

Peer Support Complements Counseling

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Few people these days are unaffected by mental illness. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated [17.9 percent of adults](#) in the United States had a mental illness in 2015, which is around 43.4 million people. Whether it's a family member, friend or colleague, more Americans are acutely aware of the debilitating effects these illnesses can have. [Symptoms](#) can impact everyday life, but peer support specialists and mental health professionals can make a difference.

The Role of a Peer Support Specialist

Mental Health America describes peer support specialists as [individuals who offer advice and support](#) to clients with mental illnesses, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and drug or alcohol addiction. In some cases, these specialists have shared similar experiences with the clients they're helping, establishing a connection between the individuals. Even without personal experience of mental illness, peer support specialists undergo extensive training to most effectively help others.

What Is Peer Support?

Intentional Peer Support Founder Shery Mead defines 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."

Peer support specialists can have a number of roles to help clients, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration ([SAMHSA](#)). The main role is as a mentor, using one-on-one meetings to help clients overcome their issues. But some peer support specialists may work in call centers or facilitate group therapy.

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Peer Support and Its Effects

Peer support not only benefits individuals with mental illnesses but also society as a whole. According to *Health Affairs*, [individuals spent \\$201 billion on health care treatment](#) for mental disorders in 2013, the most of any illness in the United States.

Peer support counseling has proven to be effective, with Mental Health America noting a number of studies that show peer support [produces many positive results](#).

- Life coaches in the Buffalo, New York, area helped 53 percent of clients with employment goals return to work.
- A federally qualified health center in Denver used peer support and realized a return on investment of \$2.28 for every \$1 spent. Over nine months, the number of hospitalizations and days hospitalized for clients with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder declined sharply.
- A separate study found that 28.7 percent of respondents were not employed or had transitional employment before becoming certified peer specialists. Post-training, 60 percent of respondents “transitioned off or reduced public assistance and reduced their use of mental health care services.”
- Individuals who participated in peer support reported significant decreases in body pain, expressed greater hopefulness and reached health goals through self-reporting.

Peer Support and Counseling

While peer support obviously provides benefits, professional counseling is key for the most effective treatment. Both types of help offer different [benefits](#).

[Mental health](#) counselors help clients manage their disorders and provide therapy toward addressing their problems. For example, a counselor may use cognitive behavioral therapy to identify problems and formulate solutions that clients can utilize to overcome the effects of their illness.

Peer support specialists, on the other hand, use their own experiences to form an emotional connection with clients, helping guide them in overcoming their problems.

Careers in Mental Health

Mental health counseling is one of the fastest-growing occupations in the United States. Employment of [mental health counselors](#) is expected to increase 20 percent by 2024, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Pursuing a Career in Counseling

Grace College's [online master's degree in clinical mental health counseling](#) prepares graduates for work in counseling environments. This faith-based program analyzes major mental health theories and strategies through a biblical lens. The curriculum helps teach students [how to apply](#) Scriptural truth and principles in practice.

A majority of coursework takes place in a fully [online](#) format. Students attend an annual seven- to 10-day residency on campus in scenic Winona Lake, Indiana. The program is accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).