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Special Feature Article

Peer Support and Recovery

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Abstract

Everyone, with or without disorders, needs peers and a place to belong for them to "live in their own way". In European countries and the US, persons with disorders are regarded as "experts by experience". Emphasis has recently been placed on peer support, which utilizes one's own experience to support one's peers. In addition, there has been worldwide attention on recovery colleges, in which persons with disorders and professionals co-produce courses (lectures), and students aim for recovery through independent-minded learning. In this context, we have been practicing a variety of peer support activities. At "Peer Support Minato" (private volunteer organization in Omura City, Nagasaki Prefecture), all participants, including persons with disorders, families, volunteers, students, and professionals, carry the concept of "all of us have a problem", and our activities have been conducted to discuss various themes together, on an equal footing since 2010. Together with the members of Peer Support Minato, we implemented the Practical Research Project on Supporting Learning for Persons with Disorders after Graduating from School in 2018-2020, with the support of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. For 2021-2023, we are working on Nagasaki City's Peer Supporter Training Course for Persons with Mental Disorders. We believe

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that peer support is essential for reducing self-stigma and promoting the recovery of persons with mental disorders.

Keywords: peer support, self-stigma, recovery

Introduction

Regardless of whether they have disorders, everyone needs peers and a place to belong to "live life on their own terms." In recent years, in Europe and the United States, persons with disorders have been regarded as "Experts by Experience,"[6] and peer support, in which individuals draw on their own experiences to support others, has been emphasized. Although evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of peer support is currently scarce,[2)4)5)9)] the author believes that peer support is essential for reducing self-stigma among persons with mental disorders and promoting recovery, and views the relationship between the two as illustrated in Figure 1.

Furthermore, the practice of "Recovery Colleges," where persons with disorders and professionals co-create courses and participants aim for recovery through self-directed learning, is attracting global attention.[14)] This co-creation refers to a new approach in which persons with lived experience, their families, and professionals work together as equals to plan and deliver public services.[16)] The purpose of this paper is to report on the peer support activities practiced by the author, based on this background.

I. Recovery Colleges

Originating from the Recovery Education Center in the United States, the first Recovery College was established in the United Kingdom in 2009 as part of the National Health Services (NHS). Currently, they have spread beyond the UK to Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan, and more than 20 other countries. Recovery Colleges are not a therapeutic approach, but rather a practice that aims for recovery through self-directed learning.

The courses offered at Recovery Colleges are planned jointly by persons with disorders and professionals and are implemented collaboratively. Its principles include co-production between persons with disorders and professionals, an educational model (supporting participants to recognize and utilize their own abilities and strengths), and open participation for

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everyone. Some Recovery Colleges overseas operate Discovery Colleges targeting young people.[3] Online services are also available.[15] Multiple studies have reported that participation in Recovery Colleges improves recovery and life satisfaction.[14] Bourne, P., et al.[1] conducted a pre- and post-participation comparison of 463 students at a Recovery College in the UK and reported that participation led to reduced healthcare costs due to decreased use of medical services, such as hospitalizations. A key future research priority will be to demonstrate the effectiveness of Recovery Colleges through randomized controlled trials (RCTs).[17] [18]

II. The Author's Practices

1. About "Peer Support Minato"

Following the completion of the "Mental Health Volunteer Training Course" held in 2009 by the Omura City Council of Social Welfare and the Gender Equality Center, the executive committee members of the training course, including persons with disorders, took the lead in launching the volunteer discussion group "Peer Support Minato"[13] in April 2010. The name "Minato" (Port) embodies the hope that this group will be a place where members, who are usually out on the vast ocean of society in their workplaces or workshops, can enter "Peer Support Minato" like a ship, dock, and rest. Here, they can lean on one another when tired, share their thoughts, and, having loaded up on the fuel of courage, set sail once more to return to their daily lives. Additionally, when it was formed, a group of members built a wooden round table, which is currently placed in the volunteer room at "Plat Omura," a hub for welfare activities in Omura City (Figure 2). This round table has become a symbol of "Peer Support Minato," which emphasizes equality and the absence of hierarchical relationships among its members.

