The Power of Peer Support for Mental Health

May 6, 2010 By David Evans

A recent article in the Chicago Tribune highlighted the potential benefits of peer support for people struggling with psychological disorders. A woman, Bina, who the writer interviewed for the story put it this way, “A doctor can read about it, but he doesn’t know it firsthand. [In a peer support group], they get it. You’re preaching to the choir. They know exactly what you’re talking about.”

I have to give props to a group run by the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) in New York City for helping me out of my last really serious depression, the worst I’ve ever experienced. To be honest, there were some people in the group who drove me crazy (no pun intended), and others that I felt were a bit bossy, acting as though they knew it all and that you should just follow their instructions. By the time I reached the group I’d had enough of that kind of attitude and advice from professionals and didn’t need it from a fellow sufferer.

Hearing about the pain and fear that others experienced as they tried to go about living a “normal” life with the burden of mental illness was truly helpful, however. Living with my depression was like being trapped in the water under a thick sheet of winter ice. I couldn’t breath. I couldn’t seem to reach anyone on the other side of the ice and they couldn’t reach me. In the depths of my depression I’d simply given up and sunk to the bottom. Hearing others tell their stories, of which bits and pieces strung together reflected my own story, put cracks in the ice and allowed me to come up for air.

Perhaps the best thing that came out of the time I spent in the group was a shared experience that I’d never encountered before, in print or in person. Pretty much everyone I met in those groups expressed the intense frustration I think most of us suffering from a psychological disorder feel at one time or other about the random process of treatment.

I’ve read plenty of stories condemning the unscientific nature of the psychological profession and the problematic evidence about the efficacy of psych meds, usually by people who had only ever been mildly depressed or who had never suffered from mental illness at all.

What I’d never really heard from a fellow patient was how scary and disempowering it feels to have your provider essentially just throwing solutions at you (therapy and meds) and hoping that

something sticks. If something does work, you’re never really sure why or how long it will remain effective, or what you’ll turn to if it stops working. I ultimately realized that the hearty confidence displayed by some of my psychiatrists and therapists over the years was either stubborn denial of the less-than-stellar nature of modern psychological treatment or dishonesty born of the belief that a doctor shouldn’t let his or her patient see them sweat.

What I got from my peers in that support group was the unvarnished truth from people who’d walked in my shoes: In short, living with a mental illness sucks, and with treatment there are often as many questions as there are answers--but there is hope, and sometimes we come out better and stronger people on the other side.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.sanemag.com/blog/power-peer-support-mental-health