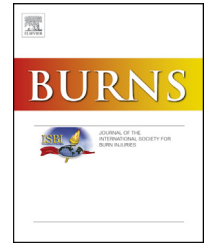


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Inpatient peer support for adult burn survivors—A valuable resource: A phenomenological analysis of the Australian experience

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ABSTRACT

Peer support has long been recognised as an essential component of a supportive network for people facing adversity. In particular, burn survivor peer support is a valuable and credible resource available to those rehabilitating from a severe burn. The aim of this study was to explore burn survivors' experiences of providing and receiving inpatient peer support to develop an in-depth understanding of the influence during the rehabilitation journey. In 2011, twenty-one burn survivors were recruited from four severe burn units across Australia. A qualitative phenomenological methodology was used to construct themes depicting survivors' experiences. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, and data collected through in-depth individual semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method of data analysis. Central to burn rehabilitation was the notion of peer support having a significant impact on burn survivors' psychosocial rehabilitation. The emergent theme 'Burn Survivor Peer Support' identified five cluster themes: (1) Encouragement, inspiration and hope (2) Reassurance (3) The Importance of Timing (4) The Same Skin (5) Appropriate Matching. These findings demonstrate that peer support assists with fostering reassurance, hope and motivation in burn rehabilitation. A national network based on a clinician led inpatient burn survivor peer support programme could provide burn survivors across Australia, and in particular remote access locations, with the benefits of peer support necessary to endure the rehabilitation journey.

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1. Introduction

Peer support has been defined as “a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful” [1] and built on the premise of empowerment [2]. It is a relationship that is of a voluntary and spontaneous nature that addresses the individuals or shared concerns [3]. The support can incorporate emotional and informational assistance and what Dennis [4] has termed “appraisal”. Peer support has long been recognised as an essential component of a supportive network for people facing adversity [5]. The benefits of peer support have been well documented in the treatment of chronic disease including cancer, cardiovascular disease, asthma, diabetes [6]. Peer support provides opportunities to: (1) increase one’s self-esteem [7], (2) increase one’s quality of life, (3) decrease one’s feelings of isolation [8], (4) develop one’s personal growth and self-reflection and (5) assist in finding new meanings [9].

Within the context of burns, peer support has altered burn survivors’ lives by the acquisition of a new perspective and hope for the future [10] and it has been reported to positively improve burn survivors psychosocial rehabilitation [11]. Oster et al.’s [12] findings demonstrate that speaking to another burn survivor is an empowering experience. Burn survivors who engage in peer support are reported to experience a significant positive change in their attitude that provides comfort and a means to heal [10,13]. Furthermore, Tolley and Foroushani [9] suggest that the spoken words of burn survivors can be an uplifting and inspiring experience however, more influential is the “silent knowing” that is heightened by the visual impact of encountering a burn survivor much further along in their rehabilitation.

There remains a high incidence of psychosocial difficulties experienced by burn survivors [14–17]. The role of peer support has become a valuable resource in the survivors rehabilitation journey [9,11,18,19], and is correlated with a positive body image, self-esteem and a reduced incidence of depression [20]. The rapid growth of peer support networks is suggestive that peer support has a critical role in post-burn adjustment [10] and is an adjunct to their burn rehabilitation [11]. Empowering burn survivors to access peer support enables the extension of their support network that is seen as an alternative to conventional support methods [9]. Drawing from these injuries, burn survivors can impart their experiences that bring a unique, personal and credible perspective through emotional and instructive support [5,21]. Words spoken by a burn survivor is an enriching and inspirational experience coupled with a mutual understanding that is reinforced by physically meeting a survivor who has experienced the rehabilitation process [9].

There are limited qualitative studies that address peer support and its value within burns rehabilitation. Tolley [9] has recently brought to the forefront that access to peer support in Australia has been lacking with no national inpatient peer support network for those rehabilitating from a severe burn. However, this was a scoping review focussing on methods, design and structure of programmes and less about the utility and impact that peer support offers burn

survivors. In particular, Badger and Royse [22] conducted a large qualitative study exploring burn survivor peer support that found it to be of significant value to burn survivors. However, the interviews varied from 2 to 50 years after the burn. While remembered experiences are valuable, recall and meaning can change with extended time elapsed. This lead to a methodological opening for a study that interviews participants at a time more proximal to their injury.

The quantitative literature specifically on peer support is sparse: Badger and Royse [10], Williams [13] and Sproul et al. [23]. The former studies [10,13] explored views on peer support; the later described frequency and reported positive benefits of peer support. This current study addresses the importance and benefits of burn survivor peer support, as well as focusing on the peer supportive relationships that occur in an inpatient setting in the unique Australian context and cultural milieu as Australia is a modern and multicultural nation that is geographically and demographically diverse. Most of Australia’s urban population is concentrated on the South-East and East, and the South-West coastal regions with vast distances between the States and the Territories which make access to rural and remote areas challenging for those accessing health services. The study also aimed to address the methodological issue of the post injury timing of interviews.

This study was part of a larger project that explored burn survivors’ experiences of rehabilitation in Australia. In an earlier report of our research, adult burn survivors describe experiences of acknowledgement and acceptance encountered during their rehabilitation journey [24]. These findings highlighted the challenges experienced and the value of coping strategies to facilitate acceptance. This paper explores burn survivors’ experiences of providing and receiving inpatient peer support.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

The study reported within utilised a descriptive phenomenological methodology. This enabled a rich understanding of the burn survivors’ ‘lived experience’ of providing and receiving inpatient peer support. As a methodology, phenomenology has become widely held within the domain of qualitative research [25] as a means to describe human experience [26,27] as it enables the researcher to directly explore and analyse phenomena, arriving at a genuine explanation of the individual(s)’ ‘lived experience’ [28]. In particular, descriptive phenomenology endeavours to view the phenomenon with fresh eyes, uncontaminated by prior knowledge or scientific impositions [29] as the richness of the ‘lived experience’ is not explored through an empirical approach [30].

2.2. Ethical considerations

The study’s protocol was approved by the institutional research ethics committees from five sites across four Australian states where participants were recruited [31]. Written consent was sought from each of the 21 participants prior to conducting the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and participants could

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