Objective:

To describe the role of peer mentors with spinal cord injury (SCI) who were trained as peer health coaches (PHC) during a randomized controlled trial research called “My Care My Call” (MCMC). MCMC is a novel telephone-based, peer-led empowerment and health self-management intervention for adults with chronic SCI 1+ years post injury.

Design/Method:

Data for this deductive direct content analysis included information from 40 tel-counseling calls conducted with 42 peer participants by 2 trained PHCs. Each PHC-poor relationship lasted 6 months, and the focus of phone conversations was empowerment and SCI self-management. PHCs developed a “Toolkit” containing semi-structured scripted communication tools, and a custom website to document interactions with peers. Data included how the PHC employed communication tools and information delivery strategies during counseling calls. Interaction data was analyzed to describe PHC roles, and examine the ingredients of the unique role of PHC as an advisor.

PHC Communication Tools and Information Delivery Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Tool</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Listening</td>
<td>Provide a place for clients to express feelings and concerns, allowing the PHC to understand their perspective.</td>
<td>PHC listens actively, paying attention to the emotional content of comments, and responds thoughtfully.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify Support Systems</td>
<td>Share information about resources available to peers, including physical, emotional, and social support.</td>
<td>PHC shares relevant information about community resources, assists in finding support, and accompanies clients to appointments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brief Action Planning</td>
<td>Help clients set small, achievable goals, encouraging them to take action on a daily basis.</td>
<td>PHC provides practical advice, suggesting small steps and mental exam.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared Story</td>
<td>Facilitate self-management skill development and behavioral change through story sharing.</td>
<td>PHC shares personal stories, exemplifies, and encourages sharing others’ stories.</td>
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</table>

As Role Models, PHCs were able to empathize and exemplify sharing specifically tailored information about themselves to their experiences of managing and living with an SCI, including sharing opinions and advice when appropriate.

RESULTS

Analysis revealed that PHCs fulfill 3 principal roles: Role Model, Supporter, and Advisor.

PHCs fulfilled the unique role of Advisor by utilizing tools and strategies to work with peers on self-management issues related to health, Assistive Technology/Durable Medical Equipment and dealing with doctors and other healthcare professionals.

Teaching

Activities included:
- Referring peers to relevant resources
- Reviewing relevant issues with peers during a call
- Sharing what was learned
- Reinforcing the learning using affirmations

Strategizing

Facilitating self-management skill development and behavior change through:
- Brief Action Planning
- Identifying expert supports (i.e., primary care physicians, physicists, social workers, therapists, and seating clinics) in between calls reminding peers about setting up or attending appointments.
- Coaching calls on a mutually agreed-upon topic, encouraging peers to take action and continue to work toward goals.

CONCLUSIONS

At any given time during any given call, a PHC can use their experience and training to act as:
- a real-life role model
- an encouraging supporter
- a skilled advisor

These are powerful functions that no one person can satisfy. Peer mentor as advisor is a unique role compared to established SCI peer mentor relationships of role model and supporter. We suggest that trained to be a SCI PHC, peer mentors are an untapped resource for addressing health self-management.

SCI peer mentoring can and should be extended to incorporate tel-coaching beyond the first year of rehabilitation. Rehabilitation professionals have identified peer mentors as valuable members of the multidisciplinary team, and further research incorporating this PHC perspective will be beneficial.