

YouTube as peer support for severe mental illness

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People with severe mental illness such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder or bipolar disorder use a popular social media website like YouTube to provide and receive naturally occurring peer support, Dartmouth researchers report in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

"What we found most surprising about our findings was that people with severe mental illness were so open about their illness experiences on a public social media website like YouTube," said lead author John Naslund, A PhD student in [health policy](#) at The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice. "We saw that people with severe mental illness did not appear to be concerned about the risks of openly sharing their personal illness experiences because they really wanted to help others with similar mental health problems."

Naslund and colleagues found that people with severe mental illness used YouTube to feel less alone and to find hope, to support and to defend each other, and to share personal stories and strategies for coping with day-to-day challenges. They also sought to learn from the experiences of others about using medications and seeking mental health care.

"It helps them to overcome fears associated with living with mental illness, and it also creates a sense of community among these individuals," the researchers said.

Severe mental illness such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and [bipolar disorder](#) are among the leading causes of disability

worldwide. These serious mental illnesses are also associated with a great deal of stigma and discrimination.

The researchers used a method called online ethnography to analyze n=3,044 comments posted to 19 videos uploaded by individuals who self-identified as having schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder or bipolar disorder. They then used qualitative methods to analyze the comments and find common themes in the data.

"What is also important is that our findings are consistent with how peer support is viewed in [mental health](#) research and practice, which suggests that YouTube or other [social media](#) websites might help to extend the reach of informal peer support activities between people with severe mental illness," Naslund said.

The research does have limitations, however, in that the work was exploratory. "Therefore, it was not possible for us to determine whether YouTube can provide the benefits of peer support to a wider community of individuals with severe mental illness," he said.

More information: *PLOS ONE* www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0110171

Provided by The Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth

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