The members of "Peer Support Minato" include persons with disorders, family members, volunteers, students, and healthcare and welfare professionals. Rather than operating within a "giver-receiver" dynamic, members transcend their respective roles and boundaries to build relationships based on "turning vulnerability into a bond," "mutual support," and "mutual respect." In addition to holding monthly steering committee meetings (Tuesdays, 5:00–7:00 PM) and regular meetings (Saturdays, 2:00–4:00 PM), the group has also been running "Minato's Little Room" (once a month, Saturdays, 7:00–8:00 PM) since May 2021 as an online space for conversation. The author is involved in these activities as a member of the steering committee.

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The primary objective of these activities is to help persons with disorders themselves alleviate their self-stigma through the initiatives listed in Table 1. The participation rules for "Peer Support Minato" are shown in Table 2. The current flow of the discussion sessions is as follows: "Verbalizing and clarifying the participation rules, self-introductions (recent good or bad experiences, and expressing current mood on a scale of 1 to 10)," "Deciding on a theme together and discussing it," and "Reflections on the day."

Recent evaluations of "Peer Support Minato" by members include: "A place to belong, a place to feel at ease"; "A place to belong for the heart that I want to protect, an oasis where I can meet pleasant friends who make me chuckle"; "A place for self-improvement"; "A place where I can learn alongside highly motivated peers, expand my possibilities, and become more positive"; "A place where we can interact across various boundaries"; "A place where I can be completely transparent"; "A place to learn new things, not just about illness but also general knowledge, a place for encounters and a place of peace"; and "A precious emotional anchor, a comfortable place to belong where I can be my true self."

2. "Peer Support Minato" activity report for FY 2021

Regular meetings in fiscal year 2021 were held once a month, totaling 12 times in that year (6 online, 6 face-to-face), with an average of 11 participants. The Steering Committee (1 Chair, 3 Vice Chairs, 5 Steering Committee Members, 1 Auditor) met once a month, totaling 12 times in that year (3 online, 9 face-to-face), with an average of 6 participants. Minato's Little Room sessions were held once a month, totaling 11 sessions annually (excluding April; all 11 were online), with an average of 9 participants.

Next, the themes of the regular meetings (excerpts) included: "How I've Changed Since Joining Minato," "What Do You Do When You Feel Lonely?," "How to Make Friends? What Is a Friend?," "How to Cope When Feeling Anxious," "How to Enjoy Staying Home," "Recovering from Paranoia," "How to Bounce Back from Negative Emotions," and "How to Spend the Year-End and New Year Holidays." The themes for Minato's Little Room (excerpts) included: "How to Communicate Effectively with Your Doctor," "How to Spend the Rainy Season," "Summer Enjoyments," "How to Spend Time When Bored," "Favorite Celebrities," "Things You Like," "Things You're Good At," "Reflecting on this year," "Dreams and resolutions for this year," "Strategies for when you're busy,"

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"Finding joy during the COVID-19 pandemic," "Ways to stay warm," "Dishes you're good at cooking," and "Tips for falling asleep more easily." The agenda for the Steering Committee meeting included reviewing past regular meetings and Minato's Little Room sessions, clarifying roles for the next meeting (such as themes, moderators, and note-takers), organizing and participating in various events, and general operational matters.

Regarding participation in events: (i) Five board members participated in the 2021 Nagasaki City Contracted Project "Peer Supporter Training Course for Persons with Mental Disorders" as lecturers and group exercise facilitators (9 sessions in total); (ii) Four board members spoke on "The 10-Year History of Peer Support Minato" and "Recovery Stories" at an online training session for the FY2021 Miyazaki Prefecture "Practical Research Project on Lifelong Learning Support for the Realization of an Inclusive Society"; and (iii) Two board members spoke on "Recovery Stories" at the FY2021 Nagasaki Prefecture Developmental Disabilities Support Center Seminar (on-demand broadcast).

