The Effects of Peer Counseling in a Group Therapy Program for Obese Children and Adolescents

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Initial Situation and Research Questions

«KEEP ON MOVING» is a **multidisciplinary therapy program** for obese children and adolescents (age 11–16) and their parents. The **social-pedagogical approach** of **peer counseling** and the additional exchange between program participants (peers) and successful graduates of the program (peer coaches) via **a social online learning platform** has first been used and was further developed in an obesity group therapy program (2009-2015).

I. In which ways **do peer coaches benefit** from their participation in the program?
II. Which impact does peer counseling have on the peer coaches' **personal development**, on **maintaining learnt behavioral modification**, on the **extension of their self-competence, social and media competence** as well as their **various resources** and the **increase in their perceived self-efficacy**?
III. Can a mutual, trustful relationship be established between adolescents via a **social online learning platform** allowing for the **discussion of topics relevant for therapy** (social interaction comparable to self-help communication (Borgetto 2004/2013)), which is used on a voluntary basis in addition to personal communication?

Method, Sample, Social Online Platform

- **Focus group interview** with all 4 peer coaches of program 2013/14
- **Qualitative content analysis** according to Mayring (2010)

Peer Coaches	Age (11/03/14)	BMI (in 12 months)
PC 1: m	16 y	decreased
PC 2: f	16 ½ y	increased
PC 3: m	15 y	stable
PC 4: f	15 ½ y	decreased

Social online platform: **https://www.edmodo.com/**
- E-learning platform for teachers, students and parents (Chicago 2008), known as the «Facebook» of educational products.
- **Advantages** over Facebook: higher data protection, no age limitation. **Disadvantages**: less used, less attractive
- The modalities of the online exchange were developed in focus groups in a **participatory** way in advance with program graduates.

Results I and II

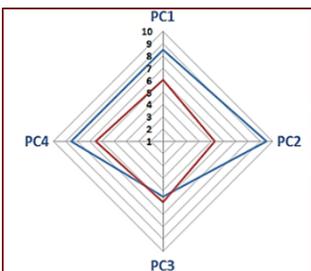According to the peer coaches, during the course of the peer counseling (1 y), their

Perceived self-efficacy improved

(median 8.5) and their

Weight was stabilized (median 6)

(at time of interviews on 11/03/14)

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Results II and III with Quotes of Adolescents

Important factors fostering relationships, and factors enhancing and imparing benefits

• Remembering behavioral changes and alternative ways for action	• Reciprocity was not established on all communication channels
• Experiencing higher percieved self-efficacy	• Knowledge transfer happened only in one direction
• Enhancing knowledge-, communication-, social- and media competencies	• Too few activities related to strengthening relationships during the program
• Consolidation of knowledge	• Experiences of discrimination related to weight
• Enjoying to provide social support and to fulfill a meaningful task	• Embarassment and reluctance as the largest barriers in the process of establishing a trustful relationship
• Being percieved as an attractive model	

PC3: (…) They seemed extremely positive to me. Maybe that's because of my open-mindedness, which allowed me to directly talk to them on an equal level and in a totally comprehensible way and that I wasn't superior to them…

PC2 (…) nobody likes to go to their parents, friends or other people to tell them that you are being bullied at school because of your weight...

PC1: (…) that I can still relate to the program and that I remind myself: Yes, I was there myself and I know that I can do it. It was like it was something consecutive and I liked to share some of my knowledge with the peers (...) and maybe I've shown them that they themselves can do it as well!

Conclusion and Discussion

- Presence and support by the program managers is required to support the estabilshment of **trustful relationships** between peers and coaches in a therapy setting to be successful.
- Social support processes between peers in the therapy setting cannot primarily be initiated and fostered with a social online learning platform.
- It is important that **stigmas are reduced** by raising awareness and empathy between **peers**.
- In peer-to-peer-programs, peer coaches draw a larger benefit and achieve higher learning effects in the areas of percieved self-efficacy, knowledge-, communication- and methodological competencies than the actual target group (peers) (Nörber 2008), Kern-Scheffeldt (2014).

Literature (selection)

Bandura, A. (1976). Lernen am Modell. Ansätze zu einer sozial-kognitiven Lerntheorie. Stuttgart: Klett. **Borgetto**, B. (2013b). Wirkungen gemeinschaftlicher Selbsthilfe bei Suchterkrankungen. In: SuchtMagazin. (4). S. 20-24. **Reuter, T./Schwarzer, R.** (2009). Verhalten und Gesundheit. In: Bengel, Jürgen/Jerusalem, Matthias (Hg.). Handlung der Gesundheitspsychologie und Medizinischen Psychologie. Göttingen: Hogrefe. S. 34-45. u.a.m.