

# Mental Health Peer Support Via Social Media

Presented by Neesa Sunar and Kathryn Ruffins

# Who We Are...

- We are peer specialists employed at Transitional Services for New York, a mental health service agency in Queens, NYC.
- TSINY has 14 different components:
  - 7 in outpatient department
  - 2 scattered site housing departments
  - 5 congregate care centers
  - 1 crisis respite center

# Who We Are...

- Neesa Sunar works at the Apartment Program of TSINY. She works with 90 residents who live in apartments in the community. Tasks include:
  - Escorting via public transit to doctor's appointments, government offices, etc.
  - Training in ADLs, WRAP plans, etc.
  - Sunday recreation group with arts, movies and songwriting.
  - Attending meetings with the NYC Dept. of Health and Mental Hygiene.

# Who We Are...

- Kathryn Ruffins works at the Empowerment Center and the Education Training and Resource Center (ETRC) as a peer counselor. Tasks include:
- Helping people create WRAP plans
- Applying for government benefits on clients' behalf
- Facilitating healthy cooking and eating classes
- Providing counseling
- Sponsoring TSINY's LGBT support group

# Why We Started our Facebook Groups

- Neesa started “*What is Wellness? A Mental Health Discussion Group*” to provide a safe place for open discussion about mental illness, embracing and sharing the values of peer specialists and the Recovery Model.
- Kat started “*The LGBT Advocate*” to provide a safe and supportive place for the LGBT community online.

# Learning Objectives

- Create, develop and maintain your own online mental health/other communities using Facebook and Twitter.
- Develop solid friendships and connections with people met online.
- Promote yourself online as a mental health advocate.

# The Internet: A Tool for Communication

- The Internet is a powerful tool that can bring people together.
- If you have an internet connection, you can connect with people from around the world!
- Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter assist in connecting with others.

# Various Benefits of Social Media

- You can keep in contact with family and friends, including those who you do not physically see regularly.
- You can meet like-minded people from around the world, whom you would never meet otherwise in person.
- You can also connect with people in your local area, first meeting online and then meeting in person.
- Communication is fast and immediate.

# How to Meet People on Twitter

- Write a profile with hashtags such as #bipolar or #lgbt.
- Follow people who have interesting hashtags. Some will follow you back.
- Interact with people by tweeting and having chats.
- Connections can be strengthened by friending the person on Facebook.

# Be careful...

- Never give out any personal information.
- If meeting up, arrange to do so in a public space.
- Trust your instincts. If someone seems unsafe, you have no obligation to talk to him/her.

# Who to Trust?

- The best online friendships are ones that develop at a slow and steady rate.
- As time passes, a person's highs, lows and quirks surface. Conflicts may occur as well. As these are worked out and tolerated, a solid foundation is built, and the friendship becomes stronger.
- Immediate friendships can occur. But again, always remain cautious with new people.

# How To Start a Group on Facebook

- Decide who your audience will be. This can include people with mental health issues, the LGBTQ community, the disabled community, and so forth.
- When starting the group, share it with your friends on Facebook to increase membership.
- You can use Twitter to recruit members. Follow people with mental-health related hashtags, and then message them directly, personally inviting them to the group.

# Mental Health Group Themes

Many mental health groups already exist. Various themes we have observed include:

- Support groups
- Anti-psychiatry/medication groups
- Diagnoses-specific communities, e.g. Depression, Bipolar, Anxiety, Schizophrenia, etc.
- Political advocacy groups
- Specific demographic subgroups, e.g. LGBT, men, domestic abuse survivors, substance abuse, etc.

# **Neesa's Group:**

## ***“What is Wellness? A Mental Health Discussion Group”***

- WiW is a mental health support group based on the values of peers, bringing together those with interests in awareness and advocacy.
- Neesa writes daily questions about the mental health experience, which stimulate philosophical discussions.
- After 1 year, membership totaled 200+. After 2 years, membership totaled 1400+.

# Kat's Group: *"The LGBT Advocate"*

- This group provides a safe space for the LGBT community, focusing on mental health and physical safety.
- We are hands-on with assisting people in crisis.
- We have 30,000+ members and 9 admins including Kat and others from all over the world, ensuring 24/7 coverage.
- Huffington Post chose us as one of the 11 best online LGBT groups in 2015.

# Why We Created Our Groups

“I created *What is Wellness?* as an online group that promotes and creates awareness about peers and their work. The group also provides a space for discussion of life and its aspects. In my recovery, I have found healing in intellectual analyzing when my emotions and feelings failed me. I share this spirit in the group.” ~ Neesa

“I started *The LGBT Advocate* to offer a safe place for people in the LGBT community to explore and express their sexuality and gender identity.” ~ Kat

# Facebook Security Settings

- Facebook groups can be a place of safety, friendship and support for those who might otherwise not have these.
- Decide if you want to have an open, closed or secret group. Open is open to anyone, and members can join immediately. Content is visible to non-members also.
- In a closed group content cannot be seen by the public.

# Facebook Security Settings

- A secret group is not visible to the public. A person must be specifically invited in order to join and view content.
- When determining your group's setting, think about the members you want to recruit. Would they like their circumstances to be confidential, or would they be more open?