3. Co-production projects between "Peer Support Minato," NPO Nagasaki Nozomi-kai, and Nagasaki University

1) "Community-based Comprehensive Support for Lifelong Learning Activities of Persons with Disabilities," a project selected under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) FY2018–2020 "Practical Research Project on Learning Support for Persons with Disabilities after Graduating from School."

In 2018, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology announced a policy to promote initiatives aimed at realizing an inclusive society. This policy was based on ratification of the 2014 "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" and enforcement of the 2016 "Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities," and focused on helping persons with disorders maintain, develop, and enhance the skills necessary to live independently in society throughout their lives after graduating from school.[10)]

"Peer Support Minato," the NPO Nagasaki Nozomi-kai (which operates a Type III Community Activity Center), and Department of Health Sciences at Nagasaki University's School of Medicine applied for the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's "Practical Research Project on Learning Support for Persons with Disabilities after Graduating from School" under the theme of "Community-based Comprehensive

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Support for Lifelong Learning Activities of Persons with Disabilities," and were selected in June 2018. This selected project consisted of a "Learning Program for the Transition from School to Society (Transition PG)" and a "Learning Program for Each Life Stage (Lifelong PG)," targeting individuals with developmental and mental disorders. Its objective was to support persons with disorders so that, despite facing various challenges, they could live normally with dreams and hopes through proactive learning alongside their peers. Six board members of "Peer Support Minato" served as committee members for the project's coordination council (meeting four times a year) and participated as lecturers and facilitators in "Transition PG," "Lifelong PG," and various forums.

The goal of Transition PG was "Meeting peers and understanding one's own characteristics." Held once a month on Sundays from 1:30 to 4:30 PM, the themes were as follows: the first session was "Peer Supporters' Experiences," the second was "Psychoeducation on Illnesses and Disabilities," the third was "Communication," the fourth was "Stress Management," and the fifth was "Communicating One's Own Characteristics." The number of participants in Transition PG was 11 in fiscal year 2018 (7 men, 4 women; average age: 22.8), 9 in fiscal year 2019 (9 men; average age: 22.4), and 6 in fiscal year 2020 (4 men, 2 women; average age: 19.2). Excerpts from participants' reflections upon completing the program included: "The best part of this program was that it broadened my perspective. I realized I wasn't the only one struggling, others were too. I learned not to force myself to hide my flaws but to be true to myself"; "Everyone has their own worries; we're all unique. Sharing our opinions helped me see various perspectives"; "By reflecting on my weaknesses and struggles, I discovered aspects of myself I didn't know. And by hearing other people's perspectives, I learned coping strategies I never would have thought of"; "Through group work, I realized that it's good to consult with others in any program, which was helpful"; and "I received empathy and advice regarding the issues I was facing. I was able to honestly express my thoughts." These were some of the comments received.

The goal of Lifelong PG was "to live with dreams and hope." The program was held once a month on Sundays from 1:30 to 4:30 PM. The themes were as follows: the first session was "Peer Supporters' Experiences"; the second was "Psychoeducation on Illness and Disabilities"; the third was "Regaining Energy (1)"; the fourth was "Regaining Energy (2)"; and the fifth was "Stress Management." The number of

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participants in the Lifelong PG program was 13 in fiscal year 2018 (9 men, 4 women; average age: 46.2 years), 14 in fiscal year 2019 (9 men, 5 women; average age: 45.1), and 8 in fiscal year 2020 (6 men, 2 women; average age: 44.3). Excerpts from their reflections upon completing the program included: "I was able to find a place where I could enjoy facing who I am right now, and the idea of creating a place to belong for people in similar circumstances was born; it became a major turning point in my life," "I feel like I've reached a conclusion to a period of stagnation and can take a step forward; I feel I've gained a sense of acceptance that it's okay to be exactly who I am right now." "I realized the importance of learning proactively, that knowledge truly becomes your own when you learn by your own will, not just because someone else told you to. I believe that continuing to learn is important for everyone, no matter their age or whether they have a disorder." "Through the recovery stories and discussions in group work, I felt that everyone had a strong sense of self. They were giving meaning to their own experiences. "Since everyone's experiences can benefit others, I hope this reaches even more people." "I really appreciated that this was a space where I could honestly talk about my weaknesses. It's wonderful to be able to voice my thoughts and have people who will listen." These were among the comments received.

