

Utilizing Trained Peer Specialists with Digital Behavioral Health Treatment Increases Access,
Improves Outcomes, and Reduces Spending

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TRAINED PEER SPECIALISTS IS ASSOCIATED WITH REDUCED HEALTHCARE SPEND IN THE UNITED STATES

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to determine if Trained Peer Specialists are associated with reduced healthcare spending. Trained Peer Specialists are essentially a low-cost alternative to behavioral health clinicians. To see if utilizing Trained Peer Specialists results in reduced health care spending, the price of graduating Trained Peer Specialists and the efficacy treatment were compared to cost and efficacy of traditional treatment. Employing online Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, with the help of Trained Peer Specialists, to provide mental health resources was compared to face-to-face therapy. The results indicate utilizing Trained Peer Specialists for behavioral health conditions is associated with reduced healthcare spend.

Main findings: Utilizing a Trained Peer Specialist model increases access to desperately needed care while reducing healthcare spending. A national accreditation program built upon existing standards is needed to ensure a national measure. The rigorous certificate explained in this paper should be the example.

Principal conclusions: Based on the enormous reduction in healthcare spend coupled with the dramatic need for behavioral health treatment, there should be a national accreditation program for Trained Peer Specialists. There is a potential reduction in healthcare spend by 250 times and further adoption of Trained Peer Specialists should be implemented.

Keywords: Trained Peer Specialist, behavioral health, healthcare innovation, healthcare policy, United States

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Introduction

With an extreme shortage of behavioral health clinicians, particularly in rural locations, there is an enormous challenge facing America (Proser & Cox, 2004). Even when providers are available, there is often a long wait time that can only exacerbate the mental health conditions. At the core is a crisis on mental health conditions where a majority of people is left untreated causing enormous costs to the system (National Institute of Mental Health, 2006). This could be due to lack of access (Hoge et al., 2004; Vogt, 2011), barriers to treatment, cost (Rowan, McAlpine, & Blewett, 2013), and stigma (Blais, Hoerster, Malte, Hunt, & Jakupcak, 2014; Blais & Renshaw, 2013). By utilizing an alternative model known as Trained Peer Specialists, it will help to increase access, improve outcomes (Hobfoll, Blais, Stevens, Walt, & Gengler, 2015), and ultimately reduce costs for the system. Trained Peer Specialists are an innovative concept and emerging in the changing landscape due to Affordable Care Act, Essential Health Benefits, Parity Act, and most recently the United States Preventive Services Task Force recommendation that all Americans over the age of 18 be screened for depression (Siu, 2016). Most importantly, this screening should be covered under the Affordable Care Act. The problem is the lack of clinicians available to fill this need. This is where Trained Peer Specialists and the concept of peer support can change behavioral health.

Peer Specialists are persons either with or have had a mental health condition who have completed specific treatment and training that enables them to enhance a person's wellness and recovery by providing peer support. Prevail Health Solutions utilizes Peer Specialists as part of its personalized digital behavioral health program. Prevail's Peer Specialists have experienced a mental health condition such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and have completed Prevail's online mental health program. Trained Peer Specialists share both knowledge of having a mental health condition and the Prevail clinically validated program with others who have a similar mental health condition. This relationship is mutually beneficial and has numerous advantages when compared to traditional behavioral health services.

The core principles of peer support include mutuality, reciprocity, inclusivity, and a focus on recovery (Livingston & Cooper, 2004). Mead, Hilton, and Curtis (2001) define peer support as "a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful" (p. 136). Cognitive Behavioral Training (CBT) is the core of the Prevail peer support program. All CBT models are based on the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Prevail's Peer Specialists guide users to self-direct recoveries, including the development of personally satisfying identities, lifestyles, social networks, and values. Peers do this through an online platform where they engage users through chats and a variety of digital CBT-based tools.

Materials and Methods

Individuals interested in becoming Peer Specialists with Prevail must be either currently engaged in or have completed Prevail's clinically proven online program. By participating in the program,

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potential Peer Specialists have demonstrated that they have or have overcome a mental health condition, which is an essential component of the Prevail Peer Support Program. This ensures that they have personal experience with mental health and are in recovery for that condition, and can share that knowledge and experience with other users. Peer Specialists' personal experience with mental conditions allows them to empathize with users and provide users with practical advice that they have found to be effective while utilizing our program. Similarly, Prevail's Program Peers must graduate from in-depth training on how the Prevail program and its tools work and can communicate that understanding to users.

Prevail's Trained Peer Specialists begin as users and are required to complete an online peer specialist training course prior to engaging with users. This training provides information on how to be an effective peer. Once this training is completed, these individuals become User Peers. User Peers can engage with individuals who visit the site and are interested in Prevail's program as well as Prevail program users if a Program Peer is unavailable. User Peers focus on encouraging other users toward recovery. User Peers also answer user questions about the Prevail site, programs, and services peers provide.

