

An exploration of the roles and experiences of SCI peer mentors using creative non-fiction

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Spinal cord injury (SCI) peer mentors are individuals who, through their lived experiences, offer emotional support and empathetic understanding to others living with SCI to foster positive health, independence, and well-being. This study explored SCI peer mentors' perceptions of their roles and experiences.

Materials and methods: Six paid or volunteer peer mentors participated in semi-structured interviews. We first explored the data using thematic narrative analysis to identify patterns, themes, and narrative types. Next, we analyzed the narrative types using creative analytical practices to construct and refine the stories.

Results: Based on our analysis, we developed two stories from a storyteller perspective to present a snapshot of SCI peer mentors' experiences. The first story focuses on a "discovery" narrative from the point of view of Casey who adopted a person-centered approach to mentoring, focusing their attention on the needs of the mentee. The second story focuses on Taylor's experiences with the "dark" side of peer mentorship, which focuses on the psychological toll of being a SCI peer mentor, from discussions about suicidal thoughts with clients to struggling with burnout.

Conclusions: Results provided insights for support services regarding the importance of supporting the mental health of mentors to ensure they continue delivering high quality mentorship.

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KEYWORDS

Disability; peer support; rehabilitation; spinal cord injury; psychological toll

► IMPLICATIONS FOR REHABILITATION

- Peer mentors need to be educated on the significance of their role in the rehabilitation process and how their interpersonal behaviours can influence their mentees, both positively and negatively.
- Peer mentors should receive formalized and accessible training to ensure they are equipped with effective mentoring skills, but also providing them with tools to cope with physical, mental, and emotional stressors they may encounter as mentors.
- There is a need to continue diversifying and improving the types of services provided to SCI peer mentors in addition to one-on-one counselling, such as interactive educational workshops, for peer mentors to learn and practice coping skills, including mindfulness, meditation, and action-planning.
- As with other paid employees, SCI peer mentors should be trained to recognize when they are feeling depleted and be supported in seeking appropriate care from a health professional to provide quality psychosocial services to others.

Introduction

In Canada, the prevalence for people living with spinal cord injury (SCI) has been suggested to be 85,556, with 51% of this population experiencing a traumatic SCI and 49% acquiring a non-traumatic SCI [1]. Individuals with SCI are at greater risk of experiencing physical (e.g., chronic pain), psychological (e.g., increased dependence on caregivers), or societal (e.g., negative attitudes towards disability) challenges to full participation in daily activities compared to people without a physical disability [2]. Further, people with SCI may experience difficulties adapting to these physical, psychological, and societal challenges, which can have an impact on their perceived quality of life. One strategy that has been particularly important in optimizing the physical

and psychosocial functioning for people with SCI is peer mentorship [3,4].

Peer mentors are defined as individuals with SCI who provide emotional and physical support, knowledge, and assistance to others living with SCI to foster well-being and community integration [3,5]. Community-based, non-profit programs provide a space for peer-mentorship to occur in both the formal (e.g., mentor-mentee pairing, organized events) and informal (e.g., day to day conversations, casual interactions) context depending on the needs and desires of the individual [6]. In many cases, peer mentors work as part-time or full-time employees, or as volunteers within these organizations. Researchers have explored positive outcomes associated with SCI peer mentorship [3–5,7]. As illustrated in recent reviews, multiple positive outcomes of receiving