Furthermore, when implementing the program, we have strived to realize "proactive and interactive learning" where participants can flexibly broaden and deepen their own thinking through collaboration with one another, as well as dialogue and interaction with peer supporters and other stakeholders. In particular, during fiscal year 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to carry out the project by flexibly adjusting our initial plans while making use of online platforms.

2) FY2021–2023 Nagasaki City Contracted Project: "Peer Supporter Training Course for Persons with Mental Disorders"

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare stated that "peer support initiatives, in which individuals who have personal experience with disorders or illnesses utilize that experience to work at disability welfare service facilities and provide support to other persons with disorders or illnesses, are effective in supporting the community transition and community living of persons with disorders." To secure high-quality personnel to provide peer support in disability welfare services and other settings, the Ministry established the "Implementation Guidelines for the Peer Support

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Training Program for Persons with Disabilities" in March 2020.[7)8)] In the "Nagasaki City 6th Disability Welfare Plan and Nagasaki City 2nd Welfare Plan for Children with Disabilities," published in March 2021, Nagasaki City explicitly stated that it would organize the "Peer Supporter Training Course for Persons with Mental Disorders" as a social participation support project (community living support promotion project) and strive to train personnel. [12)] NPO Nagasaki Nozomi-kai, commissioned by Nagasaki City, implements this course in collaboration with "Peer Support Minato" and the Department of Health Sciences at Nagasaki University School of Medicine. [11)] It should be noted that this course offers basic, specialized, and follow-up training based on the standard curriculum outlined in the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's "Implementation Guidelines for the Peer Support Training Program for Persons with Disabilities."

In fiscal year 2021, 24 participants (average age: 45.7 years) completed the course, with a completion rate of 92% (24/26). Attributes of the graduates were as follows: 20 with disorders (83%), 4 without disorders; 17 men (71%) and 7 women; 10 in their 40s (42%); 12 currently employed (50%); and 8 currently utilizing Type B workplaces (33%). Regarding satisfaction with the course, 17 participants (71%) were "satisfied" and 6 (25%) were "somewhat satisfied." Excerpts from participants' feedback upon course completion included: "This was a very meaningful course that provided me with a goal and a path for my future life's work"; "I was able to hear lectures and valuable stories from active peer supporters, and I learned many things that will be important for my future"; and "It was very beneficial to reflect on myself and to be able to put my feelings, thoughts, and opinions into writing. I believe it was only because of this setting that I was able to recall my own recovery process."

Conclusion

Promoting peer support is a critical challenge in the rehabilitation of people with mental disorders. In peer support settings, people who have had similar experiences share those experiences and the various emotions associated with them, saying things like "I feel the same way" or "That's just like me," which helps them realize, "I wasn't alone," "Everyone feels the same way," "We're all in this together," "It's okay to trust my peers and honestly express my weaknesses and vulnerabilities," and "My experiences can actually help others"; through this, they gain a sense of security, self-esteem, and hope and dreams for living. "Weakness" becomes

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a “strength” that fosters human connection. “When I talk things through here, I start to see them from different perspectives, and eventually, it turns into laughter. When I can laugh again, I feel energized. This is a place supported by everyone’s smiles”; this is another valuable comment from a member. Based on the recognition that persons with disorders are “individuals” who have experienced disorders firsthand and possess valuable life wisdom gained from daily coping strategies and ingenuity in the face of challenges, true “Experts by Experience,” it is essential that peer support spaces be co-produced by persons with disorders and those involved with them. The author believes that peer support is indispensable for reducing self-stigma and promoting recovery among people with mental disorders.

