Is Peer Support an answer to social isolation?

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Method

3 case study sites:

i) Cumbria – Mixed group that splits
ii) East London - Mixed Caribbean group
iii) West Kent – People with Dementia

In each area:

• Client database: Monitoring data
• Questionnaire Survey:
  28 to people with dementia, 17 responded (61%)
  19 to carers, 13 responded (68%)
• Focus groups (between 7 and 9 participants)
Results: who?

- The majority of clients were male (58%)
- ¾ were people with dementia and ¼ carers
- A considerable proportion of people with dementia both in London (33%) and West Kent (32%) live on their own.
Expectations

- A number of respondents, most of whom were people with dementia, expected the groups to provide more information about dementia (30%) and more information about services (30%).

- Some carers (23%) expected the group to provide more information about caring.

- A number of respondents (23%), most of whom were people with dementia, also felt the groups would be more social.
Information

6 respondents thought there were ways the information provided in meetings could be improved.

From respondents with dementia this included;
- information about the future
- the possibility of experts discussing with the group the causes of and research into dementia.

‘Perhaps doctors or scientists might simply discuss why and how the condition occurs and also of research into early diagnosis and cure/control’ (Male, Person with dementia, Cumbria)
Social network

• Most respondents (60%) felt that the groups had helped them to maintain friendships.

• Nearly all carers (92%) enjoyed talking to other carers.

• Most people with dementia (71%) enjoyed talking to other people with dementia.
Social network

23 respondents (77%) chose to comment on whether they felt the group enabled them to meet people more often socially:

‘I enjoy the "togetherness"’ (Male, person with dementia, West Kent)

‘I enjoy attending the group and am limited in what I can attend outside the group because my husband has had his fall now’ (Female, Carer, Cumbria)

‘I get a chance to meet and talk with people who are sympathetic, experienced and have cared for individuals with dementia. This is now one of my main sources of social contact as many of my previous friends are too embarrassed and do not know how to deal with me and have gradually stopped meeting me’ (Person with dementia, Cumbria)
Focus groups

Key theme: The enjoyment of attending the group due to not feeling alone

1. General social contact
   • One commented on how the group is the most people they see all week.
   • Another explained how talking to a person who is not a stranger makes life acceptable when you have dementia.
Focus groups

2. Contact with people in a similar situation

Knowing what other people go through meant that the groups were a place to share information and ideas of how to deal with dementia and to unburden themselves:

• One person with dementia explained that, due to attending the groups, they felt they were not ‘thrown out into the wild’ post-diagnosis.
• Some participants added that the group also gave them hope and optimism as well as reducing their sense of stigma.
• Some participants mentioned the importance of humour in dealing with their situation; how companionship allows them to have a laugh, and how making a joke lightens the seriousness of dementia.
Is there anything you don’t like about the group?

Only one person, a carer expressed something that they did not feel happy about.

This occurred when the group were speaking about ‘group bonding’ and ‘friendship’

He felt that it was important that he maintain his individuality, separate from dementia, and did not want to ‘bond’ with the group. He said talking about going out on a group outing ‘left him cold’.

But he did feel that it was a ‘big help’ and that it was helpful to be ready for the future with dementia and.

Others in the group felt it was important this person realise that bonding is optional and that he does not have to participate.
Conclusions

- Peer Support is reaching those who are living alone and who may be most at risk of social isolation.

- Most service users reported that the services were effective in reducing a sense of isolation.

- Although some people with dementia were ‘not sure’ whether they enjoyed talking to other people with dementia. This may reflect the difficulty some service users face looking into the perceived ‘future’ of their dementia journey.

- As well as reduction of social isolation experiential learning and coping strategies were important outcomes for some participants.

- This evaluation highlights some areas in which the groups may wish to evolve according to need, including the provision of information, particularly to people with dementia.

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