# Authorization of New Members

- Facebook also has 2 settings for when new members request to join the group:
  - Any present member can add or approve new members.
  - Any present member can add new members, but an admin or moderator must approve them.
- Reviewing new member requests allows for ensuring that “trolls,” bullies or pedophiles do not enter the group.

# Keeping the Group Safe

- There are different types of people who can disrupt the group or make it unsafe. Some examples:
  - Trolls: people who write comments that deliberately antagonize or offend other members.
  - People trying to recruit youth or those at risk for sexual favors.
  - People who think that the rules of the group do not apply to them.

# Creating a Vision Statement

- A vision statement can help with the following:
  - It establishes what is unique about your specific group.
  - It orients new members.
  - It gives the group structure.

# Creating Rules and Regulations

It is also VITAL to draft a thorough list of Rules and Regulations.

- *It protects admins and members from liability in risky situations.*
- It indicates what kind of postings are permitted, and those that are not.
- It serves to keep the group a safe space.
- It explains to members the specific rights that admins have.

The Vision Statement and Rules and Regulations should be posted as a pinned post at the top of the page.

# Creating a List of Resources

- You can keep information and resources permanently displayed in your group with:
  - Your pinned post: This is the first post that appears on your page. You can put your Vision Statement and Rules here.
  - Files: You can attach Word files to the group, which can contain information and resources helpful to members.

# Recruiting Administrators

Running groups is a very big responsibility and going it alone is a recipe for disaster. As your group grows, you will not be able to manage the group yourself.

You need people to help you keep on top of what's going on 24/7. You also need people to help you set the tone of the group.

A way to do this is to have several admins from different parts of the world.

When recruiting admins, make sure they agree with your Vision Statement and the way that you run your group.

# Administrative Duties

- Approve new members who want to join the group.
- Monitor the group's activity to ensure that postings are according to the Vision Statement and Rules and Regulations.
- Maintain constant communication with other admins to stay on top of group activity.
- **ADD ADMINISTRATORS AS THE GROUP GROWS!**  
You cannot do it yourself.

# Recruiting Members

In the beginning, you will need to actively recruit new members:

- Share your group with your personal friends on Facebook.
- Have your friends add their friends.
- After 1,000 people have joined, Facebook will start advertising your group. People will then join on their own.

# Growth Takes Time and Energy

You may be enthusiastic about your group and its potential. Remember that *it will not grow overnight*.

You must check-in with the group every day, making sure that interactions remain cordial and relevant to the group's topic.

You also have to regularly add new members to keep the group growing. As you acquire more members, “word of mouth” will occur, and people will start finding the group on their own.

# Hold the Reins Loosely

- Your group will change and evolve as it grows. This is good and normal, and keeps the group interesting.
- You don't need to micromanage the group. This is counterproductive because it discourages the spirit of support.
- As the group grows, scout and recruit trusted people to become co-admins. Again, *it is important to have more than one admin.* Communication can remain constant by having an open chat always going on.

# Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

Referring to *Tuckman's Stages of Group Development* can help to anticipate the stages that your Facebook group can pass through.

Note that Facebook groups are more fluid, and these stages may not always apply. Members constantly leave and new members constantly join. Admins also come and go. This can change the dynamic of the group over the course of time.

# Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

**Forming:** The group assembles, and members are polite as they get to know one another. Some are anxious, and direct leadership is necessary to orient the group.

- You must check in with your new group often to keep the energy going.

# Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

**Storming**: Members begin pushing boundaries. Personalities clash and disagreements occur. Some groups may never grow from this stage and may end altogether. It is vital that the admins actively smooth over conflicts, promoting a safe space.

- You must be on standby at all times, so as to put fires out as they emerge.
- Speak to all parties involved through personal chats. Hear each person's perspective. This can be time-consuming.

# Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

**Norming:** The group stabilizes as the “storming” conflicts are resolved. In fact, these conflicts can act as a bonding experience, where members emerge with a greater sense of community. Hopefully, members learn to tolerate and accept one another's differences.

- Members will start reporting how they like the group.

# Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

**Performing:** Members know the group's dynamic and can work together effectively.

- Word of mouth will occur and a steady stream of new people will request to join the group without promotion. Facebook promotes for you when you have 1000 people.
- Your group will revert to previous stages as new members join and conflicts arise. Admins must always be on guard to catch conflicts as soon as possible.

# Tips for Effective Online Communicating

- “Keep it on the ‘I.’” Instead of giving advice, offer personal insight. Encourage others to offer their insight as well.
- Always offer gratitude to participants.
- Even if you disagree with a person, you must still respect their personhood. No one is better than anyone else.

When doing these, members will respond positively. They will model their interactions based on what you post.

# Some Advice...

Do not immediately write off people if conflicts occur. People have their ups and downs, and it is important to remain optimistic.

Peer work on the internet is just as hard and involved as is peer work in person.

We need to be prepared to be able to handle emergencies that crop up in the group.

# Conclusion

We believe that peer work is not limited to person-to-person physical proximity. Social media is a real, vibrant and relevant part of people's lives today.

Social media can offer peer support in the mental health community in any conceivable topic.

We believe that social media is the future of peer support.

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