

The Counselling Online forum: Innovative approaches to build peer support and online connection for people living with addiction

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Introduction / Issues: *Online communities are increasingly used by people living with addiction to build peer support, share experiences, and connect with others. However, there is little research exploring their use and factors influencing engagement. We report on Counselling Online's forum as a new platform for people with lived experience to share their stories of change and receive support.*

Method / Approach: *Using a descriptive case study approach, we examine findings of the first two years of Counselling Online's forum. We employed a range of social media and forum activities to engage users as a community to gain practical information and support from others. Descriptive data on characteristics of users, categories, and trends will be presented. We also used qualitative analysis of posts to identify key factors influencing engagement.*

Key Findings: *Since commencing in January 2019, there have been over 2,800 forum users. Users range from people seeking help for the first time, those experiencing a relapse, and family supporting a loved one. They visit to be inspired and encouraged to participate and support each other. Targeted facilitation by peer workers resulted in a 17% increase in member posts in the first month they were employed. These posts focused on sharing experiences and providing needed support.*

Discussions and Conclusions: *Targeted, peer-facilitated posts contribute to user engagement and ongoing support. The forum continues to meet the demand for practical information for people experiencing addiction and recovery. Counselling Online's commitment to ongoing improvement and use of innovative user engagement will set the agenda for online community research and practice in Australia.*

Implications for Practice or Policy: *The rapid uptake and ongoing engagement with online communities offers additional service options for people experiencing addiction requiring immediate assistance within a lived experience framework.*

Implications for Translational Research: *Further research into forum user profiles, satisfaction, and connection to other avenues of addiction care and support is required.*

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