

Chapter 5

USING FORUMS TO ENHANCE CLIENT PEER SUPPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Support groups operated through the Internet have existed since the middle of the 1990s, exploiting modern technology in continuation of traditional, face-to-face support groups (aka self-help or mutual-aid groups), which have been employed since the 1930s. The Internet has provided a special platform for operating these groups, which are able to take advantage of the unique features of virtual communication: convenience; anonymity and privacy; asynchronicity; textuality and saved history; optional use of external links, pictures, movies and sound; availability almost anywhere, anytime; relative inexpensiveness; and broad social acceptability. Moreover, the Internet more readily enables the matching of group participants who possess

similar needs; for many, this is apparently a unique opportunity to communicate and associate with people who share one's interests.

Initially online support groups were constructed through e-mail lists and relatively primitive server-based software that created newsgroup sites. Technological developments, as well as users' experiences and desires, contributed to more advanced web-based platforms that created highly dynamic support communities characterized by advanced and rich design. The result is that today hundreds of thousands of online support groups are active worldwide, trying to meet users' expectations and provide some relief to human difficulties.

DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS

An online support group connects people who share a common problem, difficulty or area of distress. Most such groups are operated through an Internet

forum ("bulletin board") platform, which provides anonymous, invisible, text-based, usually asynchronous, normally open and generally free virtual social environment. In this environment—typically run by means of server-based software (meaning that participants access a website by using a regular Internet browser)—people share information and personal experiences, communicate with one another and form interpersonal interactions with the purpose of obtaining emotional relief, on the one hand, and supporting others in need, on the other. A smaller number of groups take place through an e-mail list—which is another way of creating asynchronous group communication online. Although forum-based groups are more advantageous from the perspective of both technology and usability, some people prefer joining an e-mail-based group because it saves the necessity of accessing a website in order to read messages. Online support groups sometimes take place in chat rooms, too, as this format allows real-time (synchronous) communication and offers the advantages of immediacy and spontaneity of interactions, though it does present the disadvantage of having to be connected at specific, nonflexible times.

Online support groups allow people in need to receive help in numerous

DISTINCTION BETWEEN THERAPY AND SUPPORT GROUPS

There is much confusion between therapy and support groups, whether online or offline. This misunderstanding has developed apparently because these two forms of providing psychological help to people in need have certain common denominators. However, it is important to emphasize that despite several

areas of distress: physical medical conditions, such as a certain disease or syndromes (e.g., diabetes, breast cancer, tinnitus, epilepsy); emotional difficulties (related to various issues, such as bereavement, divorce, being fired, school failure, sexual assault); coping difficulties (e.g., smoking cessation, diet and weight loss, immigration); living with disabilities (e.g., hearing impairment, dwarfism, limb amputation); and relatives of people with certain difficulties (e.g., parents of children with autism, children of Alzheimer patients). People in need usually locate appropriate, relevant groups through online indices and search engines, but also through referrals by professionals, links on various websites, the media and recommendations from friends or relatives.

In most cases, online participants use nicknames in order to retain full privacy and secrecy unless they choose to identify themselves or disclose personal information. The degree and type of participation in a group is usually a matter of choice, the participants themselves deciding how often to participate, how deep their writing is to be and to what degree to support others. However, intimate disclosures are quite normative as is both asking for and providing help and advice to others in the group.

Similarities, they are two different entities, they have different goals and they expose clients to different procedures and protocols. Four of their major distinctions are as follows: first, an online support group is fundamentally based on mutual-help among its participants, not on dedicated professional intervention

(by one or another psychotherapeutic approach). Second, an online support group is neither necessarily managed nor supervised by a trained professional. Third, the procedures and policies of most online support groups seldom adhere to standards of professionalism

PROCEDURES AND PRACTICE OF ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS

There are various types of online infrastructure that enable group communication. Synchronized communication allows all online participants to take part in the communication at the same time through chat rooms. Asynchronous communication provides a vehicle for participants to communicate without the necessity of simultaneous participation as through email lists and forums, which enable delayed reading and responding. While a forum is operated through a website and is usually open to anyone, an email list involves more concealed communication, since only members of the list can receive or send messages.

