The Low-Down on Mental Health Support Groups

They're varied, confidential and teach self-care skills and coping strategies.

By Kirstin Fawcett April 2, 2015 | 9:44 a.m. EDT + More

When Tara Reilly was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 22, she didn’t think anyone else could relate. But last year, an online search brought Reilly, now 25, to a local chapter of a peer support group sponsored by the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, a mental health nonprofit. There, she found solace among others who shared stories similar to her own.

“There’s such a stigma with mental health conditions,” Reilly says. “It’s not something you can just talk about with most people. Having people who understand [my experience] is great.”

But the benefits don’t end there. Research suggests peer-run support groups for patients with mental illnesses confer myriad benefits, ranging from physical to emotional to social. Here are a few reasons you might want to seek out a support group if you have depression, bipolar or another disorder:

They’re varied. There’s no one-size-fits-all form of mental illness – and the same can be said for peer support groups, says Steve Harrington, president of the International Association of Peer Supporters, a nonprofit that promotes peer support in mental health systems. This means you’re likely to find a group that’s a good match for you.

Peer support groups are available in different settings, including psychiatric hospitals, outpatient programs, community grassroots endeavors and local groups sponsored by national organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Some are highly structured; others are informal. One group might consist of five people; another, 25. They run the gamut from specialized and specific – i.e., geared toward people with schizophrenia or survivors of suicide – to general, with an overall focus on mental health. The unifying factor is that each group comprises – and is moderated by – peers who have experience living with a mental illness.

When searching for a peer support group, take all of the above factors into consideration, says Dr. Keith Humphreys, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine. But those aren’t the only criteria that might make one group a better choice than another.

“Groups are a function of the people in them,” Humphreys says. “Any given group can have a powerful personality in it that rubs you the wrong way, or it could just have a philosophy that doesn’t match your experience. People need to shop carefully just like they would for a therapist
to make sure it’s a fit.” This might mean trying multiple groups, relying on word-of-mouth suggestions from trusted friends, searching the Internet for local groups or asking your doctor for a referral.

Bottom line? Don’t worry about what kind of group you choose. Instead, focus on what makes you feel comfortable and fits your lifestyle and needs. Don’t let a few failed attempts discourage you, either. After a while, you’re bound to find the right one.

**They’re confidential.** Peer support groups share a similar mantra: What’s said in the group stays in the group. This means you can talk freely without worrying about gossip or discrimination.

“People with mental illness are frequently reluctant to share much about their illness, or the fact that they have a mental illness, with the general public, or their friends and family,” says Sam Walinsky, who works as a peer mentor and group facilitator for a support group run by NAMI’s Montgomery County, Maryland, chapter. “This is partly because of the stigma that comes along with mental illness. Support groups provide an opportunity through which people can speak with assurance of complete confidence.”

And although peer-led support groups are occasionally criticized for the fact that they don’t keep detailed participant records or follow up with members, this also means people can seek help for mental health conditions without worrying about insurance or career repercussions, Humphries says.

**They provide outside resources.** Peer support groups don’t just provide emotional assistance – they often connect participants with educational, vocational and housing opportunities, says Leah Harris, director of the National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery, an advocacy organization that provides social services and other resources for individuals with mental illness. They’ll help you navigate social security disability; hook you up with a career counselor; and teach you day-to-day living skills.

**There are few taboos.** “[In my group], we don’t shy away from tricky topics,” says Denise Fay-Guthrie, a peer mentor and group facilitator for NAMI-Montgomery County. “We call them ‘hot potatoes.’ For instance, if someone is talking about suicide, we don’t gasp. Just because someone mentioned suicide, that doesn’t mean we’re going to go and call a mobile crisis team.” This approach allows participants to safely explore topics that might otherwise elicit negative reactions from family members or peers.

Of course, this isn’t the case for all groups. Some have specific rules to not talk about graphic subjects, self-harm or suicide. However, Walinsky says, tough conversations or issues are usually viewed as the norm – not the exception. “Working through discomfort can mean you are working through a comfort zone,” he says. “That’s when growth can happen.”

**You can participate at will.** “People who are wary to try out a support group should know they’re not required to verbally participate,” Walinsky says. “You can pick up a lot by just sitting and listening. That’s really important, because it may take some time to get comfortable. After a few sessions, you might even find yourself becoming an active participant.”
And although most support groups meet regularly – say, weekly or bi-monthly – you’re not required to go to every meeting. If you don’t have time or feel like you need it, you can skip a session without repercussions. The important part? They’ll always be there if you really need them.

**You learn self-care skills and coping strategies.** Mental illness affects every aspect of your life, ranging from your relationships to your sleep patterns to your physical health. And although full remission is possible, there's no “cure” for conditions such as bipolar disorder, depression or schizophrenia.

“You can’t tell this illness to go away,” says Dr. Lawrence Kohn, director of development at Boston University’s Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation. “It comes back in people; it’s not a linear progression, like a lot of physical maladies are. But [through support groups], you can learn to manage the illness instead of having the illness manage you.”

During a peer support group meeting, members might explain their experiences with various medications; ruminate on whether to disclose their mental illness at work; wonder how to explain their illness to family members; and talk about the importance of sleep, self-care and treatment compliance. In turn, others might share stories about what worked for them.

“I’ve gotten a lot of great advice by learning what other people do,” says Lizabeth Schuch, a board member for the District of Columbia chapter of DBSA. “There’s bound to be someone who has what you have, and they can offer something that you haven’t tried. You’re getting real ideas, versus being told to do things by the doctor or therapist.”

Of course, Schuch warns, you have to be careful not to tell someone what to do, or what not to do. “We talk from our own experiences,” she says.

**You make friends.** Research suggests social interaction helps alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety. And support groups provide a built-in base of potential new friends, allowing for bonding opportunities inside – and outside – of group sessions.

For instance, Reilly befriended another woman in her group; they sometimes visit museums together when they’re not at meetings. And Fay-Guthrie’s group goes out to dinner every month. “It’s not about our mental illness – it’s about people being together with a more lighthearted setting,” she says.

**Everyone’s an equal.** “People find these peer support groups to be helpful because everyone has struggled,” Kohn says. “Talking about the struggle is helpful in and of itself, but particularly so because there isn’t the same power principle that’s in effect when someone’s in with a therapist or psychiatrist.”

**You require less medical attention.** Studies indicate that psychiatric patients who participate in peer support groups require fewer – and shorter – hospital stays. They’re also less likely to rely solely on the mental health system, and are more likely to adhere to treatment.
You gain hope. “People who are living in recovery for mental health conditions are a model of what is possible,” Harris says. “I think it’s hugely inspiring to people when they see someone who has a psychiatric diagnosis and is employed, is giving back and is achieving their goals and dreams.”

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