

Online Support Groups: A Valuable Supplement to Conventional Mental  
Healthcare

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Online Support Groups: A Valuable Supplement to Conventional Mental Healthcare**

Online support groups are a source of contention. For individuals lacking access to care, due to financial constraints, social stigma, or any other restriction online communities can be valuable sources of support. Yet other online communities, and social media, in particular, can also exacerbate depressive symptoms (Roystonn, 2020). Some professionals denounce these groups for perpetuating problematic negative behaviors, however, do these potential negatives outweigh the good these are capable of performing? Specifically, since 2000, how has online mental-illness support supplemented or displaced in-person care? While licensed mental healthcare professionals have cautioned that online mental healthcare is no substitute for professional care, many depressed persons report that they find it indispensable as a supplement to professional care; to some depressed persons, it is an effective alternative to care they cannot afford or otherwise access.

### **Review of the Research**

Why won't anything work? This is a common sentiment shared among many who have joined online care groups for major depressive disorder (MDD). Many depressed individuals avoid online care groups; stigma makes depression difficult to discuss, especially with strangers. The stress and anxiety it can induce may deter healthy discussion. Social media use has been linked with depressive symptoms in teens and young adults (Brailovskaia, 2020). According to Jamieson (2020), adolescents in online communities who received less attention than others felt rejected and distressed. According to Moore (2012), 60.35% of the 12-17 year south-eastern US youth who have been bullied in the real world have also been bullied online. Furthermore, victimized individuals tended to report lower levels of self-esteem, and life satisfaction than their non-victimized peers. Thus, those victimized are at a greater risk of MDD and are less likely to

reach out to others for fear of suffering another negative experience. Nevertheless, online support communities can complement professional care (Roystonn et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2020).

In a review of national health surveys in Singapore, Roystonn et al. (2020) determined that online support groups relieve social isolation and psychological distress, and help users learn to manage their symptoms and find treatment options. But experiences vary widely. Supportive feedback and frequent interaction promote improvement (Yan, 2020), but online interactions are generally more superficial than offline relationships. The lack of psychological closeness between participants often leads to the experiences being both less enjoyable and less fulfilling than they would be in-person or over the phone (Shah et al., 2009). In the early 2000s, Jonathon Cummings and Robert Kraut concluded that internet users often experienced reduced social connectedness and increased loneliness. This consensus has since changed due to the internet becoming an integral part of everyone's lives, but for avid users who foster online relationships instead of bolstering their pre-existing connections, these side effects can still occur. Online support groups also tend to have less of a positive impact than their in-person counterparts. The British Medical Journal (BMJ) found that in 2004 out of 12 studies on depression, only 3 online support groups displayed significant improvement. The BMJ also found that in support groups for weight-loss, online support groups showed significantly less improvement than their in-person counterparts (Eysenbach et al., 2004).

For individuals lacking access to in-person professional care, professional online support groups are immensely beneficial. Organizations such as the Life Raft Group properly inform members about their health, offer emotional support and provide medical referrals for most illnesses. They're available 24/7 and encourage individuals to take the initiative to begin educating themselves about making responsible decisions to manage the conditions they possess

(Ferguson et al., 2004). That said, while professionally organized online support groups tend to be beneficial, the same cannot be said for all groups organized by interested or similarly afflicted laypersons.

There are three major issues with non-professional online support groups, unwarranted positive affirmation, illness reification, and the spreading of social diseases (Barker, 2008; Coiera, 2013). Unwarranted positive affirmation occurs when an individual receives approval from others for incorrect beliefs or ideas. This can be devastating, as it may cause the misguided layperson to become skeptical of any professional that does not agree with him. Illness reification occurs when constant unwarranted affirmation causes an individual to believe that they suffer from a condition that he either does not possess or is not real. Social diseases are conditions that are non-communicable such as obesity, alcoholism, or MDD. People do not actively contract an illness for this but rather individuals naturally begin to emulate the detrimental norms and behaviors of those around them. According to Coiera, (2013), for each obese person, an individual has regular social contact with, his chance of becoming obese increases by 0.5%. This is problematic, as most non-professional online support groups consist of afflicted individuals interacting with other afflicted individuals. Administrators of the prominent Anxiety and Depression Support Group on Facebook have acknowledged this dilemma and decided to close the group as a result (Anxiety and Depression Support Group, 2021).

