

Led by 'survivors,' mental health groups make a difference

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Study conclusion: Self-help organizations operated by people with a history of mental health issues benefit members and the community.

Researchers: Wilfrid Laurier University psychology Prof. Geoffrey Nelson is principal investigator.

Self-help organizations in Cambridge, Kitchener-Waterloo, Hamilton and Niagara region; as well as Rich Janzen and Joanna Ochocka, Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, Kitchener and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto; and the Ontario Peer Development Initiative in Toronto were research partners.

Study focus: People who have experienced mental health problems are developing their own organizations that operate services ranging from drop-ins and self-help groups to one-to-one peer support and social and recreational activities.

The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care funds more than 60 of these Consumer/Survivor Initiatives (CSIs) across the province.

"Despite the large number of these organizations, very little is known about the effectiveness of CSIs in promoting the mental health of members or in creating positive changes in social systems that impact people with mental health issues," Nelson said.

Four Consumer/Survivor Initiatives in southwestern Ontario participated in the research.

Researchers compared three groups: members who were continually active in those initiatives over three years; members who'd been active for a year and a half but were no longer active at three years; and a comparable group of people who'd never been active.

Compared to the other groups, continuously active members showed significantly less distress over their psychiatric symptoms.

They also participated significantly more in community activities, were much more satisfied with daily living activities, and were more involved in employment and education three years after they began participating in the organizations.

These improvements, sustained over a three-year period, suggest the potential value of the peer-support organizations. The initiatives also helped create positive changes in the community, such as public perception of mental illness, service delivery and social policy.

"These findings point to the important role that CSIs can play in a reformed, recovery-based mental health system that is responsive to consumers' rights to self-determination, social inclusion and access to housing, employment, education and income," Nelson said.

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