

The Power of Peer Support

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The Impact of Loneliness and Lack of Supportive Community

Over the past 30 years, a rapid and accelerating deterioration has been recorded in the quality and quantity of community-driven support¹. This phenomenon has many names, the Loneliness Epidemic being one of them, which now affects **30% of Americans 65+¹ and 60% of Americans 18–65², growing 5% to 9% every year**. It is estimated that loneliness results in **\$6.7 billion in additional health care costs to Medicare providers³** and **\$154 billion annually to employers in additional work days lost⁴**.

Despite an unprecedented level of online connectivity, almost 45% of Americans report that they are not finding the social and emotional support that they are seeking, according to recent studies from Cigna and AARP. Social support that reduces emotional distress is most effectively provided in connections with people who have been in one's shoes and can offer sincere understanding and encouragement.

Cost of Loneliness:

\$6.7B
annual cost to
Medicare providers³

\$154B
annual cost
to employers⁴

Loneliness and social isolation pose widespread challenges to the U.S. healthcare system, affecting the health of its members and resulting in increased medical costs, including:

50%

reduced engagement in self-care and clinical services¹

Loneliness is the largest predictor of dissatisfaction with healthcare⁵

29%

increased susceptibility to premature death⁶, and increased risk for cardiovascular disease, stroke, and suicide^{7,8}

21%

contribution to health disparities among socioeconomic groups coping with chronic disease⁹

2X

Each increased point in one's loneliness score doubles the risk for depression¹⁰

Effectiveness of Peer Support

To effectively tackle these growing challenges, it's time to consider how to provide, at scale, an evidence-based and underutilized tactic for tackling the effects of loneliness and low engagement that is effective and intuitive for patients and consumers at their moment of need: namely, well-designed and evidence-based peer support.

Multiple studies have shown that peer support is effective in:

- Increasing engagement in self-care and wellness¹¹
- Increasing sense of control and ability to bring about changes in one's life¹¹
- Increasing quality of life¹²
- Reducing hospital admission rates¹¹
- Decreasing substance use and depression¹¹
- Decreasing costs to the mental health system¹³

Integrating Peer Support into Healthcare Delivery

Technological advancement and demographic changes have made peer support easier to deliver at scale than ever before. This is why:



The prevalence of online chat and social networking as a medium through which peer-to-peer is made possible, if done right. Vulnerable populations such as chronic patients, aging populations, and those coping with mental health issues have been shown to benefit from emotional support provided in digital form¹⁴. Older adults have been shown to be particularly receptive to digital health solutions, with AARP having found that **72% of adults aged 70 and older own a smartphone or use a tech device in daily life**⁴.



Accelerated adoption of SDOH-centered strategies by health insurance companies and large employers who recognize the necessity of delivering social health to improve mental and physical health outcomes. These strategies have also proven effective in preventing deterioration in health across the acuity spectrum⁵.



AI technology that enables precise monitoring for keywords, sentiment analysis, and phrases to ensure maximum safety in a social setting, as well as matching the right peers who can provide emotional support, companionship and empathy for each other.



Audience fatigue from ad-driven “traditional” social networks that have lost credibility as health-building tools. Indeed, data shows an increase in mental illness for heavy users of ad-driven social media networks that may offer peer connections, but do not consistently and measurably offer peer support¹⁵.



These trends justify exploring whether peer-to-peer connections that are designed to improve emotional and social health can help curb the rising tide of loneliness for Americans, ranging from young adults to seniors – and if so, how.

Keys for a Successful Peer Support Strategy

There are 4 important keys for building and scaling a successful peer support strategy:

Safety

To be able to successfully navigate members towards health in a peer-to-peer environment, interactions must be moderated both by humans and AI. A self-moderating community will not produce the appropriate outcome. The presence of a hands-on community management team will ensure that safety guidelines are followed, as well as a well-developed AI technology that flags “watchlisted words” that trigger pre-created scripts and if needed, escalation policies.