## **Alleviating Loneliness and the Dangers of Online Support Communities**

Some depressed persons turn to online support communities to supplement professional care (Depression Support, 2020); for others who avoid professional care, such communities are often used as an alternative (Corrigan et al., 2020; Holland, 2016; Masuda et al., 2012). Support groups can be vital sources of solace from others with shared experiences. On December 11th, a member of the Depression and Anxiety Mental Help Support Facebook Group wrote “Have been on top of my anxiety most of this year (Having suffered badly for 20 years, really bad for the last 5), but I'm starting to crack now” (Depression & Anxiety Mental Health Support, 2020). This was the user’s first post to the group. Within 4 hours they had received 25 comments, generally supportive. On March 28th, a Reddit user posted,

I'm a 25-year-old woman who feels like a complete and utter failure. I dropped out of high school, have never gone to university, and have been in and out of various dead-end jobs like age care and tutoring ... I've always dreamed of becoming a writer but after 8 years of working at it, even that dream has been derailed by a pure lack of talent and aptitude for the craft. At this point, I am truly starting to question whether there is any point in living on this planet (BriefSupermarket1341, 2021).

Within a day this user received 131 upvotes and numerous replies to her plea for help. The woman appreciated this positive feedback immensely and thanked many of the commenters for their advice and support. Conversations with others online through text tend to be less enjoyable than their in-person counterparts. Nevertheless, when excluding physical interactions, both forms of conversing convey a similar level of emotional support (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008) In moments of immense emotional turmoil, any form of comfort can be a godsend. Despite the replies being from strangers, they were still impactful and helped the woman feel less alone.

Depression is a terrible illness to handle alone. Online support groups give individuals an avenue to alleviating this burden by sharing it with other caring members.

Depressed persons may turn to online support groups due to a lack of financial resources. One of the most prohibitive barriers to psychiatric care is the economic burden (Shah & Beinecke, 2009). On April 23rd, a member of the Depression & Anxiety Mental Help Support Facebook group wrote, “I wish I could afford functional medicine, doctors, or TCMS. I know I would benefit. I just know it. Why is it so expensive?” (Depression & Anxiety Mental Health Support, 2020). A financially struggling Reddit user echoes this plight, “It's also too expensive. I am alone in this situation. Nobody to pay for it or help me currently” (domme\_heather, 2021). For individuals without insurance, an initial consultation from a psychiatrist tends to range from \$300-\$500, with follow-up appointments costing upwards of \$100 (Rupp, S, 2021). Therapist rates differ based on location but tend to cost anywhere between \$60-\$250 (Thervo, 2020). These prices can be crippling, a sentiment which the following Reddit user expresses,

And her appointment cancellation was “only \$100”. More than I make in a day.

Hopefully, I can see someone through my state's Medicaid ... I've been trying to get stable since June, but I'm starting to slip away again and it's so hard to see a psychiatrist.

Money isn't just money when you make as little as I do (loveisjustchemicals, 2021).

The economic burden makes receiving treatment difficult for numerous individuals suffering from depression. While not nearly as effective, online support groups offer a form of relief and comfort that may not otherwise be available.

Stigma is another major deterrent that prevents depressed persons from seeking professional care (Holland 2016; Corrigan et al., 2014). On April 25th, a member of the Anxiety and Depression Support Facebook group wrote “My husband doesn't understand mental illness.

He sees it as a weakness” (Anxiety & Depression Support, 2020). A Malaysian Reddit user echoes this sentiment,

Malaysia doesn't give a rat's ass about depression. Some even call it "The White Man's Disease.” The general public, my family members, and even my life partner will shrug it off as me just being dramatic. They claim that I'm not doing enough to "snap out" of these delusions ... I feel pushed to a corner with no viable help (\_delusionale\_, 2020).

Children are another major group affected by stigma. While many parents are accepting of other people's mental illnesses, it is difficult for them to accept that their children may be suffering as well. The following Reddit user recalls having to mute herself to prevent her mother from hearing her cry over the phone,

The idea of her daughter having depression is just unfathomable to her (ironic because she works in a rehab center). If I give even the smallest hint to my declining mental health, she immediately starts to tell me stories of all these people she knows that have it worse. But that doesn't motivate me to make a better life for myself. If anything, I feel like more of a failure (\_matcha\_matcha\_, 2021).

For all of these individuals, the stigma held by their loved ones is preventing them from seeking help. Their issues are either downplayed due to societal norms or ignored outright as a result of either pride or ignorance. These individuals are instead forced to seek help in private through more discreet methods. Online support groups cater to this need, as they allow individuals to receive help while retaining their anonymity. While the support offered by online communities pale in comparison to professional treatment, in many cases it is better than no treatment whatsoever.

