

Understanding Peer Support and Its Benefits



“Recently diagnosed as an adult, Twitter has been a fantastic source of knowledge and virtual friends. The little things really help, the how are you doing, what’s on the menu, as well as the questions answered and the fears allayed.”

—Gillian Kerr

“I was diagnosed in 1969 at age 12. I didn’t know any other T1D’s. Diabetes can be a very isolating disease. Thanks to social media, I have now connected with other T1Ds. It helps so much, with self-care of T1D and my mental health.”

—Jill Weinstein

Support in navigating the challenges of diabetes is a critical component of quality diabetes care and well-being. Support can come from members of your the healthcare team as well as from peers.

What is Peer Support?

According to a recent study, peer support is defined as “support from a person who has knowledge from their own experiences (e.g., immediate family member or caregiver).”

Four benefits of peer support:

1. Peer support can help people affected by diabetes minimize self-care barriers in the quest for emotional well-being and the best possible quality of life.
2. It can provide “crucial lived experience” context that may not be available through interactions with the healthcare system.
3. Peer support can normalize the daily decision making and action steps required to carry out self-care behaviors.
4. Evidence demonstrates that peer support positively impacts clinical and behavioral outcomes, establishing a critical component of quality diabetes care.

What are Types of Effective Peer Support?

Peer support is conducted through a variety of interactions across various online and in-person methods.

Examples include:

- Technology-mediated connection with peers:
 - Blogs and podcasts.
 - Online peer support groups.
 - Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit and many others. This includes hashtags like #diabetes or #dsma on Twitter or Instagram.
 - Online video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Google Hangouts and Microsoft Teams.
- Phone and video calls (calls and texting).
- Face-to-face and in person (meet-ups, support groups, conferences, camps).
- Peer-facilitated interactions (similar to community health worker facilitation) and mentorship programs.

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*“Online diabetes communities are... a *community* in which one can speak freely about personal and medical issues, as they relate to diabetes (and otherwise) amongst people with similar knowledge and concerns. For many without access to in-person support, the DOC [diabetes online community] is invaluable.”*

—Brenda F. Bell

“I recommend it because we share ... micro-tips that would be hard for a HCP to understand but make all the difference. Help is available in the moment when you need it. Feels to me there’s often a gulf between a PWD and someone without it because the experience is a highly unusual one.”

*—Mary Anne Patton
(@T1bionic)*

These interactions create a sense of community, of affinity and of group identification. For some, interactions are continual; for others, periodic.

What Themes Emerge in Peer Support?

Peer support provides experiential information and social learning. A study of diabetes peer support interactions on various social media platforms found several emergent themes:

- Humor.
- Diabetes pride.
- Venting.
- Sharing lessons learned.
- Building community.
- Personal relationship with diabetes technology devices.

Your role:

As a healthcare professional, accept the challenge to routinely assess individuals’ social support/support network. During client sessions, you can integrate and promote the power and value of peer support beyond DSMES to include an array of resources and opportunities.

How Can You Integrate Peer Support Into Practice?

1. Visit the ADCES webpage on peer support featuring a Systematic Review of Reviews and Gap Analysis, a Perspectives in Practice paper, a handout for individuals seeking resources, podcasts and other helpful resources. Learn more at DiabetesEducator.org/PeerSupportforHCP.
2. Read the monthly Focus on Peer Support column in ADCES in Practice magazine. Find peer support resources and personal stories of health care providers who have incorporated peer support into their practices.
3. Try it out. Most communities welcome the participation of healthcare providers. Explore websites, social media platforms and other available resources. A great place to start is the weekly #dsma twitter chat. Observe, or “lurk,” to learn more about the daily realities of living with diabetes. Visit DiabetesEducator.org/PeerSupportforHCP to find other online communities.
4. Talk to people with diabetes in your community about how they benefit from peer support. Invite them to share their experiences at support group meetings and group classes.
5. Learn and share at the ADCES Annual Conference, featuring many sessions about peer support and how you can creatively incorporate it into practice. This is a great opportunity to talk to experts in the field. Learn more at ADCESmeeting.org.