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Fostering empowerment in online support groups

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Abstract

Online support groups have been used extensively, in numerous areas of distress, for 15 years. Researchers have presented conflicting findings and ideas about their effectiveness in helping people cope with respective problems. Our review of quantitative studies and our qualitative exploration of the nature of the experiences that occur in such groups show that several factors operate to potentially affect participants. Personal and interpersonal dynamics, which are central in producing effects in these groups, are induced and accelerated by the powerful online disinhibition effect. These factors, including the very impact of writing, expressions of emotions, collecting information and thereby improving understanding and knowledge, developing social relationships, and enhancing decision-making skills and consequent behavioral actions all serve as possible generators of a sense of personal empowerment for people in distress. This view may explain why empirical research has frequently found little or no specific outcomes from participating in online support groups; however, it has found much support for nonspecific personal impacts of this means of intervention. Thus, we contend that online support groups are designed to foster, and many of them actually do, well-being, a sense of control, self-confidence, feelings of more independence, social interactions, and improved feelings—all nonspecific but highly important psychological factors. As such, participating in an online support group could foster personal empowerment, which is much needed in handling specific conditions of distress. Nonetheless, this participation has potential costs, too, especially developing dependence, distancing from in-person contacts, and exposure to unpleasant experiences typical of social engagement in cyberspace.
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1. Introduction

Support groups have a long history. They seem to have been in existence hundreds of years ago in fraternal organizations such as Freemasonry, but their popularity began blooming in the middle of the 20th century when Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Steps movements showed that group support was essential in helping members recover from a distressful situation and obtain some emotional relief. These groups based themselves on the simple premise that people who share similar difficulties, misery, pain, disease, condition, or distress may both understand one another better than those who do not and offer mutual emotional and pragmatic support. Over the years, the special value of social support to an individual's well-being, emotional state, and perceived self-efficacy has been recognized in the context of formally established groups, as well as informally in the natural social environment (Farris Kurtz, 1997; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). A significant shift in people's recognition and focus on social support emerged as they acknowledged that a support group was an inexpensive, convenient, yet effective vehicle for obtaining help. The self-help trend integrated into support groups and has gained much empirical support as numerous investigations and personal testimonies have evidenced (see a comprehensive review by Tucker-Ladd, 1996–2006).

Online support groups began to emerge in the 1990s. Less accepted by the professional society, they gained only sporadic publication on the Internet and a few early reports at conferences (see King & Moreggi, 1998). This movement, however, has now grown into a mass social phenomenon that is estimated to number hundreds of thousands such groups worldwide. Online support groups can operate through various Internet applications—an email list, a chat room, or a forum ("bulletin board"), but it is the last form that seems to have become the overriding technology, as participants take advantage of its asynchronicity as well as of various other features: easy access, opportunity for archival search, convenient use of emoticons and links, and friendly design (Meier, 2004).

Online support groups exist on practically every distress topic possible, from patients with asthma to parents of children with autism, from hearing-impaired adolescents to children with Alzheimer disease parents, from victims of rape to dyslectic students, from early divorcees to patients dying of a particular type of cancer, and from socially phobic adults to smokers who are trying to quit. For those who take part in an online support forum, the group functions as a durable and accountable help resource through which they transmit and obtain information, provide and receive emotional support, socialize and form interpersonal relationships, and experience comradeship with others sharing a similar distress, thereby helping to reduce their perceived anomaly (Bane, Haymaker, & Zinchuk, 2005). It is important to note that despite obvious similarities and though frequently there is a lack of differentiation between them (Bellafiore, Colòn, & Rosenberg, 2004; Colòn & Friedman, 2003; Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005; Meier, 2004), a support group differs substantially from a therapy group. Several core differences should be noted: first, unlike a therapy group, no pre-planned, targeted professional manipulation—a treatment protocol—is conducted or delivered in support group. Second, the purpose of support groups is basically to offer *relief and improved feelings* rather than therapeutic change in the emotions, cognitions, or behaviors of participants. Third, support groups may operate without a leader or manager or have a nonprofessional administrator, whereas therapy groups always have trained professionals who lead them. Fourth, a support group is usually an open forum, which participants can join or leave at anytime, whereas a therapy group