

Peer support offers promise for reducing depression symptoms

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Peer support offers promise as an effective, low-cost tool for fighting depression, a new study by the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System and University of Michigan Health System finds.

Programs in which patients and volunteers share information were found to reduce symptoms of [depression](#) better than traditional care alone and were about as effective as [cognitive behavioral therapy](#), researchers found after analyzing 10 randomized trials of peer support interventions for depression dating from 1987 to 2009.

The analysis was the first of its kind to look at peer support specifically for depression, says lead author Paul Pfeiffer, M.D., M.S., an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical School and researcher at the VA Ann Arbor [Healthcare System](#).

"Peer support is much less likely to be incorporated into the treatment of depression than for other conditions such as alcohol or substance abuse," Pfeiffer says. "Our study combined data from small [randomized trials](#) and found peer support seems to be as effective for treating depression as some of the more established treatments."

The findings were recently published online ahead of print publication in *General Hospital Psychiatry*.

Peer support has been found to decrease isolation, reduce stress, increase the sharing of health information and provide role models, the study

points out.

Since peer support programs often use volunteers and nonprofessionals – and can be done over the phone or Internet as well as in person – they have the potential to be widely available at relatively low cost, Pfeiffer says.

The need for additional coping options is important when one considers that one third of patients taking anti-depressants for major depressive disorder still experience significant symptoms after trying four medicines, and more than half of people who achieve remission of their symptoms relapse within a year, he adds.

"As a field, we should be looking at how to integrate peer support components into primary care and specialty treatment of depression," Pfeiffer says, noting that additional, larger studies could also provide more insight.

More information: "Efficacy of peer support interventions for depression: a meta-analysis," *General Hospital Psychiatry*.
[doi:10.1016/j.genhosppsych.2010.10.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.genhosppsych.2010.10.002)

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