Project Spotlight

Building a Sustainable Peer Support Model for LMICs
Lessons Learned from the Diabetes Buddies Program in South Africa

Once a rare disease, diabetes is now a growing epidemic in South Africa. Similar to other Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs), South Africa’s health system faces many challenges in meeting the needs of people with diabetes in the face of the growing epidemic. Research suggests that adaptation of culturally relevant self management strategies and interventions that promote sustained behavioral change are key to resolving this issue. The Peers for Progress (PfP) project in South Africa has demonstrated that a peer support intervention can be a low-cost and sustainable model in resource-poor settings.

The Diabetes Buddies program was a pilot project to promote a healthy lifestyle and better management of diabetes through reciprocal support among women in the Mfuleni Township surrounding Cape Town, South Africa. Adapted from the Power to Prevent Program, the intervention had three components: 1) a series of 12 psycho-educational group sessions that address improving one’s lifestyle of eating, moving, abstaining from alcohol and drugs; 2) mobile phone probes about daily lifestyle; and 3) text messages to support lifestyle changes.

Dr. Mary Jane Rotheram-Borus and colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles worked with a local organization, Women for Peace, to ensure that the Diabetes Buddies intervention was tailored to the cultural needs of the women in South Africa. Supportive statements were translated and back-translated into Xhosa and English. The intervention used culturally appropriate metaphors, stories, and activities (e.g., cook Pam and then asked women to select portions for themselves; follow by showing the appropriate size for a single meal).

Twenty two participants were recruited for the study and formed dyads. During the course of 12 weeks, women were able to contact each other outside of the group sessions through the use of a mobile phone network. This allowed ongoing support between buddies. Women were also encouraged to share their successes and challenges in adopting new, healthier lifestyles. As part of the mobile phone component, one message, or probe, was sent daily to each participant with the goal of helping the women gather information to use in the management of their disease.

In addition to baseline assessments, the program also conducted a 3 and 6 month assessment following the intervention. The evaluation measures included biomarkers of diabetes, self-reports of lifestyle, coping styles, mental health symptoms, and support measures. In pre-post comparisons at 3 months, there were increases in sleep time, blood checks by a health care provider, positive coping styles as well as level of social support.

In addition to these outcomes, the Diabetes Buddy program has also provided long-term model for sustained behavioral change. This is evidenced by the continuation of the program one year post evaluation. The original group of women has recruited more participants and continues to meet. The women indicated changes in their lifestyles as a result of the program. For example, in a study published online by the Diabetes Educators (Rotheram- Borus et al., April 30, 2012), “
Women who could not walk to the group meetings in the beginning of the program were able to walk by the third or fourth session to attend the meetings.” Also, Women for Peace, the partner organization, is collaborating with Stellenbosch University and the local Community Chest in the township to strengthen its existing peer support strategies.

What can we learn from a program like “Diabetes Buddies”? Programmatically, having an infrastructure (not just the funding) in place is critical for a sustainable peer support model. This coincides with the findings from the 2010 Peers for Progress Global Meeting. Also, in terms of developing interventions, the use of mobile phone has its potential in resource-poor resource settings. For another PfP grantee example in mHealth, please read the spotlight on the Peer Champion Program in rural Uganda led by Dr. Linda Baumann.