Impact Driven

Offering peer support to peers is a first step, but tying it to ongoing outcomes measured monthly is the only way to ensure that members are indeed moving towards improved emotional, social, mental and in some cases physical health, month by month. It is also important to set expectations with community members that the goal of this specific peer community is to increase health.

Peer Training

Peers must receive training to be able to effectively offer emotional and social support. Moreover, this training cannot be offered to everyone and should be offered to members in the community that have been ranked as helpful by other members, have shown a propensity towards altruism and a commitment to help others continuously and consistently.

ROI and STAR Ratings

With healthcare costs rising yearly and a multitude of interventions presented to health insurance providers and self-insured employers, buy-in for peer support interventions will only be obtained if showing a direct improvement in medical costs and impact on key quality measures such as STAR, HEDIS, and CAHPS. Peer support solutions that are able to show 3x-7x return on investment in medical cost reductions against their fee will find it easier to scale, as well as to highlight the importance and unique contribution of well-designed peer support.

Conclusion

The steady deterioration in the quality and helpfulness of peer-to-peer connections offered by traditional social networks have resulted in a lonelier, arguably more disconnected world, especially for people facing significant life events and chronic conditions where support is desired and sought out. Nevertheless, technology advancements and rising tech-savviness across all age groups present a unique opportunity to leverage the power of a supportive community, as well as to offer a community-driven intervention that will measure and improve key outcomes, including medical costs, member experience, and overall health. Done well, peer support can and will lower loneliness and isolation, improve health, reduce medical costs, benefit underserved populations – and most importantly – do all that at scale.

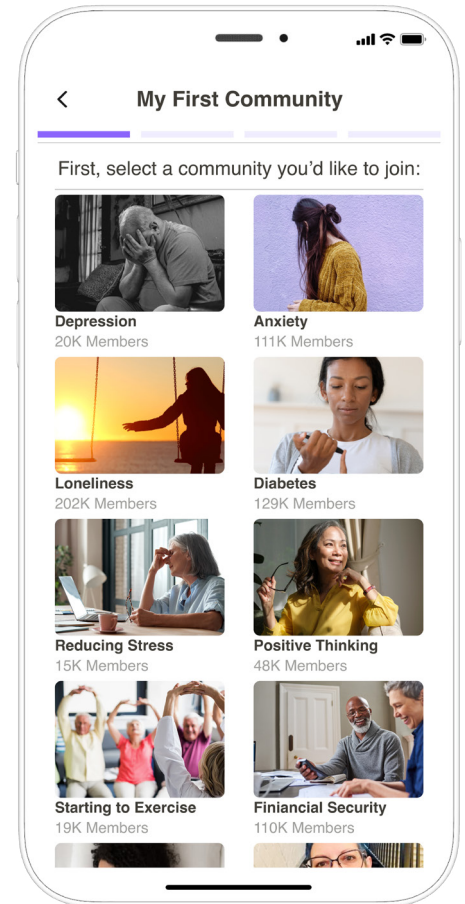
About Wisdo Health

Wisdo is a peer support and clinical referral platform designed to address the harmful consequences of loneliness, social isolation, and lack of engagement on health and medical costs.

Wisdo uses a data-driven model to map users' life challenges, goals and obstacles to health, and then proactively connects them with trained helpers who have been in their shoes to provide emotional support, weekly group coaching to build social skills, and referrals to clinical and SDOH solutions offered to users through their employer and health plan. Founded in 2018, over 500,000 adults ages 17-80 have joined Wisdo. Several empirical studies show that Wisdo results in improved mental health, reduced loneliness scores, and significant medical cost savings.

A 12-month study with a national Medicare Advantage health plan found that Wisdo resulted in:

- 34% reduction in the number of mentally and physically unhealthy days (-10.2 days) experienced by members per month
- 21% reduction in loneliness scores with 13% of participants no longer screening positive for loneliness by month 3
- 22 gaps in care identified on average per Wisdo user, providing opportunities to improve STAR rating and member experience
- 25% referral rate success to teletherapy services
- 6-10% reduction in utilization of services such as ER and in-patient visits
- Estimated medical cost reduction of \$1,020 per enrolled member per year based on claims data analysis



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