#) suggests this is true. Often, talking to others about a difficulty can help you think it through, while making the emotions and feelings associated with a problem seem less overwhelming.

[Studies](#) have shown peer support, particularly within mental health services, can lead to an increased sense of [hope](#) and a feeling of empowerment, and diminish feelings of isolation.

"Peer support is very effective for people who suffer with [mental health](#) issues. First, they discover that they are not alone with the issues they have. Knowing there are other people having similar experiences means they do not feel [lonely](#). They feel they have others with whom they can walk the difficult path together," says Nippoda.

"This is important because it can reduce self-blame as they can acknowledge that it is not their fault to feel that way. Also, they can obtain information about their situation and this can broaden their knowledge, which can help them better understand their issues."

"The greatest benefit I see in running groups is the emotional support participants feel through talking with people who have similar [mental health](#) experiences," says [Counselling Directory member Shelley Treacher](#), a BACP-accredited counsellor. "Peer support helps people to normalise emotions, feelings and mental health and to find self-compassion."

However, it's important for peer support to be carried out carefully. Those who want to offer peer support need to be non-judgemental and empathetic, and ensure people feel heard and respected. In a group setting, it's also key for everyone to be given a chance to speak.

"If the group has too many people, the group members might not feel safe, as the intimacy and warmth can be lost, so a small number is more appropriate," says Nippoda.

How to access peer support

Find local groups

Many charities offer local and online general peer support groups, including [It's Worth Talking About](#), [Mind](#) and [Rethink Mental Illness](#). Often, these groups are facilitated by trained volunteers.

Some organisations host specific support groups, such as [Bipolar UK](#), which has support groups hosted by staff or volunteers who are affected by the condition. [Carers UK](#) has a directory of local support groups.

Start slowly

Before finding peer support, it's important to think about whether it's right for you. It's also helpful to consider how you are feeling and whether hearing other people's experiences may be triggering or upsetting.

If peer support doesn't work for you, that's fine – it might just not be the right support for you now. Sharing your thoughts, [feelings](#) and experiences can be difficult and it's normal to feel nervous beforehand. However, you can choose how much you want to share with other people. Peer support groups will be happy for you just to attend and listen until you are comfortable speaking.

Speak to your GP

If you're struggling with your mental health, it's important to speak to your GP, who will be able to advise the best course of action for you. They may recommend [talking therapy](#) – for which you can be referred or [self-refer on the NHS](#) – or [medication](#). Peer support can help alongside other treatments.

"Peer support and counselling complement each other beautifully," says Treacher. "One is likely to bring out the benefits of the other, as people process what comes up in peer support, and gain support for the subjects that surface in [therapy](#)."

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