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The importance of peer support in advancing care in behavioral health: Building recovery capital and guiding others through life's storms

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Abstract

This article explores the pivotal role of Peer Recovery Support Specialists (PRSS) in advancing behavioral health care by building recovery capital and guiding individuals through the challenges of substance use disorder (SUD) recovery. Drawing on the lived experiences of PRSS, the paper highlights their unique ability to foster trust and provide empathetic, real-time interventions. The integration of PRSS with innovative technologies like the CravAlert® system, which monitors physiological markers of stress, cravings, and mental health crises, allows for proactive and life-saving interventions. Using the metaphors of a climber navigating a blizzard and a parachute slowing a fall, this article emphasizes how PRSS prevent relapse and reduce harm, ensuring individuals receive support during critical moments. In addition, PRSS play a vital role in helping individuals build recovery capital, essential resources like housing, employment, and supportive relationships, which are necessary for long-term sobriety and overall well-being. By combining human compassion with data-driven insights, PRSS and technologies such as CravAlert® offer a hybrid approach to behavioral health care, ensuring that individuals in recovery not only survive but thrive.

Keywords: Peer recovery support specialists, recovery capital, cravalert®, behavioral health, substance use disorder

Introduction

The journey to recovery from behavioral health challenges, particularly substance use disorders (SUDs), is often akin to ascending a treacherous mountain amidst a violent storm. At any moment, an individual may face overwhelming obstacles such as relapse, overdose, or the resurgence of mental health crises, making their path fraught with peril. In such moments of vulnerability, Peer Recovery Support Specialists (PRSS) emerge as crucial guides, navigating the stormy landscape with unique insight and lived experience.

PRSS have themselves walked the precarious path of recovery, equipping them with the empathy and understanding necessary to offer not just advice but also practical, lifesaving interventions. These peer specialists are uniquely qualified to establish trust with individuals undergoing recovery, providing support that goes beyond traditional clinical models. With the advent of technological innovations like the CravAlert® system, PRSS are further empowered to offer timely, data-driven interventions that can avert crises and support long-term recovery.

The goal of this paper is to examine the profound role of PRSS in behavioral health and their ability to help individuals build and strengthen recovery capital, all while leveraging cutting-edge tools like the CravAlert® system. The metaphors of a climber in a storm and a parachute for recovery are employed to highlight the lifesaving impact of these combined strategies. Ultimately, this paper asserts that peer support is a foundational element of effective recovery programs.

The cravalert® system: A lifeline in times of crisis

The CravAlert® system represents a convergence of peer support and technological innovation in behavioral health. Utilizing wearable biosensors, CravAlert® monitors physiological indicators such as heart rate variability, respiratory changes, and signs of heightened stress—all markers that can precede cravings, anxiety, or depressive episodes (see Figure 1). The system is designed to detect these physiological shifts in real time, sending alerts to PRSS, who are then equipped to respond swiftly to potential crises.

When a PRSS receives an alert, they engage with the individual experiencing decompensation. This could involve offering coping strategies, reassurance, or simply checking in, depending on the needs of the person. What makes the CravAlert® system so effective is its ability to identify early warning signs before the individual themselves is fully aware of the impending risk. By acting preemptively, PRSS can intervene in the critical moments before a relapse or mental health crisis occurs.

The Cravalert® system thus serves as a dual-layered safeguard. On one hand, it provides data-driven insight into an individual's physiological state, and on the other, it empowers PRSS to offer real-time, person-centered support. This hybrid approach leverages the best of both technology and human compassion, making it a powerful tool in promoting long-term recovery.

