Problem Drinking and Peer Support in Cyberspace

A Small Grant Report

Background

In recent years, there has been a significant rise in the number of people who access the Internet for information, advice and support. In particular, there has been a marked expansion in the number of online support groups (also known as 'online support communities') devoted to health, illness and problem behaviour topics. Despite a growing body of literature which has examined the use of online support groups and their impact on living with chronic illness, there has been little attention given to alcohol-related online support groups.

The Project

This project explored the online experiences of those who participate in alcohol-related online support groups and included an online survey of 90 members of 9 different online support groups. In addition, a qualitative analysis of 758 messages posted to 3 UK based online support groups.

Findings

The survey responses revealed that the majority (61.7%) of respondents reported that they had been accessing an alcohol-related online support group for at least 1 year with 59.1% accessing it on at least a daily basis. Respondents were highly active users, reporting that they either frequently or sometimes posted a message to the online discussion forum (86.7%).

Participants reported a variety of reasons as to why they had joined an alcohol-related online support group including: dissatisfaction with AA, no face to face support option, accessibility & convenience, anonymity, the membership of the online group and the ability to connect to others.
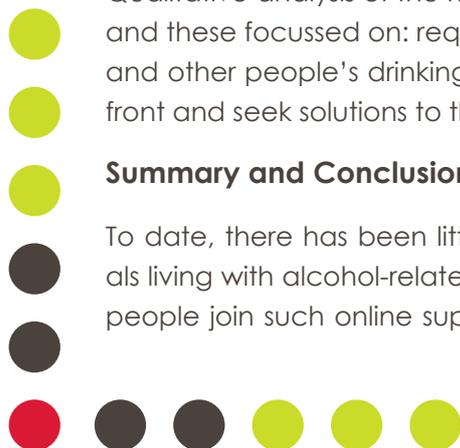
A number of advantages of online support groups were noted (though some duplicated the reasons as to why they joined in the first place) and included: access & convenience, connecting with others, anonymity, information & advice and emotional support. A number of disadvantages were also noted: misunderstandings, lack of social contact, group dynamics and individual characters, lack of response, addictive and disinhibited behaviour.

Through online support groups, participants reported a number of experiences which may empower them with 'finding recognition' being the most common.

Qualitative analysis of the messages posted revealed a range of topics which were commonly discussed and these focussed on: requests for help, the drinking problem, sobriety, giving support, general chit chat and other people's drinking problems. The online discussions appeared to help individuals address, confront and seek solutions to their alcohol-related problems and promote self-help.

Summary and Conclusions

To date, there has been little attention given to exploring the role of online support groups for individuals living with alcohol-related problems. This project is one of the first in the UK to explore the reasons why people join such online support groups and how peer support may be viewed and experienced. Using

an online survey together with an analysis of messages posted to alcohol-related online support groups this exploratory project provides important insights into this rapidly growing phenomenon. The results have identified a number of ways in which online support groups can meet the support needs of individuals affected by problem drinking whilst also highlighting some potential limitations.

The findings of the online survey reveal a range of factors that may lead to an individual seeking online support. Moreover, it identifies a number of important advantages which members consider valuable in helping them address their alcohol-related problems. In addition, the survey identified a number of empowering processes which members may experience and suggest that the primary benefit of participation in an alcohol-related online support group is the ability to 'find recognition' of one's own experiences in the stories and experiences of others. However, participation in an online support group is not without potential difficulties and a range of these were identified from participant responses.

The findings of this small-scale project have important implications for both individuals as well as health professionals alike. As we see an increase in both the number of online support services being provided to individuals living with alcohol-related problems as well as a rise in the number of people choosing to access them, it is important that up to date, accurate and reliable information is available. For example, support services wishing to develop online peer support may wish to carefully consider both the potential advantages and disadvantages. The deployment of skilled moderators may well facilitate such groups and help address some of the limitations identified by members. Individuals themselves should also be aware of the pros and cons of online support and should be made aware of how this novel form of support may be helpful to some people, though not necessarily everyone.

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The Final Report