In many ways, synchronized communication is similar to face-to-face communication in terms of instantaneous response, because the responses of other participants are immediately presented on the chat window and associated with the name of the participant who posted them. This form of online communication, which enhances spontaneity and authenticity of people conversing, may become an obstacle as participants are dependent on the presence of other group members in the chat room at a given time. Setting appointments in advance, as is done for offline support group meetings, may help overcome this obstacle. In addition, the size of a synchronous group must be taken into consideration; it is difficult to hold a chat dis-

and ethics or to legal obligations. Fourth, unlike therapy groups, practically all online support groups are open to anyone and no pre-screening is conducted; similarly, members can leave and return at will.

cussion with more than a few participants because of the lack of visibility and nonverbal communication cues. In contrast, a forum may in principle successfully serve a very large group of participants (Histing, 2000, 2007). The immediacy of communication and the need to write down a response, as opposed to saying it out loud in a face-to-face group, makes it necessary for participants to be more aware of their wording, the length of their writing, their response time and the need to refer and direct comments to a relevant participant.

Many of the difficulties presented by synchronized communication are easily resolved through asynchronous communication through a forum. The ability to communicate whenever it suits them allows participants to choose the right time, logistically as well as emotionally, an advantage that makes this kind of group more convenient and provides users with broader operational space. A forum is chronologically reversed, so that the most recent main message is presented first. A main message hears a thread of messages in which participants interact with one another. A participant may post a message freely, at any time and of any length. The delay in asynchronous communication allows messages to be edited before they are submitted. Use of attachments and links is possible, too. Forums are usually open to

anyone and their history can usually be browsed freely. In addition to the active members of the group, passive, reading-only participants (called lurkers) may read and stay informed about developments within the group. While lurkers do not actively take part, they frequently experience a commitment to the group and obtain support from it (Nonnecke & Preece, 2002).

Two of the special features that distinguish online from offline support groups are the textual nature of online communication and the variety of technical aids for the use of participants. Early theorizing predicted that computer-mediated communication would be impersonal because of its invisibility and anonymous nature and the fact that it is not able to convey nonverbal cues. However, the huge number of individuals who choose to take part in this type of communication seems to contradict that notion

(Tanis, 2007). People adapt their linguistic and textual behaviors in an attempt to overcome limitations created by written-only communication; in this way, communication becomes more personal and tends to resemble face-to-face communication. Some of the tools available to online writers constitute attempts to substitute nonverbal communication, such as highlighting text by color, size, or boldness; use of emoticons; elevated punctuation marks; links to other online materials, integrating pictures and sounds with text; and the use of personal signatures. These tools help get the message across in a richer way and with greater accuracy. Additionally, written communication facilitates the creative use of written language through the employment and integration of linguistic creative applications, such as rhythms, metaphors, poems and original (invented) terms (e.g., Provine et al., 2007).

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES IN ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS

Being part of a group enables participants to go through a process in which they can learn about themselves and about how others see them and receive an opportunity to express themselves authentically. Yalom and Leszcz's (2005) conception regarding therapeutic forces that operate in groups and facilitate change is of high relevance here. These forces include instilling hope, inducing a sense of universality, imparting information and knowledge, offering advice and guidance, developing altruistic attitudes, encouraging interpersonal learning and providing a convenient space for catharsis. Qualitative and quantitative research of online support groups shows that these forces operate in virtual groups just as they do offline, in face-to-face groups.

Additional processes characterize online support groups. Since communication takes place in a virtual arena, one can participate while preserving anonymity and invisibility. This unique procedure operates as an accelerator of disinhibition and consequent self-exposure. These processes thus explain why new members feel comfortable soon after joining the group by sharing personal experiences and relatively quickly develop feelings of intimacy in relationships with other group members. Disinhibition, furthermore, induces dynamic progress in the group by encouraging sharing, self-expression and introspection. It should be noted, at the same time, though, that disinhibition might introduce damage by promoting flaming, act-

ing out and judgmental attitudes (Suler, 2004; Tanis, 2007).

