

PeerTalk is a nationwide independent charity organisation that hosts weekly volunteer-led peer support groups for individuals suffering from depression, anxiety, and other forms of psychological distress. By providing a forum for sharing and listening, as well as encouragement and, more significantly hope to those who attend, the charity seeks to increase attendees' awareness of depression and resilience.

This report summarises a dissertation produced by one of Sheffield Hallam University's MSc student mental health nurses. Their project was a service evaluation to determine the benefits of a national charity's support for individuals experiencing depression. In particular, they sought to understand what the charity offered that differed from mainstream mental health services. To read the full report click [here](#)

This study aimed to evaluate the PeerTalk charity's provision. Its objectives were:

- To gain an understanding of PeerTalk attendees' experiences and perspectives.
- To identify what PeerTalk offers its service users that other services do not.

Four themes were generated from the data.

These were: connectedness, self-awareness, positive environment, and facilitation.

Connectedness

Connectedness describes a relationship with peers and PeerTalk. Peer support is designed to establish a sense of physical and emotional security, allowing peers to feel at ease connecting and sharing with others with the same knowledge and experiences. The positive interactions discussed by participants demonstrate how comparable experiences make attendees more credible role models and the perfect individuals to establish a connection and a feeling of normality. In terms of connectedness with the PeerTalk service, the participants stated that they had previously tried other services for support but found that PeerTalk offered the different kinds of help they required:

<i>There's a lot of things that I had implemented, but I do find PeerTalk, its different and helpful.</i>	<i>It was strange how on the second week, I talked about something totally different, and I didn't even realise it was something that I needed to talk about, but I was clearly so relaxed in that room that it came out.</i>	<i>I was there like five minutes early, say, and I could tell that, that like the rest of the group, knew each other but they're friendly, not clicky. And I was like, oh, I think I like this.</i>
---	---	---

PeerTalk clearly leaves participants feeling at ease, in a safe, relaxing environment with like-minded people that share their experiences. In doing so it creates a sense of connection to the service that other services may not achieve.

Self-awareness

Participants explained how they felt PeerTalk assisted individuals through a process of self-healing, towards recovery, that was undertaken by acquiring self-awareness of their current situation.

<i>I need to process my thoughts, people when they discuss, they also organise their thoughts, their memory Yeah So, it's really important to have.</i>	<i>First time I went, I wasn't sure why exactly I was going. And I didn't even know what I what I wanted even to talk about. So, I went there, and they couldn't shut me up.</i>	<i>I certainly notice the difference when I don't attend, I sort of get caught up in everything else (participant 2) I definitely notice when I don't have an outlet.</i>
---	--	---

PeerTalk provides attendees with the chance to build their confidence by talking openly about their issues in a non-judgemental environment and eradicating their initial fears as they move through the support sessions. This self-awareness allows for personal growth and sets attendees on the road to recovery:

Positive environment

The PeerTalk environment was described as providing the right environment to support healing by facilitating people to work through their issues with like-minded people who also have shared experiences. The therapeutic environment was highly valued for the way it fostered recovery:

It helps me to examine some situations desensitised from them see it from a completely different cultural point of view, which is extremely enriching. Like having a different perspective and endpoint.

I liked PeerTalk because after I started talking about My mental health, or Depression, I should say I started to feel safe and I know that sounds crazy, but I felt I could talk more.

You share, and you are peers as you are really equal. And you can speak, and if you don't want to speak, you don't have to. And if you want to speak a lot, like I often do, then you're free to.

PeerTalk support groups offered attendees an opportunity to work with other peers in a safe environment as they go through some difficult periods. Participants discussed supporting others, using their knowledge and experience, while learning more about mental illness and other coping strategies themselves:

In being with others, you can really see people in situations you have been in yourself. It's an eye-opener but you offer support and guidance, and next week, you never know, it might be your turn to need the support. And I think by offering your coping strategies, they sometimes offer you some back what might work.

This discussion flowed into the giving and receiving of help and advice from someone without a title, an agenda, or a set of rules to follow. Participants valued the use of peers as support over some other services that had 'professionalised' their support:

Sometimes putting that professional stance on it, people would they open up as much, they feel relaxed because they're not on a time limit. And they have services you get, like, is it around six sessions?

Think to me experience, lived experience is as valuable as credentials. So, you know, I'm not really too fussed about the fact that there's not whatever title psychologists like, whatever the title, I'm not really that fussed about that. Like, it's not really, I mean, I'm not against the psychiatric model. But that's not really what I go for, you know, I'm going to be with people who have lived this.

I don't want it to turn into just another like, clinical setting. Yeah, if you conventionalised it too much. Yeah, that will be a big problem

Group facilitation at PeerTalk versus other services

Participants discussed how and why they thought PeerTalk had worked for them where other services hadn't. PeerTalk appears to be getting things right, as participants felt that they offered the correct support at the right time with the right plans, procedures, and arrangements in place. This had not always been their experience in other services:

I approached PeerTalk for help it all happened really quick and if people are struggling, they should reach out and it beats the waiting times.

PeerTalk is a lot less formal and structured, there's no pressure to participate if you don't feel like it.

They don't do any kind of therapy, just coordinate the whole thing

This study found clear benefits for participants attending a PeerTalk support group. Its relaxed environment allowed for candid and free communication to take place between equals. Meaningful friendships were formed as a result of similar shared experiences giving the participants the confidence to speak out, recognise their own recovery styles and assist others on their journey in a non-judgemental manner. Participants favoured PeerTalk over many other services they had tried due to its relaxed nature, the absence of pressure to participate, and the provision of support from peers rather than healthcare professionals. Consequently, this study tentatively concludes that PeerTalk should be considered a worthwhile intervention in its own right, rather than merely a way to reduce pressure on mainstream services.