

Side by Side

Summary of early research findings

May 2017

Peer support is understood in many different ways because it is created and owned by the people who take part. At its core, peer support is about the relationships that people build as they share their own experiences to help and support each other. Peer support can develop in any setting, as a structured activity, or far more informally.

A lot of people with mental health difficulties take part in peer support in their own communities – rather than in formal mental health settings. However, this type of peer support is not well funded or well understood. Mind has worked alongside 48 groups and partner organisations to try and address this challenge.

This report sets out the early findings from the large research project evaluating the Side by Side programme, which was led by Mind. It provides information about the impact of community-based peer support for mental health. It also suggests ways to improve this kind of support in the future. More detailed findings will follow (see the ‘What happens next?’ section for more information).

What was the Side by Side programme?

The Side by Side programme – funded by the Big Lottery – took place between February 2015 and January 2017. It aimed to improve the lives of people experiencing mental health difficulties across England by increasing the availability of community-based peer support. The programme also tried to understand how to improve the quality of peer support delivered in the community.

The programme was run by Mind in partnership with 48 groups and partner organisations in nine areas across England: Blackpool, Blackburn, and Darwen; Coventry and Rugby; Kensington and Chelsea; Leeds; Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees; Northamptonshire; Plymouth; Southampton and New Forest; and Suffolk. Together, we raised awareness of peer support with 73,926 people, provided online peer support to 17,936 people, and facilitated face-to-face peer support with 3,255 people.

What did the research involve?

Mind commissioned researchers from St George's, University of London (SGUL) and the McPin Foundation to explore the values underpinning community-based peer support for mental health. These researchers also looked at what impact peer support has on the people who give and receive it. The London School of Economics worked with them to investigate the economic impacts of peer support. The SGUL/McPin researchers adopted a ‘co-production’ research approach. Team members drew on their own experiences of mental health difficulties and peer support – alongside their research expertise – to shape and guide the evaluation approach.

The researchers interviewed almost 100 people involved with the Side by Side programme and collected questionnaires from over 700 people. About one in three people who took part in the research were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities.

What makes peer support unique?

The research identified six core values that were found across all three peer support settings – online, groups, and one-to-one. The values do not work on their own; they are interconnected and build on one another. Together, they represent what makes peer support different from other forms of support.

The first three core values – ‘Experience in common’, ‘Safety’, and ‘Choice and control’ – form a foundation on which the final three values – ‘Two-way interactions’, ‘Human connection’, and ‘Freedom to be oneself’ – rest. It is important that peers feel they are with other people who have similar experiences, feel safe to express themselves, and have choice and control over whether/when/how they express themselves. Without this, they are unlikely to engage in two-way interactions and develop meaningful connections with other peers. Without the five other values being in place, it is unlikely that peers will feel like they can freely be themselves in peer support.

Although these common values are shared across all peer support, the research also found that peer support could be shaped a lot by local conditions. People involved in organising peer support made a number of practical decisions about how peer support could work to best suit the needs of a particular group of people. Five broad categories of decisions shaped what a peer support project looked like:

- Level of facilitation
- Types of leadership
- Focus of peer support ‘sessions’ (for example, social, educational, or activities)
- Types of membership
- Organisational support

The way that people and groups chose to organise peer support using these different categories had a big impact on how peer support worked on the ground. This meant that making different choices on a number of these categories resulted in a range of projects that looked quite different from each other and that were carefully tailored to local needs.

What is the impact of Side by Side?

The research found that as people engaged with more peer support, their wellbeing, hope for the future, connections to others, and self-efficacy (feeling like they can make positive changes to their own situation) improved. This varied for different peer support settings (group, one-to-one, and online). However, the research suggested that most change was achieved when there was active giving and sharing of peer support in a two-way interaction, especially in groups.

There were also differences in outcome for different groups of people, especially people from different BaME communities. These findings are being analysed in more detail to fully understand what they mean.

Having choice about the kind of peer support to access appears to be very important. The evaluation suggests that people try out different approaches to peer support in order to find out which approach works best for them. The research found that people reduced the amount of peer support they accessed over time but the impact was maintained.

These findings provide evidence for commissioners that people continue to live well in the community (maintaining good outcomes) whilst accessing less peer support over time. Importantly, there was no evidence that the more peer support that was offered, the more peer support people ‘used’. This is unlike the usual pattern observed with many conventional mental health services.

The economic analysis also found that people taking part in the Side by Side evaluation used fewer health services while they were involved with peer support. They also depended less on friends and family members to care for them. However, it is not certain whether this is caused by the programme or a combination of other factors.

What were the practical challenges of delivering the programme?

The Side by Side programme exceeded many of its targets and local projects engaged more people than planned. Many projects have managed to keep going after the funding ended. However, the research found that there were some practical challenges in delivering a programme that is as large and complex as Side by Side. In particular, it was hard to set up a range of new peer support choices within a short period of time.

Some clear recommendations emerged from the evaluation that any organisation – large or small – could put into action to improve the sustainability of organised community-based peer support. These include: peer leadership; creating positive, safe, trusting spaces for peer support; an active sense of learning both among those people already giving and receiving peer support, but also in understanding how the full diversity of cultures and communities needs to evolve peer support locally; and, changing and adapting ways of working.

The research found that getting money to organise peer support was a challenge –

particularly at a time of intense pressure on budgets. People who could provide funding (i.e. commissioners who were already engaged with peer support) were interviewed. They said that peer support could become a part of a wider package of support in an area – with different organisations joining together to provide a range of support options, including peer support. This might help to reduce costs and provide a smoother experience for people trying to access support.

What happens next?

This report presents the early findings from the Side by Side evaluation. However, there is a lot more information to analyse. During the rest of 2017, the evaluation partners will be producing more detailed reports to explain what they found. Practical guidance will also be written to share the lessons learnt from the Side by Side programme with people involved in peer support across the country.

A full early research findings report and a short summary for participants are also published alongside this summary.





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The McPin Foundation

The McPin Foundation is a specialist mental health research charity based in London but working across England. We exist to transform mental health research by placing lived experience at the heart of research activities and the research agenda.

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Mind

We won't give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

For more information on peer support, see:
mind.org.uk/peersupportinfo

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mind.org.uk

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More information about mental health research at St George's, University of London can be found at: sgul.ac.uk/research/population-health

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