Administrators, moderators, and prominent members of these support groups often use their positions to fight mental health stigma (Male Depression, 2020). Many of these individuals frequently promote and run campaigns aimed to improve treatment accessibility or remove society's stigma against mental health. For example, one member of the Facebook group Male Mental Health Y.A.N.A, takes part each year in Movember, a movement to publicize men's health needs, including mental health. On November 2nd, he wrote "I take part in Movember every year. Mental and physical health are important and we men suck at asking for help which is why I raise awareness about them every year" (Male Mental Health Y.A.N.A, 2020). In 2019, Anthony Caputo, the creator of the Anxiety and Depression Support Group on Facebook, started a fundraiser to alleviate the financial barriers some individuals face when attempting to receive professional help. A Reddit user and Twitch Streamer named VortexVegaCN also decided to make a difference stating,

I'm spending the next month fundraising for an amazing Australian charity that helps with mental health, BeyondBlue. A couple years ago I was starting to notice a change in myself ... Then my mum died suddenly while I was home and I went off the deep end. Everything crumbled around me ... I broke down and went to the doctor who finally prescribed me medication. It took time but I felt much better, I still go through bad patches and sometimes really bad patches but as a whole, I've picked up my life from where I was at. I got an amazing response from my friends and family when I decided to post it on Facebook ... so I'm really hoping to hit \$1500 by the end with the amazing help of family and friends (VortexVegaCN, 2020).

Vortex successfully hit his goal, and fundraising for BeyondBlue has become a regular part of his life. Vortex now performs annual charity streams on Twitch, and he and his associates



were able to raise over \$12,000 this year (cn\_vega, 2021). These three individuals want the best for the members of their communities and all others struggling with depression. They represent only a fraction of the charity work being performed, and like many others are attempting to better both themselves and the world around them.

The biggest strength of non-professional online support groups is their communities. Ironically enough, these communities can also be their greatest weakness. While receiving positive support in times of turmoil can be immensely beneficial, these communities can devolve into an echo chamber of negativity, where individuals form bonds over their shared toxic behaviors. An impassioned psychotherapist and Reddit user writes,

A lot of my patients suffer from depression and a lot of them naturally have very negative habits and routines. They have trouble getting out of unhealthy routines ... And a lot of them spend way too much time on social media and Reddit where they seek like-minded people to bathe in their negativity. While I understand how difficult it is for them to find any motivation to get out of these habits it's so important not to seek out misery deliberately. I hear so many excuses: "These people understand me.", "They don't judge me.", "It's just making fun of my depression.", "I got nobody else to talk to." I totally get it, depression sucks, and sometimes making fun of it can help but it doesn't stop with the occasional fun ... I once tried to give advice ... but was downvoted immediately. Just try it out for yourself. Post wholesome things like: "There's help out there" or "you should rather talk to a therapist", "you are not alone in this", hell, anything you would tell a good friend who is obviously suffering. They won't have any of it and this creates such a toxic environment for people who are hurting the most. This environment will NOT help you. There's no therapist present in these threads to intervene if things go out of hand. Even if

it seems that you've found your community, it's not true. You will find that community out there in the real world with professional help (hurendom, 2018).

This professional individual is very against non-professional online support communities. The communities he is describing are awful and perpetuate the negative behaviors of their users. The echo chamber present in these communities can lead to the aforementioned issue of illness reification and even worsen the condition of their members. Individuals do not benefit from having other people constantly enable their negative habits, or affirm their self-destructive mindsets. The communities described here can have a massive negative impact on their members' lives, however, not every support group is like this. Reddit user Hurendom makes a sweeping generalization to all online support communities which frankly in many cases is not true. Nearly all of the examples mentioned previously defy this individual's description. His stance also seems somewhat biased due to his position as a professional mental health worker. While professional help is the best source of treatment, it is not always available to everyone. Despite some online support groups having toxic communities, those which maintain positive environments can be immensely helpful. Furthermore, his opinion is not universally shared among other professional mental health workers. In 2017, Kathleen Griffiths's research on online support groups was published in the Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA). Griffiths found that online support groups tended to be beneficial but that more research was necessary to determine what types of individuals benefited the most from their usage. Ironically, she also found that some individuals often became distressed due to their inability to help more people. This actually suggests the opposite of what Reddit user Hurendom stated. Instead of enabling each other's negative behaviors, some of the individuals are frustrated with their inability to help everyone. Furthermore, little evidence was found supporting that group

negativity was infectious, but the lack of moderation that would prevent the spread of toxicity in these groups may still pose a threat to members.

