Reviewer's report

Title: Explicit and implicit information needs of people with depression: A qualitative investigation of problems reported on an online depression support forum

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Reviewer: John Powell

Reviewer's report:

I enjoyed reviewing this interesting and well written paper. As the authors point out, depression represents a major disease burden on patients, carers and society, and information needs in relation to depression are therefore an important topic for research. The area is a topic of particular interest to me so I have made quite a few comments, most of which are minor. The chosen methodology is appropriate for the research question.

MINOR REVISIONS

1. The paper describes a qualitative analysis of posts to three related internet fora for depression. The data used is a little old (2004-2006) and I think the authors should at least comment on this (is it likely to affect their findings? – e.g. has the way people interact with the web changed? Have the people who use the web changed?)

2. The background section is good but I am aware of a couple of papers which are not cited which the authors may want to have a look at and include:

• In a qualitative interview study of 33 inpatients with bipolar affective disorder, Pollack identified six conceptual areas of information need, concerning: (1) self management of the disorder; (2) understanding the disorder; (3) managing daily life; (4) living in society; (5) relating to others; and (6) relating to self. [Pollack LE. Informational needs of patients hospitalized for bipolar disorder. Psychiatric Services 1995; 46: 1191-4.]

• In a small retrospective analysis of case-notes, Llewellyn-Jones et al. investigated the questions psychiatric outpatients asked at the end of consultations. Of course, this will be influenced by the quality of the preceding interaction. The authors found that most questions asked by this population (who tend to have chronic conditions) related to medication issues - about stopping, reducing or side effects. [Llewellyn-Jones S, Jones G, Donnelly P. Questions patients ask psychiatrists. Psychiatric Bulletin 2001; 25: 21-24.]

• I’m also aware of a (as then) unpublished North American doctoral dissertation which describes the design of a website for people with depression. This may now have been published. As part of this study the author asked visitors to the website to complete an online questionnaire concerning the information they were seeking. This was therefore a self-selected sample of Internet users, who
were already seeking information from a website, asked to identify the topics of most interest to them. The results show that among all respondents, the topics of greatest interest were: 'causes of depression'; 'recent research on depression'; and 'helping yourself if/when you are depressed'. The topics of greatest interest to the subgroup of people who were seeking information about themselves were 'helping yourself if/when you are depressed'; 'feelings of hopelessness/helplessness'; and 'causes of depression'. [Price P. Needs assessment of those who seek information about clinical depression via the Internet. Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering 2002; 62: 4800.]

Given the findings of these three (admittedly small) studies, the authors may want to mention them in their discussion of the present study’s findings.

3. Within the methods section I would like a little more detail on the inductive approach. Did the authors (for example) use well recognised techniques such as constant comparison, or seeking out deviant cases? Both can be useful in testing out emergent categories/themes.

4. Did only one researcher read the data and identify themes? Did other researchers read some or all of the data? Was there any discussion to agree themes, refine ideas, resolve disagreements etc?

5. Results section states that all contributors had personal experience of depression. I would like clarity on two points – does ‘personal experience’ mean they had depression? (or does it mean either they or e.g. a family member had depression?). Also, did all contributors have ‘personal experience’ as the authors excluded other contributions from the sample, or because this is what their consecutive sample contained? Incidentally, for clarity I would suggest adding the word ‘consecutive’ to the ‘Sampling’ paragraph page 6 (“A consecutive sample”).

6. Results section says “there was evidence…” about sex and age variability. What was this evidence? (Just needs more explanation).

7. A total of 134 participants is stated – is it possible that there were individuals with multiple logins? Where steps taken to reduce chance of this? It is a general issue with internet research (and internet identity more generally) – it is not a criticism of this paper but the authors may wish to comment.

8. On page 27 the authors cite Powell & Clarke (Health Expectations 2006) in relation to the need to hear other people’s experience. I would also suggest looking at what this paper says about people undertaking their own research (which I think the present study shows); and what it says about the different aspects of other people’s experience. I only mention these because I think the data in the present study is consistent and I think the authors could say more about the (implicit) need that their participants have for seeking out lay (peer) opinions online.

MAJOR REVISIONS

These relate to the findings and discussion

1. The theme ‘coping with depression’ was the least satisfactory for me. It felt confused between a description of symptoms that patients were reporting (and seeking help for) – e.g. lack of motivation, sleep problems, etc. – and an attempt to examine why people were seeking help. I think this section could be rewritten to be more focused on the underlying information need than on a more descriptive account of the problems people described. What seemed important to me was the need to understand how others cope, and to ask for help from peers. That is what came through the extracts as I read them. E.g. page 12 “I would like to hear about...” Or on page 11 someone asking “why is it I feel so alone and scared..?” For me this qualitative piece of research should aim to get at some of the underlying motivation – why are people going online to ask these questions from anonymous peers? What do the questions they ask tell us about their motivations (beyond simply describing the problems they have)?

2. Page 13 quote under medication “could someone offer me an opinion please?” – why is this person seeking a lay opinion? What need is this addressing – is it a lack of information on depression medication, or actually are they seeking something they cannot find from traditional/formal sources – i.e. specifically a lay opinion from a fellow service user. Likewise on page 14 the person asks about side effects. But why have they chosen to do so on a discussion forum rather than just use Google or similar? Could the need here be for peer information as distinct from professional? Do they want a lay view on side effects – i.e. what others have experienced? Page 15 on professional services, again what I find intriguing is the seeking of a lay opinion, in this case after the author has already asked their family and psychiatrist.

3. Understand depression theme – seems to be mainly about cause and diagnosis – just wonder if ‘theme’ could be narrowed to these areas? Was there sufficient on other aspects?

4. I didn’t think ‘comorbid health problems’ really fitted as a theme. Might be better as a mention in the discussion? There just didn’t really seem to be much analysis in this theme which was more a descriptive list.

5. In the discussion section page 23, second paragraph. The authors discuss addressing motivation and enjoyment issues, and they acknowledge that this is about addressing the illness. I think there needs to be clarity between information to inform (empower, support choice, feel less alone etc.), and psychoeducation/bibliotherapy type information aimed at treatment (authors mention increasing motivation and boosting pleasure). Perhaps this distinction needs to be made in the introduction?

I think this is an interesting paper, thank you for the chance to review it. I think it should be published once the comments above are responded to.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely
related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I am collaborating on a research project with one of the authors (Griffiths).