Communicating through writing, in contrast to speech, leads to significant cognitive and emotional self-processes. For example, writing has been found to contribute to the process of thought arrangement and subsequent emotional relief (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Writing is a way for a person to express and share thoughts, emotions' and experiences that may not be otherwise expressed. In addition to mere ventilation, the writer is focused on herself or himself while writing, allowing for an examination and re-examination of thoughts, for clarification, explanation and eventually—unlike in face-to-face interactions—the choice of whether to transmit the text to the group. This reflective process contributes to self-awareness, awareness of others and a developing sense of control (Hoybye et al., 2005), all in a safer place than the participants' offline environment (Tichon & Shapiro, 2003).

FACILITATION OF ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS

There is no consensus or standard directing the management and supervision of online support groups. Some groups are conducted with no officially designated administrator; in others, the administrator is one of the members, chosen either by the group or by its owner (e.g., the portal's administration, a professional association) to oversee and supervise proceedings so that group procedures are successfully maintained.

Despite the call for research (e.g., Eysenbach et al., 2004), the personal impact of the group administrator (also termed moderator, facilitator or navigator) and the types of moderating still await scientific inquiry. Recent research

The evidence that has accumulated shows that involvement in an online support group empowers participants, in addition to providing emotional relief (as opposed to healing users). Several specific processes have been identified as responsible for creating a sense of personal empowerment: the exchange of relevant information and knowledge, undergoing the psychological impact of writing, providing and receiving emotional support, accepting social recognition, sharing personal experiences, developing interpersonal relationships, helping others in need, being assisted in making decisions and taking consequent action and experiencing amusement and fun. These processes produce specific outcomes: clients become better informed, more confident, more accepting of their condition, more optimistic, more active and have generally improved well-being (Barak et al., 2008; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008).

on cancer support groups by Lieberman (2008), however, clearly points to the advantage of professional facilitation as superior to peer facilitation when judged by several criteria.

Facilitators' responsibility has multiple aspects. First and foremost, they should promote cohesiveness, as this is one of the most important and influential factors at work in a group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). It is a mission, however, that is particularly complex to achieve in an online group, which is characterized by physical distance, anonymity and invisibility. A second important role played by facilitators is to maintain the rules and practices of the group proce-

de in regard to ethics, such as preventing unwanted exposure or outing, harsh language and flaming; deleting problematic and misleading messages; negotiating with and solving problems of frustrated or embittered members; making attempts to avoid impersonation and phishing and so on. Facilitators may take such actions openly or secretly in back communication channels. A third function is to make sure that published information is well founded and based on credible sources and to prevent it from misleading and misguiding people in need and distress. Obviously, group facilitators cannot check every piece of information and advice provided, but they should take steps to guide participants and so minimize the effect of any

RESEARCH ON ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS

Process Research

Much research has been conducted on processes, behaviors, communication characteristics, personal expressions, emotional experiences and other process-related variables that occur in the dynamics of online support groups. Some process research has focused on psychological factors that take place in the group process (e.g., universality) and found that indeed the act of identifying and comparing oneself with similarly distressed people contributes to emotional relief (e.g., Bane et al., 2005) and empowerment (Bakardjieva, 2003; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008). Generally, this research shows that online support groups are as dynamic, lively and engaging as offline support (and therapy) groups. Writing, as mentioned earlier, has been found to act as a central therapeutic agent, enhancing emotional relief

problematic and harmful information that is published. An additional role of the group facilitator entails stimulating discussions related to the group's common topic, raising intriguing questions and posting materials of interest. Another function is to ensure that the group atmosphere is as positive, supportive and constructive as possible. This may be done by both modeling appropriate messages and responses and by providing feedback to members (usually through private communication). As the multiple and responsible role of a group facilitator is highly time- and work-consuming, the different tasks involved could be divided among several people who share the mission (Till, 2003).

