iPOF: Improving Peer Online Forums

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The Improving Peer Online Forums (iPOF) project[1] seeks to understand how online mental health forums work, why people find them useful, and how they can be improved. Our work will use realist approaches to help build a series of interventions that can assist moderators and administrators improve online mental health forums. These interventions will be formulated and tested by a team made up of health care professionals, clinical researchers, linguists and data scientists.

People experiencing mental health difficulties often look for help online. This has increased during Covid-19, because it has been harder to get in-person help. Online searches will lead them to a range of mental health peer forums. These are websites where people with a shared interest or concern can "post" messages to others and get their advice and support. Online forums can be very helpful. Some people report feeling less distressed, less alone, and more able to cope. However, others have reported feeling more distressed and less able to cope after using forums. We do not know why these differences occur. This means we do not know how to make forums better, or which ones should be offered to people seeking help.

We aim to find out: how online mental health forums work; why some work better than others; and why some people find them helpful and others do not. Based on what we find, we will work with people who use forums; people employed to support forums; and people who set up and fund forums; to develop tools to improve the design and support from online mental health forums.

Throughout the research, we will work closely with our three Expert Groups. Group 1 (PPI) includes people with lived experience of mental health problems and using forums, and people who support the forums (called moderators). Group 2 (Host) includes people who design and run the forums. Group 3 (Impact) are senior people who can help make sure our findings make a difference to policies and procedures which determine how forums are designed and funded in future.

We have three overlapping work-streams. In work-stream 1 (1-18 months), we will pull together relevant knowledge from research literature. We will also interview people who currently use, support, or have studied online forums. Based on what we find, we will come up with ideas about how online forums work and develop some specific theories to test. In work-stream 2 (6-30 months), we will test and refine our theories in a range of different mental health forums. We will use surveys to measure impacts for different groups of forum members. We will use interviews with forum members and people who support them to understand their experiences. We will analyse what is happening in the text of the forum conversations using natural language processing and corpus linguistics methods. At regular time points, we will share our findings with our Expert Groups, and work with them to come up with our final theories. In work-stream 3 (2-34 months), we will use the theories to create tools and training designed to improve peer online forums. We will work with our Expert Groups to ensure these are designed and shared in ways that make them easy to find and use. We cannot say now exactly what the tools will be until we have done the research. However, the PPI work we did tells us people want: attractive ways to promote online mental health forums; guidance for designing and setting up online mental health forums; training for people who support forums; an online space for these supporters to work together to build up this role and their skills.