

# Can online peer support groups help those with mental illness?

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Millions of people dealing with health issues have found comfort sharing their stories online with others who experience similar ailments, but research on their clinical effectiveness is limited, and findings are mixed. Among people with mental illnesses, the results are sparser, even though research has shown that this group prefers online peer support groups over face-to-face support groups.

To that end, Mark Salzer, chair of the Rehabilitation Department at Temple University, studied the effectiveness of online peer support for people with a [mental illness](#) in what is only the second randomized, controlled trial of internet peer support – the first, also conducted by Salzer and colleagues – looked at its effectiveness among women newly diagnosed with breast cancer.

The study, which published this month in *Social Science and Medicine*, studied the well-being of 300 participants with severe mental illnesses including schizophrenia-spectrum, bipolar, and depressive disorders, who were assigned to an email list-serv, a bulletin board online community, or a control group.

After a year, Salzer and his group found that participation in the online peer support groups did not have much of an effect on the patients' well being from a statistical standpoint; however, Salzer did find evidence that the participants who were assigned to the online [peer support](#) groups felt the groups were relevant, supportive, and beneficial.

"These groups likely provide some degree of comfort in sharing a similar experience," said Salzer. "While we can't yet quantify the benefit with our measurements, it does appear that participants benefit in online contacts with one another."

Salzer notes that the lack of statistical evidence for the effectiveness of these groups shouldn't deter doctors from allowing their patients to use them.

"If anything, clinicians should become more familiar with online groups because of their prevalence," he said. "They should be discussing their use with clients, and talking about ways to safely navigate online resources to get the maximum benefit."

Provided by Temple University

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