and promoting well being (e.g., Hoybye et al., 2005). Participants find an online support group to constitute a safer situation than an offline environment in which to share their difficulties (Tichen & Shapiro, 2003). More generally, the expression of feelings, especially more negative ones, was shown to be related to emotional relief (e.g., Buchanan & Coulson, 2007; Lieberman & Goldstein, 2006). Although lurking is typical, participants normally take advantage of their anonymity and actively and in great detail, share with others in the group (actually, with anyone who observes the group's interactions) their individual concerns. This includes feelings, memories, desires, fears and so on. Research also shows that participants are very active in providing help to others, be it ideas and suggestions, referrals to online and offline information resources, or the communication of reassurance, encour-

agement and acceptance. Providing, as well as receiving, relevant information was found to empower participants in a wide variety of support groups (e.g., Bunde et al., 2007; Coulson & Knibb, 2007; Weis et al., 2003). Research, though, has also found evidence of negative behaviors, such as flaming, outing and impersonating, that do undermine group coherence, diminish a positive atmosphere and generally hinder normal proceedings (e.g., Aiken and Waller, 2000).

Outcome Research

Outcome research attempts to examine the impact of interventions; that is, the effects and changes that intervention procedures have caused in participants. However, whereas the goal of therapy in therapeutic interventions is generally known and clear the objective of support groups is much less clear, as their purpose seems to be more general than specific therapeutic change. Moreover, as indicated by Barak et al. (2008), in contrast to psychotherapy, which is usually aimed at well-defined, pre-planned changes relating to an area of distress, support groups strive to improve general feelings relating to well-being and empowerment and they can be successful in doing so (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008).

Therefore, studies and literature reviews that refer to therapeutic changes caused by participation in online support groups usually have showed little evidence of actual, distress-specific improvement. However, publications re-

port much empirical evidence from interviews and questionnaires, but also from observations of actual support group writings, in support of the notion that participants gain generally positive feelings directly related to their experiences in the group (e.g., Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Beaudoin & Tao, 2007; Buchanan & Coulson, 2007). These elevated feelings pertain to increased self-confidence and a sense of independence and decreased anxiety, loneliness and depression—all of which indeed relate to the concept of well-being. The result as reported, was a better ability to make decisions related to one's distress condition, a better knowledge of, or at least acquaintance with, relevant information resources and the promotion of self-assurance in regard to difficulties—in other words, experiences related to the concept of empowerment.

It seems that these results imply that, for many people, the combination of specific professional therapeutic intervention, on the one hand, and participation in a relevant online support group, on the other, could provide optimal help for their problems. For instance, while evidence-based psychological treatment of PTSD for a woman who was raped could effectively help her overcome anxiety and depression related to her condition, parallel participation in a successful online support group—preferably in coordination with her clinician—could accelerate improvement of her condition by complementing her well-being. Therapists should be aware of this option and encourage clients to take advantage of it.

CONCLUSION

The advent of online support groups approximately a decade ago has dramati-

cally changed the mental condition of many people suffering from various

types of personal distress. People who experience emotional hardship—caused by disease, failure, social circumstances and other stressful and painful situations—can now easily find others whom to share their miseries and to consult with, to be helped by and to offer help to. By participating in such virtual groups, not only have many people improved their condition, but they have also gained a sense of personal empowerment that directly contributes to their general well-being. Thus, online support groups may serve as an important social agent in enhancing quality of life for disadvantaged, marginal, weak and un-

healthy populations. Moreover, online support groups may serve as a significant aid to a therapist in complementing therapeutic services. Obviously, not all support groups are equally valuable and successful; it takes the leadership of a good moderator, advanced and suitable online technology and design, involved group partners and appropriate participants to yield a constructive online support group (McKenna, 2008). With a thoughtful and well-planned approach, however, these groups may make a great contribution to the well-being of many members of society (Barak et al., 2008; Taitis, 2007).

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