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Peer Support and Trauma Recovery

Peer support is becoming an important strategy to help survivors of war-related violence recover from the psychological trauma. After a short training in counseling techniques, peer-support workers seek out trauma survivors in the community and help them reintegrate into society, find work, engage in sports and come to terms with their traumatic memories. Peer-support programs incur costs related to transportation and communication, but support groups may recover some costs through income-generating projects.

For most people who survive injuries from landmines or other explosive remnants of war, friends and family can significantly aid in the recovery process. Survivors rarely recover in isolation; support from concerned people in the survivor’s life is often the single most crucial element in the period of healing.

Survivors call upon their own inner resources to tolerate physical pain, mental anguish, flashbacks, nightmares, fear, difficulty with daily activities, loss of employment or school interruption, as well as stigma, discrimination and the humiliation of depending on others for assistance. Yet emotional support, companionship, sensitivity and affection are natural human responses and, in this painful time, often make the difference between hope and despair.

Some organizations providing victim assistance for survivors recognize the power of psychosocial support and incorporate it into their programs. In particular, many victim-assistance programs recognize the strength and power of bonds between peers—people similar in age, gender and social background, and especially those who share a history of trauma survival. Peer support has become a standard way to help survivors re-adjust during their recovery.

Peer support is particularly attractive in post-conflict settings because it encourages survivors to help one another, occurs in natural community settings, can be adapted to specific ethnic and cultural circumstances, avoids the stigma associated with psychiatric care, eradicates the self-blame and the desire to move forward and recreate a “normal” life.

Landmine Survivors Network established peer-support programs in 12 countries before closing in 2010.

Peer support is offered to survivors as either one-to-one individual counseling or in group sessions where all members are survivors. Peer-support workers receive some training on how to:
• Provide effective counseling
• Deal with suicidal behavior and substance abuse
• Help survivors obtain professional services, such as dealing with health problems, starting a business/finding work or applying for financial assistance

Because peer-support workers are survivors, some of their training includes how to deal with their own feelings of fear, anger and grief, which is important in coping with emotions that other survivors’ stories may trigger.

Peer-support workers are sometimes referred to as “outreach workers” because they seek out survivors in the community who may not have received treatment or attention for their psychological trauma. Trauma survivors may isolate themselves and avoid social contact, remaining bitter and depressed for years. By visiting a survivor in his or her home, a skilled peer-support worker can encourage a survivor to return to the social network, which improves self-esteem, increases problem-solving capabilities and reduces the incidence of suicide.

Once survivors are comfortable in a social setting, they usually benefit from a survivor-support group. Support groups meet for a variety of reasons, not always overtly related to trauma recovery but frequent for more practical activities such as income generation, entertainment or sports. In the midst of these events, peer support takes place and survivors benefit from contributing
2. In 2004:14 processes come into play, as described by Phyllis Solomon provides support to a survivor, a variety of psychosocial in the process of overcoming various types of trauma. Interacting with others who are perceived to be better than them gives them a sense of optimism and something to strive toward. Helping others, they consider to be struggling or in need, enhances people’s own sense of self-worth.

5. The helper–therapy principle proposes four main benefits for those who provide peer support.” As a result of making an impact on another person’s life, the “helper” has an increased sense of interpersonal competence, experiences the reward of positive exchanges, learns useful skills and receives social approval from the person they help and others.

Establishing New Peer-support Programs

In spite of peer support’s effectiveness in promoting recovery from trauma of survivors and of those who help them, peer-support programs have drawbacks. Individual one-to-one peer support is expensive to implement because peer-support workers need transportation to visit survivors in their homes, and this may require programs to cover the costs of public transportation, or provide peer-support workers with a bicycle or a motor scooter and associated expenses such as fuel. Many peer-support programs pay for or subsidize mobile phones for peer-support workers so they can stay in contact with survivors as well as with their own supervisors and can help survivors set up appointments, or networks for jobs and other opportunities.

Peer-support workers are sometimes volunteers, but many programs pay them salaries commensurate with their experience and training. Supervisors (usually social workers or program managers) are also necessary, and there may be a need to hire specialists in employment opportunity and advocacy. Peer-support groups can be more cost-effective than other forms of support, but there may be a need to hire specialists in employment opportunity and advocacy. Peer-support programs have access to professional psychotherapists to whom they can refer survivors with problems that are too severe for the peer-support worker to handle. Peer support is never considered to be a substitute for psychotherapy, but it is a useful supplement, especially in areas where health-care services are sparse. The training of peer-support workers is growing more sophisticated and now emphasizes the limits of peer support, as well as its benefits.

Conclusion

Trauma specialists worldwide recognize that most survivors are capable of full recovery from psychological trauma under the right circumstances and that an accepting, supportive social environment is a key factor in preventing long-term psychological dysfunction.

Peer support encourages survivors to provide that supportive network for the trauma-stricken, and it can often help survivors recover quickly without seeking help outside the community. Peer-support programs for trauma survivors can supplement thinly-stretched mental-health services in post-conflict settings and promote vital social reconstruction following a war. See endnotes page 81.