

Recovering from addiction: Do peer-delivered services help?

New research indicates that addiction to alcohol and drugs is a chronic condition. For many, recovery from addiction is often a lengthy process that requires ongoing management and support. Yet the traditional approach to addiction provides intensive treatment in response to acute episodes without longer-term follow-up and support, leading to high relapse rates. Emerging research shows that recovery is possible and achievable when accompanied by an array of supports. More research is needed to better understand the effectiveness of specific recovery support service delivery approaches.

Support from “peers” – people with lived experience of addiction who are now in recovery – is a form of recovery support that is gaining increased recognition and funding. Extensive research has documented the effectiveness of mutual peer support provided in the context of support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. However, there is little research on the effectiveness of recovery support services delivered by individual peer support workers or “recovery coaches” provided in a growing range of settings including: recovery community organizations, recovery housing, drug courts, criminal justice settings, and behavioral health agencies. Recovery coaches provide non-clinical strengths-based support, including emotional (empathy, concern, and caring); informational (referrals to services that support recovery and wellness); instrumental (transportation or support to access health or social services); and affiliational (community groups with other people in recovery, including opportunities to socialize) supports.

We conducted a systematic review – a rigorous and structured approach to assessing the extent and quality of existing research of the effectiveness of peer delivered recovery support services. Our aim was to identify, appraise, and summarize the existing evidence on the effectiveness of peer-delivered recovery support services for people in recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. Our review found that there is growing evidence that peer-delivered recovery support services have a positive impact on participants. Most of the reviewed studies reported statistically significant findings indicating that participants receiving the peer intervention reduced their use of substances and/or improved on different recovery outcomes that included greater housing stability, decreased emergency service utilization, reduced re-hospitalization rates, and/or less criminal justice involvement.

Since our findings also reveal methodological limitations in the existing studies, we recommend that future research needs to include randomized design and comparison groups, as well as clear definitions of peer roles, responsibilities, and training. In addition, it must account for the settings in which peer recovery supports are provided. Our recommendations offer a road map for future research on this important and emerging topic.

In sum, our review provides encouraging evidence about the positive value of peer-delivered recovery supports for persons who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. Peer recovery coaches assist others in initiating and maintaining recovery and in enhancing the quality of personal and

family life.

Ellen L. Bassuk^{1,2}, M.D. and **Justine Hanson**², Ph.D.

¹Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

²Center for Social Innovation, Needham, MA, USA

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