For many toxic online support communities, the administrators are aware of their member's propensity to enable and support negative behaviors. Consequently, many of the groups are constantly looking for new moderators that prevent this type of behavior. Some communities such as the Depression Support Group on Facebook go the extra mile by preventing posts from being displayed until it has been approved by an administrator or moderator. Other groups, such as the aforementioned Anxiety and Depression Support Group on Facebook have chosen to shut down entirely to prevent any further negative impact on its members' lives. Both of these actions display a level of self-awareness from the administrators and moderators of these communities. These individuals are aware of the toxicity that can form within their communities and wish to remove it or at the very least minimize any damages it may cause.

Many individuals are unaware that loneliness may be a major contributing factor to their depression. Numerous posts include information about how an individual is surrounded by loved ones but is still unable to feel happy. For example, an individual in the Facebook Group Walking Beside You: Anxiety and Depression Support Group writes, "I have good support from my spouse, but I feel guilty about asking so much energy from, her and I have trouble talking to her about my suicidal thoughts because I don't want to hurt her" (Walking Beside You: Anxiety and Depression Support Group, 2021). This individual states that he is well-liked by his friends, family, and co-workers, but chooses not to rely on them because he is afraid of being a burden. Despite having a great deal of social support, he does not feel as if he can speak to anyone about his problems and does not realize how lonely he is as a result. The individual mentions how it is far easier for him to confide to strangers through writing than it is in person. He later wrote how

much of a relief it was for him to finally tell others about how he has been feeling. All of the aforementioned victims of the stigma around mental illness also suffer similar but slightly different plight. Unlike the previous individual, instead of having difficulty opening up, these women have their issues ignored by the individuals who should care about them the most. Having one's issues be ignored or worse being patronized for feeling a certain way is incredibly isolating. If the people one cares about the most are not reliable, then one's self-worth can quickly deteriorate. It is difficult for one to continue loving himself when other individuals treat him as if his problems do not matter, or are of little importance. This sentiment is expressed by the following Reddit user, "I'm tired of feeling alone. I just want to be loved. I want someone to want me. To care about me" (SadPhish, 2020). This user has been struggling for years now, with his problems being firmly rooted in loneliness. The unreliability of his friends & family and his self-destructive tendencies have sent his life spiraling downwards. Fortunately for this user, his post received over 1,800 upvotes and 121 comments. While the positive feedback will not fix his life, in moments of immense turmoil, any form of comfort can be a godsend. The same user later posted,

I'm absolutely overwhelmed by all the love and support you've all shown me. I never expected to get one person to read this massive text of jumbled emotions ... Let alone have over 1,000 people read it and offer me their thoughts. I truly don't think my words can properly convey just how grateful I am to everybody reaching out to me, via comments and private messages... Because I know if your mass words of encouragement can reach through to me ... they can reach others as well (SadPhish, 2020).

Online support groups are not nearly as effective as professional treatment, but they are valuable nonetheless. While some have toxic communities that negatively impact their members, many

are run by individuals doing their best to ensure that the environment is beneficial for everyone. These communities allow individuals to find companionship and alleviate loneliness. In times of emotional turmoil, what some individuals need most is to feel heard and taken seriously. While online support groups are not a permanent solution and should not be treated as such, the benefits they offer can be a lifesaver.

## **Conclusion**

Online support groups are flawed, some even negatively impact their members, nevertheless, they offer depressed individuals an opportunity to feel understood and cared for even in the worst of environments. Loneliness is a crippling burden to carry. It is one of the most difficult struggles that depressed individuals are forced to endure. Individuals feel lonely for various reasons, some feel rejected by their peers or uncared for by their loved ones. Others do not even realize that they are lonely and are confused as to why they even feel sad. Regardless, all of these individuals can benefit from the assistance provided by these communities. Struggling individuals can be helped anonymously by individuals who can relate to exactly what they are going through. This assistance can take the form of positive support or even explanations to those lacking intrapersonal intelligence to untangle their emotions themselves. Non-professional support groups cannot replace professional care but they can help to supplement treatment. Many of these groups highly recommend and encourage all of their members to seek professional support. For those unable to seek professional treatment or those who wish to supplement their treatment with additional positive behaviors, online support groups are indispensable.

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