

Practice Note: The Importance of Kidney Disease Peer Mentor Programs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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When someone is told they have kidney disease, they can go into shock and denial. Although this diagnosis can be overwhelming, talking with someone “who has been there,” through a peer mentor program, can be helpful in coping successfully.

Peer mentor programs have a documented, positive impact on the lives of people affected by kidney disease (Ghahramani, 2015). The Kidney Foundation of Central PA (KFCP) developed its peer mentoring program in 2004. The Patient and Family Partner Program (PFPP) was created to provide patients with a mentor who can offer emotional support. Mentors are referred by nephrology professionals and can be patients with chronic kidney disease (CKD) or a family member or caregiver of someone with CKD. The mentors attend a six-week training course that includes a weekly class, required readings, interactive exercises, and lectures from kidney professionals. After completing the course work, the mentor can then be paired with a mentee by the program coordinator. The program currently has about 26 peer mentors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased emotional distress and amplified psychiatric illnesses (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Nephrology professionals recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic is also having a deleterious effect on people with kidney disease. Peer mentor programs are currently changing because of COVID-19. Some of the questions that are being asked by these programs include: Will these programs and partnerships be utilized more, less, or have no impact at all? Will the quality of the relationships deepen, subside, or remain unchanged? The need for a concerted effort to help patients cope with negative emotions from the pandemic is clear. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the PFPP and its mentors. This article discusses the modifications that were made to our peer mentoring program during COVID-19 and what our experiences have been with these changes.

A major modification to our peer mentoring program was to convert the training course into a virtual classroom on an online platform. All of the coursework materials were converted to electronic versions that were visually appealing and engaging. Prior to 2020, this training was limited by distance,

and to candidates willing to drive for in-person trainings. Moving the training online expanded the reach of each new mentor class, adapted the skills of the program coordinator, and increased the availability of guest speakers. In 2020, PFPP was able to offer two online mentor classes.

Although some previous barriers like transportation were overcome, new issues related to technology arose. For example, a thunderstorm temporarily disabled one mentor’s internet. Another mentor felt overwhelmed by the process of downloading the training platform to her phone. She resorted to going to her telephone carrier’s local store and asking them to load the app to her phone. Other routine difficulties, such as ensuring the screen share feature worked, or that mentors are muted while not speaking, were additional distractions that were not a part of the previous in-person mentor training, pre-COVID-19.

The pandemic necessitated many changes to our “normal” operations, particularly in the way that our mentors communicate with their mentees. Prior to COVID-19, many of the interactions had been in person. To ensure the safety of our mentors and mentees, the communications were changed to letters, emails, phone calls, or texts. However, this has increased the number of times mentors are making contact with their mentees.

The pandemic imposed many changes to the daily lives of people with kidney disease. Many people may feel more isolated due to limitations on visitors and social activities. More than one mentor mentioned the sorrow of not being able to visit grandchildren and hug them. Other issues mentors and mentees mentioned were the changes in the procedures at dialysis clinics (e.g., the need to wear masks, no visitors in the lobby area, no food or drink in the clinic area). Self-care also looks different now because of COVID-19. For example, patients may now be limiting trips to the gym and doing more outdoor activities.

One recently transplanted mentor reported that she is vigilant about keeping well-meaning family at a safe distance and encourages her mentees to do the same. When she visits facilities for necessary lab work, she wears a mask, gloves,

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and wipes down every surface to minimize any exposure that could jeopardize her new kidney. When this patient saw a fellow mentor's car parked at the post office, she instructed her husband to park nearby so that she could wave and say hello to her friend from a safe distance. Because of her rich history of volunteering with that fellow mentor, she made this connection despite COVID-19 social distancing restrictions. She shared her concerns about feeling sick due to the anti-rejection medicines and her worries about the pandemic. Her fellow mentor encouraged her to keep taking her medications and to have faith that better days are ahead.

Despite the impact of COVID-19 on our peer mentoring program, we have found that our mentors continue to use their time and talents to help others cope with kidney disease. While implementing new technologies proved challenging initially, it also has been rewarding to the mentors, mentees, and staff at PFPP. We encourage others to start and continue peer mentoring programs, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, as our patients will continue to need emotional support that is best provided by someone who has "been there."

Note from the editors:

The Patient and Family Partner Program can be accessed through the Kidney Foundation of Central PA at 800.762.6202; <https://www.kfcp.org>

If you would like to implement peer assistance at your location, NKF also has a national PEERs help line: 855.NKF.PEER (855.653.7337); NKFpeers@kidney.org

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- Pfefferbaum, B., & North, C. (2020). Mental health and the Covid-19 pandemic. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 383, 510–512.