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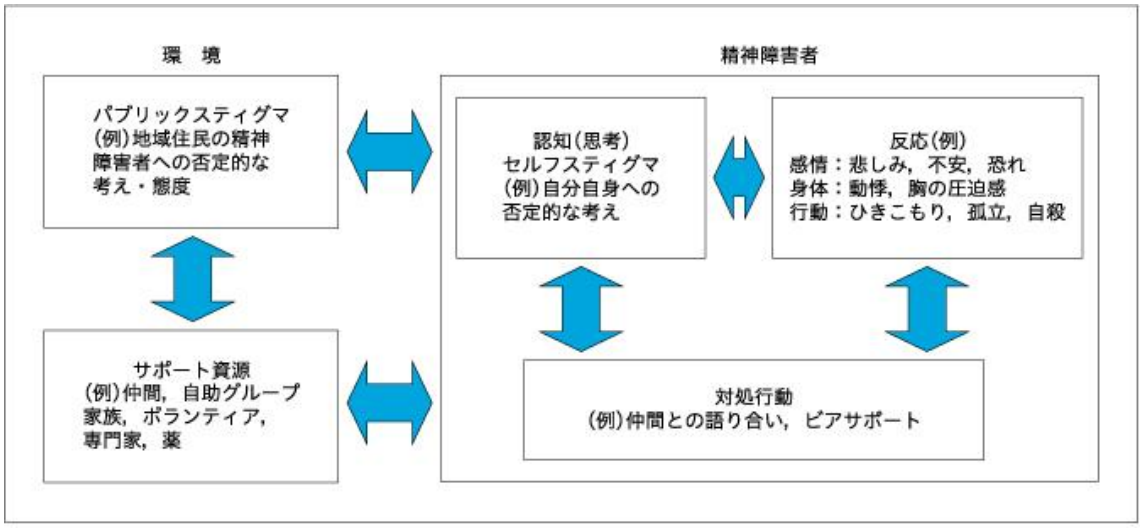

図 1　精神障害者のセルフスティグマとピアサポート

Figure 1: Self-stigma and peer support for people with mental disorders

図 2　ピアサポートみなとの象徴（円卓）

Figure 2: Symbol of Peer Support Minato (round table)

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表１　ピアサポートみなとの活動の主な目的

1. 自分のことをみんなに語る
2. 語ることで自分のことを自分で整理する
3. 人に上手に頼りながら自分の力で解決する糸口をつかむ
4. この過程を通して自分を表現する力をつける
5. 地域の人との協力関係を築く
6. 自分自身が自分のなかにある可能性に気づく
7. 共通する苦労への対処方法を仲間とともに考える
8. 周囲の人が障害について知る
9. 障害の有無にかかわらず，みんなが楽しい夢やつらい痛みを語り合える場を創造する

Table 1: Main objectives of Peer Support Minato's activities

1. Talking about oneself to others
2. Organizing one's thoughts by talking about oneself
3. Finding a way to solve problems on one's own while effectively relying on others
4. Developing the ability to express oneself through this process
5. Building co-operative relationships with local residents
6. Realizing one's own potential
7. Thinking together with peers about ways to cope with shared hardships
8. Helping those around us understand disorders
9. Creating a space where everyone, regardless of disorders, can share joyful dreams and painful experiences

表２　ピアサポートみなとの参加ルール

1. 見学はいつでもできます
2. いやな時はパスできます
3. 人の良いところはほめましょう
4. よい話し合いができるように人の話に割り込まず，他の人を助けましょう
5. この場で話された個人を特定できる内容は他で話したりしないで下さい
6. みんなのことはみんなで決めましょう
7. ルールに従わない方や迷惑行為を起こす方は，参加を遠慮していただく場合があります

Table 2: Peer Support Minato participation rules

1. You are welcome to observe at any time
2. You may choose to sit out if you feel uncomfortable

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3. Let's praise others for their strengths
4. To ensure productive discussions, please do not interrupt others and be supportive of everyone
5. Please do not share any personally identifiable information discussed here with others
6. Let's make decisions together as a group
7. Participants who do not follow the rules or engage in disruptive behavior may be asked to refrain from participating

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