



Supported Education

2.4.4 Peer support group

Abstract

What?

This toolkit chapter is an introduction to the peer support group.

Why?

The purpose of the peer support group is to help the students help each other.

Who?

The peer support group can be organized by students or by SEd employees.

When?

For a given time period—for instance, over the course of a semester. Alternatively, the time for the group meetings can be fixed, and the group can be open to anyone wishing to attend.

Where?

It can be done wherever needed.

How?

This chapter gives you some examples on how to organize a peer support group.

Introduction

A peer support group is an arrangement in which students who have experienced mental illness first-hand can gather in a group, organized either by SEd or by the students themselves. The group's purpose is to help the students help each other, as well as themselves; students who have experience with the various challenges that arise for a student with mental illness can help other students in the same situation. Peer support groups can be organized in various ways. They can be organized on the students' own initiative, or they can be organized by SEd employees, for instance. The group can be fixed, in the sense that the same group of students may attend the group for a given time period, such as over the course of a semester. Alternatively, the time for the group meetings can be fixed, and the group can be open to anyone wishing to attend.

There may be various expenses related to a peer support group, such as rental of premises and other meeting expenses, expenses for food, or related to the group's attendance at various social events. (In Bergen, we have attended the Bergen International Festival, an annual cultural festival, for the past six years). It should always be clarified in advance who will be responsible for such expenses, so that the students can consider whether they can afford to attend. In Bergen, we have the opportunity to arrange meetings on campus without any expenses for the project, and expenses related to the meetings (and social events) are taken from our own budget.

Content of a peer support group

All groups start with the participants presenting themselves one by one, by first name as well as what they study. This round of presentations may take some time, as the students often take the opportunity to ask questions about various possibilities regarding subject combinations and the like. The further course of the meeting depends on whether a topic for the meeting has been given in advance (for instance, we may have a guest who is there to talk about a given topic) or whether the meeting is open for dialogue between the students. Oral participation from the participants is very individual and situational, depending both on the topic and on the participants. Some people like to talk, while others wish to participate in silence.

As an alternative outcome of a group offering, students can also cooperate on other levels.

Examples.

1. One of the students in the project was struggling with an undergraduate take-home exam in art history. We asked the undergraduate student if we could ask one of the other students in the project, who was working on a degree in the same subject, if she could offer some academic assistance. The two students then met outside the group.

2. Establishing contact between one of the earlier students and one who is currently a student in the same subject, on this occasion to help copy-edit a paper.

Often a peer support group is a loosely composed group where students connected with SEd meet each other. The main rule is that SEd organizes the meetings, but the group always discusses their own needs and wishes. The support from the group meetings may be of an academic nature, but the purpose is of a more social nature. A peer support group is a sort of respite in students' lives, where they can relax and take a break from worrying about exposing their mental illness to their surroundings.

Part of the strength of the peer support group is the fact that the group participants have experienced first-hand what it is to be a student with mental illness, and that the challenges and problems that other participants struggle with are recognizable. However, this can also be a weakness for this type of support; other people's challenges and worries can bring back painful memories about self-experienced challenges and worries.

Topics that can be discussed in a PSG

- Dealing with exam stress
- Guided relaxation
- Study techniques
- Self-disclosure
- Mindfulness
- Film meetings
- Social security rights

Recruitment

There are different ways of composing the groups. One may choose an open group, where anyone can participate on the scheduled dates. This is a loose and low threshold way of organizing the peer support group. This type of peer support group entails a certain degree of unpredictability, for the group supervisors as well as for the participants. As there is no requirement to sign up for the groups, there is no way of knowing who will participate, or how many participants there will be for each meeting. A benefit of this type of group is that the meetings are similar to other social settings and less like a treatment program in the clinical sense. This gives the group a safe environment to explore their experience and discover what is important and what works when you are a student with mental illness. It is also possible to organize groups by diagnosis (such as a group for students diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, as described below). Inclusion criteria of the group are identical to the inclusion criteria at SEd. As such, the participants must fulfill the university's admission requirements, must receive treatment from specialist health services, and must have a moderate to serious mental illness.

The group processes use the individual participants' resources—their values and thoughts about themselves—as a starting point before considering what the participants have in common and what opportunities there are for them to gain something from each

other's experiences. When activities are organized outside the student service offices, where the students will need to sign up, the students have to do so by email. Notices and information about the groups are also sent by mailing lists, where the recipients all receive blind carbon copies. All students have agreed to be on the mailing list.

Positive norms and rules: Instructions for group supervisors

Establishing positive rules and norms for the peer group has been identified by service providers as a critical ingredient for creating and maintaining a safe space, as well as a way of influencing positive behaviors and attitudes within the peer group such as positive conflict resolution strategies, social skills and a focus on the positives.

