

Can community-based peer support promote health literacy and reduce inequalities? A realist review

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Many of us have problems using health information to improve our health. Research says it might be easier for people to be 'health literate' if they have support from their peers. Peers are people who have had to deal with the same challenges, who give each other emotional support, reassurance and advice about health issues. They help us to make sense of complicated information, and reflect on whether it can be used to make our situation better.

In our project, peer-support workers formed an Advisory Network to assist with the review process. The network explained what they do to help people. We compared their descriptions with research to find out:

- What approaches are most effective in promoting peer support?
- How does community-based peer support help people to use health information and health services? Does it improve health and reduce health inequalities?

We found that before setting up a peer-support programme, organisations need to involve local people in recruiting workers, and in designing training for workers. After the initial training, peer-support workers also benefit from ongoing support to feel confident in using their skills.

We concluded that community-based programmes are likely to promote health literacy when peer-support workers:

- have something in common with the participants
- get participants involved in social networks, through which people discuss their problems and get tips from each other on how to manage
- allow participants to discuss a range of issues that are not just about health.

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