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Running Head: PEER-LED SUPPORT GROUPS FOR LTHC

“Peer-Led Support for Long Term Health Conditions: Its functions, benefits and challenges
and how the role of a Facilitator could increase effectiveness”

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PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Achieving happiness and life satisfaction in the modern world is seemingly difficult; thus, when someone is affected by a serious or chronic illness it can feel impossible to cope. My personal encounters with long-term health conditions (LTHC) have presented a considerable challenge. There have been many times I have felt hopeless, lonely, frustrated, angry and overwhelmed. Yet, in spite of it all, the support I have received from family, friends, healthcare staff, workmates and peers has allowed me to utilize these difficult experiences to make me into a more empathetic, resilient, grateful and overall happier person.

Since the commencement of this Masters Thesis I have had the incredible privilege of engaging with people involved in peer-led support groups for LTHC across the Mid-Central District Health Board. I initially believed talking to people affected by LTHC would be an emotionally trying and often disheartening process; however, I couldn't have been more wrong. From the peer-leaders who dedicate their valuable time to bringing people together in a shared community, to the health professionals that go the extra mile to ensure their patients thrive, to the people affected by long-term health conditions who continue to persevere through the most difficult times, I have been left with an overwhelming sense of hope.

To my supervisors Don & Sara, who have supported me through this entire process- I am forever grateful for this opportunity. To the people involved in support groups for health conditions, both those who participated in my study and those who I have not had the pleasure of meeting- thank you for all that you do for the community. Lastly, for the people like myself who's daily lives are affected by LTHC – you are brave, strong and important and you are not alone.

“Lean on me, when you're not strong

And I'll be your friend

I'll help you carry on

For it won't be long

'Til I'm gonna need

Somebody to lean on”

- Bill Withers

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Abstract

Peer-led support groups for long-term health conditions are inexpensive and beneficial resources. However, literature on peer-led support is minimal and suggests that these groups face many challenges. The current study endeavored to explore the challenges and functions of peer-led support groups for long-term health conditions; further, examining how the implementation of the role of a Facilitator for these groups could negate some of the challenges and increase the prevalence and effectiveness of groups. Through focus groups and individual interviews with Group Leaders, Health Professionals and Group Participants involved in peer-led support groups, the current study identified 7 emergent themes. These themes were discussed and analyzed, particularly in relation to the experience of peer-led support groups and the possibility for the development of the role of a facilitator in the future.