Group rules/norms may include having respect for one another, not being judgmental, being inclusive, no bullying, harassment or violence, and no alcohol or drug use. Peer-based programs use positive peer and social influence to establish and maintain positive peer group rules/norms. Positive peer influences encourage imitation of positive behaviors which receive social validation by the peer group and are therefore more likely to be repeated (My-Peer Toolkit, 2010).

The group supervisor or leader must always adhere to the needs and wishes of the participants. The supervisor or leader role is also dependent on whether the meeting or group is of a social or a more subject specific nature. The purpose of the group meetings must be clarified with the participating students through dialogue. The group supervisor or leader also adheres to a confidentiality statement, and should inform the group that not all participating students that are associated with SEd wish for this association, nor their association with this group, to be public knowledge. The group supervisor should also have a partnership attitude: effectively, 'nothing about us without us'. They should promote participation in all processes, and focus on independence, proactive and process-oriented. A group supervisor also needs to ask questions, listen and respond accordingly without delay, collaborate, share power and connect with others, and share experiences with open communication.

It would also be favorable if the supervisor had knowledge of the educational system, and the welfare and healthcare systems, and also knew coaching and counseling techniques. A key element would be that the supervisor holds SEd attitudes—hope inducing, respectful, with the language of empowerment and a solution-oriented pragmatism, along with patience, tolerance and empathy.

Experiences with peer support groups in Norway

A. Bergen

In Bergen, there have been fixed peer support groups since the inception in 2006. The group has monthly meetings: dates are announced by email and there is no requirement

to sign up. Some of the topics dealt with have been mindfulness, guided relaxation, study techniques, film meetings, and information meetings where an employee from NAV informs the attendants about various social security rights. There are also political, philosophical and ethical discussions, based on things like newspaper articles or happenings in society.

B. Tromsø

In Tromsø, there are two groups. One of these has been operational since 2010. There have been some changes in its participants, but some students have participated since the beginning. For a number of reasons, the group took a break during the fall semester of 2014, but it has now been started up again. The group has about nine participating students that meet every two weeks. Usually, between five and seven students attend each meeting. This is a closed group, but students are informed about the possibility of joining the group when they join SEd. The focus for the group meetings is to be a social meeting place for students associated with SEd. At the start of the meeting, the group always orders food and the participants eat together. The topics are not decided in advance, but rather there and then, based on the participants' present situation. The feedback from the students suggests that they appreciate having a place where they know that they are not alone in struggling with their life as a student. This is not so much a topic as a sort of backdrop for the meetings. The importance of these groups for the students was clear during the break last fall semester: the demand for the groups soon rose again.

The other group in Tromsø is a group meeting for SEd students diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome or other autistic conditions. At present, there are four or five participating students. They meet every two weeks at lunchtime. As in the other group, they order food and focus on the social aspect. The participants are students who have a difficult time socializing at university, and it appears that these group meetings are of great importance to them. The topics are not decided in advance, but rather arise from everyday experiences or other events that come up at the meetings. As the participants have come to know each other more closely, they have also started meeting outside the group premises on campus. One of the participants has shown a lot of initiative in including new members in the group and inviting new members to activities that he attends outside the group. This has been important to the students, who otherwise spend a lot of time on their own and express a wish to participate more in social situations. A topic that the group has discussed lately has been how one may appear to others socially in terms of clothes, style, hair, etc., and it has become possible to talk about the challenges that the students experience in this area.

C. Grimstad

In Grimstad, a peer support has been organized for approximately every two weeks for the past four years. Their meetings take place in a café on a fixed weekday evening. The group is on offer to all students associated with SEd, and it is solely a social offering. There is no set topic; they talk about whatever is on their minds. The students receive a text message reminder one day prior to the meeting, and there is no other form of signing up. Some arrive late, some leave early, but in general, the group meetings last for two to three hours. The number of participating students varies from meeting to meeting, but is usually

somewhere between six and twelve. SEd employees use project funds to buy drinks and snacks for the participants, so that it never becomes an issue that some students may not be able to afford to participate. Sometimes, SEd employees may assist students with transport if there are students who find it difficult to get there on their own.

The demand for these meetings is often evident from early on in each semester, and the positive outcome is clear in that the participants get out and meet other students in similar situations, form friendships and make arrangements to study together. For some of the students, this is the only leisure activity that they have, or that they can manage to maintain.

In Grimstad, there are also two daytime group meetings over the course of a semester. This is for everyone associated with SEd; the meetings are held on campus and the topic is decided in advance, based on the wishes expressed by the students. Relevant topics can be exam stress management, humor and mood, how to write a CV, how to handle job interviews, visits from mental health workers, and more. For these meetings, it is often requested that students sign up in advance. The meetings last about two hours.