When User Peers are interested in advancing their training and status, they can become Trained Peer Specialists. Training to become a Peer Specialist includes reading through a 140-page Peer Specialist Training Manual modeled after a peer specialist training manual developed by the Veterans Health Administration. Each of the 11 chapters in the manual include 3-5 review questions that Peer Specialists must answer correctly in order to complete the training successfully. Completion of this training matches a level of expertise similar to peer specialist certification standards across the country.

Prevail's peer training protocol is comprehensive. It teaches Trained Peer Specialists how to translate experiences with a mental health condition and recovery into practical lessons for users that are built upon CBT, a method proven effective in treating a multitude of mental health conditions, and fortified by proven, clinically tested program (Hobfoll et al., 2015).

Procedure:

Prevail's Trained Peer Specialists will be at the center improving access to behavioral health care by engaging with users in two ways: through 24/7 online support chat program and through Prevail's online Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) program.

Prevail's Peer Support Program is conducted in an online, interactive platform in which Prevail peers interact with users through online chats. Once a user has completed a chat with a Trained Peer Specialist, they will be awarded a certain number of points, which allows them to move forward in the program.

CBT examines the relationships between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Prevail's Program Peers are not doctors. Rather, they work with users to explore patterns of thinking that lead to

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self-destructive actions and the beliefs that direct these thoughts, and then help users to modify patterns of thinking to improve coping skills. Unlike traditional psychotherapy, Prevail's Program Peers and users actively work together to help the user recover from a mental health condition. Prevail's peers are problem-focused and goal-directed in addressing and challenging symptoms of a mental health condition.

Results:

A recent randomized controlled trial showed that people interacting with Trained Peer Specialists shows dramatic clinical improvement (Hobfoll et al., 2015). 300 people went through the trial and saw a roughly equivalent effect size for PTSD and depression as an average of 117 RCT of face-to-face care (Cuijpers et al., 2011).

There is clearly a cost and access advantage to utilizing Trained Peer Specialists. The average cost of traditional methods of mental health treatment are \$1751 per year (Zibman, 2014). Compared to Prevail's cost on average of \$30 per user it creates enormous cost savings as the entire model of Trained Peer Specialists is through a points and rewards system. The most comprehensive accreditation for Trained Peer Specialists is currently the program offered by Prevail. It is built on training by the Veterans Administration, which is recognized in all 50 states for employment and with its added practical training requirements through specified hours, chat numbers, and review by supervisors to progress on to achieve certification, Prevail's Certified Peers will be on par with programs such as the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA).

Discussion:

Based on these findings it is apparent that Prevail's online program is just as effective as face-to-face therapy with cost savings. Prevail's program has also been awarded the highest evidence based rating of "strong" through the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ, 2015).

Costs are cut by utilizing Trained Peer Specialists because they are all volunteers. Their efforts are rewarded with a number of points but they are not employed. This presents a unique opportunity these individuals to give back to the community. Some want to put their learning into action by offering to support in times of need. Other Trained Peer Specialists are involved because they have battled various mental issues and challenges themselves. They have gone through the traditional channels of care and now want to be part of the change that will improve access and remove barriers for millions of Americans. Additionally others such as students wish to be Trained Peer Specialists for the opportunities available and the chance to gain meaningful, practical experience to supplement their learning. Students who otherwise would not have an opportunity to complete practicums, capstones, and other practical projects now have one with Prevail.

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All this is possible because Prevail's technology operates nationally across state lines, which eliminates the need to obtain individual state certification for Peers. The Prevail program operates utilizing national peer certification standards developed by the VA. The program ensures the same standards that states utilize for peer certification, including requiring Peer Specialists to have personal experience with a mental health condition, extensive training, and willingness to share personal experiences with mental conditions with users. Likewise, at the end of each chapter of the Peer Specialist Training Manual, prospective Prevail Peer Specialists are required to complete exams that measure their competence in the subject areas assessed. These exams are similar to many states' exams qualifying peer specialists for certification.

Currently, there are no national standards in place for peer specialist certification. Individual states can develop their own standards and certification processes. As of March 2014, 38 states and the District of Columbia have Peer Specialist certification programs and standards in place, and 8 additional states have certifications program in process. Prevail utilizes the same manual to train Peer Specialists that the VA uses to train and certify peer specialists. All Prevail Program Coaches have the option of taking this advanced-level training. The VA's peer certification program is required for peer specialists to work directly with veterans with mental health conditions, and the VA self-certifies thousands of peer specialists nationally. The VA has also been a key partner in testing and validating Prevail's platform through national delivery touching about 150,000 veterans over the last year in all 50 states. Prevail's peers must complete training that has been approved by the VA and is consistent in all 50 states, offering national certificate through Prevail's training and programs is the next step.