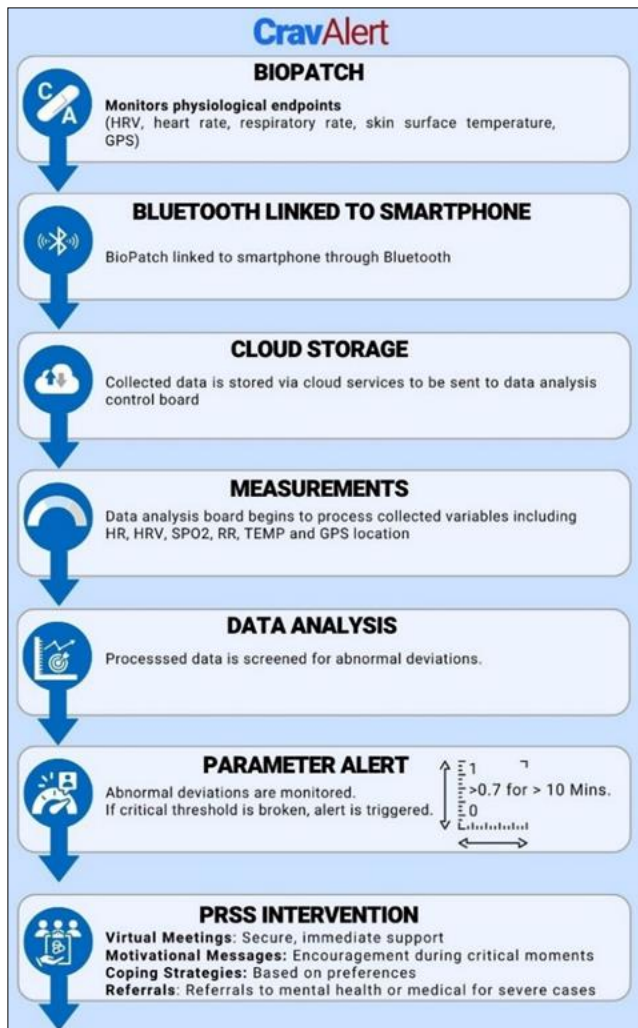


Fig 1

Metaphor 1: The blizzard and the cliff

To illustrate the lifesaving potential of the CravAlert® system and PRSS intervention, consider the following metaphor: Imagine a climber lost in a blizzard on the side of a mountain. The wind howls, snow swirls around them, and visibility is near zero. Unbeknownst to the climber, they are edging closer to a sheer cliff—a few more steps could send them tumbling into a disastrous fall.

The CravAlert® system, in this scenario, is like a beacon that detects the climber’s growing distress. As their heart rate accelerates and stress levels surge, the system sends an alert to a PRSS, who immediately springs into action. Drawing on their own experiences with recovery, the PRSS reaches out to the climber just in time, guiding them away from the precipice and back onto the path toward safety.

This metaphor highlights the critical role of early intervention in recovery. Just as the climber is unaware of the looming danger, individuals in recovery may not realize when they are approaching relapse. By stepping in early, PRSS can offer a lifeline that prevents relapse and keeps individuals on course.

Metaphor 2: The Parachute

In a second metaphor, imagine the same climber who has already stumbled off the cliff, plummeting toward the ground below. While the fall may seem catastrophic, a PRSS is there to offer a parachute, slowing the climber’s descent and ensuring a softer landing.

This represents the role of harm reduction in recovery. Even when relapse occurs—a common part of the recovery process—PRSS offer nonjudgmental support and practical tools to minimize the harm. Relapse does not have to be a devastating crash; with the right interventions, individuals can recover quickly and regain their footing.

The parachute metaphor encapsulates the harm reduction philosophy, which acknowledges that setbacks are part of the recovery journey. Rather than focusing on punishment or failure, harm reduction strategies aim to ensure that relapse does not lead to total devastation. PRSS, with their lived experience and compassion, embody this philosophy, helping individuals navigate the challenges of recovery without losing hope.

**Building recovery capital
Defining recovery capital**

Recovery capital, a term first coined by Cloud and Granfield (2008) [2], refers to the internal and external resources that individuals can draw upon to support their recovery journey. These resources encompass personal strengths, social connections, and community assets, including stable housing, employment opportunities, supportive relationships, and access to healthcare. Recovery capital is considered essential for sustained recovery because it provides the resilience and capacity individuals need to navigate the challenges of sobriety.

The concept of recovery capital emphasizes the multifaceted nature of recovery, which requires more than just abstaining from substance use. It involves building a foundation of resources that support long-term well-being and prevent relapse (Best & Laudet, 2010) [1]. Research shows that individuals with higher levels of recovery capital are more likely to sustain their recovery and experience improved quality of life (Neale & Stevenson, 2015) [4].

The role of PRSS in building recovery capital

Peer Recovery Support Specialists are instrumental in helping individuals build recovery capital. Their lived experience allows them to offer practical guidance in navigating the complexities of recovery, from accessing housing and employment to managing relationships and healthcare needs. Because PRSS have faced many of these challenges themselves, they are uniquely qualified to offer real-world solutions that resonate with those they support.

PRSS can also help individuals identify and leverage the personal strengths and community resources available to them, enhancing both their social and personal recovery capital (White & Evans, 2014) [5]. By fostering connections to stable housing, employment, healthcare, and supportive relationships, PRSS create a framework for long-term recovery that extends beyond immediate abstinence from substance use. This holistic approach enables individuals not only to survive in recovery but to thrive.

Conclusion

The integration of peer support and technology, exemplified by the CravAlert® system, offers a comprehensive and transformative approach to behavioral health care. Peer Recovery Support Specialists provide much more than encouragement; they deliver timely, evidence-based interventions that can shift the course of an individual’s recovery journey. Whether preventing relapse, offering harm reduction, or helping individuals build recovery

capital, PRSS are the essential guides who help others navigate the stormy terrain of recovery.

Through the metaphors of the climber and the parachute, we can see the critical role that early intervention and harm reduction play in behavioral health. PRSS, armed with their lived experience and supported by tools like CravAlert®, serve as both a guiding light in times of crisis and a parachute in moments of relapse. In doing so, they ensure that individuals in recovery are not just surviving, but moving toward sustained wellness.

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