The possible liability issue comes in during crisis situations. The peers at Prevail are able to help a variety of people in many different situations. In the event of a crisis situation when a user expresses that she or he is thinking of hurting themselves or others, the chat is immediately "Flagged" and connected to the National Suicide Prevention Line Chat. The peer instructs the user to accept the chat three times, and informs the user we are not equipped to handle such situations so the chat cannot continue. Once the user accepts that link, she or he will follow the prompts on the screen, which may include entering some personal information such as a zip code or the reason for contacting the crisis line.

After encouraging the user three times to accept the chat and explaining that the peer cannot help in this situation, the peer can respectfully close the chat. At that point the user will see a message with further instructions about contacting the National Suicide Prevention Line Chat or 911. Having the ability to connect the National Suicide Prevention Line into Prevail's chat platform allows help to many visitors who may not have realized what resources they needed and Prevail can be that liaison who connects them to professionals and healthcare personnel who are better equipped to handle a potential emergency.

Upon proper completion of the handoff where the Peer has done all she or he can for the User and helped him or her access a resource who can better help, the Peer is required send an email to the Peer Lead detailing the handoff and fill out the Crisis Evaluation Form.

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In order to ensure the Peer is ready for the crisis handoff, in addition to the training modeled after the VA, the Peer Manager will also conduct a practical assessment with the new Peer. The Peer Manager will chat with various scenarios that are obvious to be flagged and others that are more ambiguous. The Peer must be ready to flag in any situation before taking chats and only after passing this practical test will the Peer be able to interact with users and visitors.

Conclusion

The future of behavioral health peer support programs is hopeful as public behavioral health programs continue to struggle with under-funding, fail to reach the majority of those with mental conditions, and often deliver services that are underutilized and ineffective. A report published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1999) recognized the importance of self-help such as peer support programs as an important adjunct to traditional mental health services. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (2011) reports that since fiscal year 2009, states have cut more than \$1.6 billion in general funds from their state mental health agency budgets for mental health services, which limits the opportunities for those who cannot afford expensive psychological and psychiatric care. This calls for a new model to behavioral health treatment.

A limitation of this model is that users will expect 24/7 support. In order to deal with this, Prevail has built a strong community of peers who are available at all hours of the day and night to ensure coverage. Another limitation of this model is that the clinical trial was tested on a Veteran population. This population might be one of the hardest to reach and if the system is able to engage them then it is able to engage and help any population. Finally, the last limitation is that like with any sort of support or technology, it is always changing. To remedy this, the Trained Peer Specialists have a weekly meeting to go over any issues that have arisen, a closed online group where they can share learning experiences, and an annual test to high quality. Peers are also rated at the end of each chat to ensure that those providing the highest levels of chat are rewarded and offered more chats in the future.

Due to the cost effectiveness, Trained Peer Specialists should be reimbursed by private and public insurers and offered to their members, and recognized under a national accreditation.

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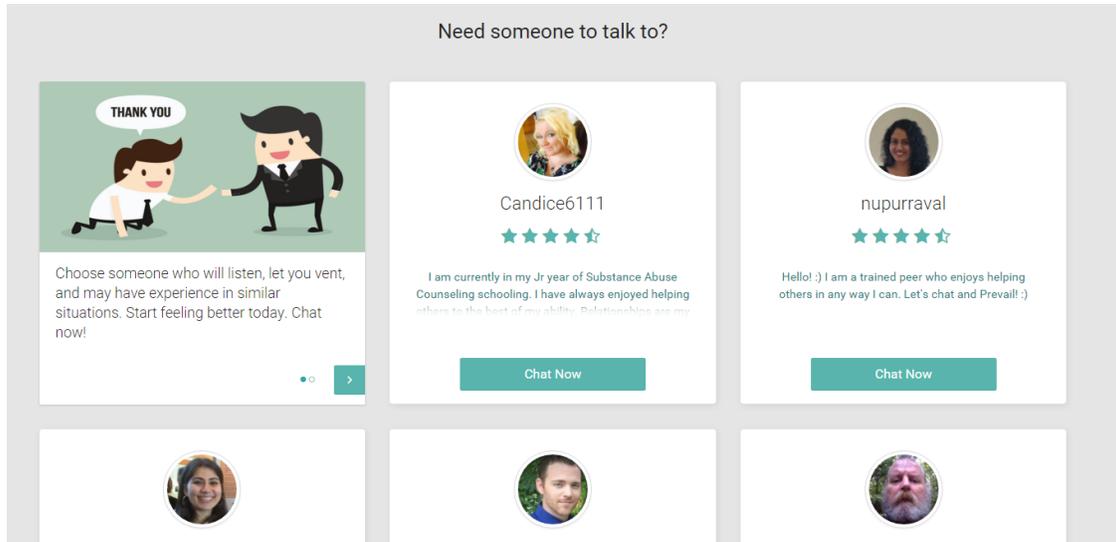


Figure 1A: Real-time IM interactions with Trained Peer Specialists

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