

Seeking Safety: A Case Study of Optum's Peer-led Programs Addressing Trauma for Behavioral Health Covered Members

Individuals who have experienced trauma in their lifetime are at a higher risk of developing significant health problems including mental health, substance use, and chronic physical health conditions. Exposure to childhood trauma can include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; violence; neglect; and family instability and divorce. Later in life, trauma can include many similar events including domestic abuse, accidents and traumatic injury, and workplace violence or job-related accidents. People who experience trauma can have a lower sense of security and personal perceptions of threats to their safety, and also have challenges to their resiliency and well-being. Many people diagnosed with behavioral health illnesses also experience trauma from the stigma and disenfranchisement associated with conditions.¹

Optum has recognized that their covered members who have experienced trauma often face special challenges to their recovery and resiliency. There is a need to provide specialized programs that address these challenges in a safe and empowering environment. Recognizing and addressing the impacts of trauma is often an important component of behavioral and physical health care, and essential for engagement and activation that supports improved well-being and resiliency.

Seeking Safety (www.seekingsafety.org) is a program designed to help people who have experienced trauma and/or substance problems develop and sustain recovery goals. This evidence-based care model, backed by over 20 outcome studies, is listed on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration's (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. Optum has implemented Seeking Safety programs in ten states for individuals who experienced trauma and may also have substance use and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Working with local community-based, consumer-led peer organizations, Optum has developed and implemented this program as a service that is provided by peer specialists. To date, Optum has trained over seventy of these specialists to implement this program.

Seeking Safety is a structured group model focused on developing present-day coping skills in a safe environment. Each session follows a structured format that includes one of 25 topics that include areas such as Safety, Taking Good Care of Yourself, Compassion, Coping with Triggers, Asking for Help, Setting Boundaries in Relationships, and Honesty, among others. Optum has pioneered the use of peers to lead Seeking Safety groups.

Participants' Experiences in the Peer-led Seeking Safety Program

Working with local community-based, consumer-led peer organizations, Optum has developed and implemented the Seeking Safety program in several states, training more than 70 peer specialists to provide these services. Optum members credit the program with a unique opportunity to develop socialization and problem solving skills in a safe environment. Two participants; Derrick and Donald (not their actual names), also report that having a peer group facilitator creates an opportunity for them to safely engage in group activity without fear of external judgement or instability.

In discussing the Seeking Safety group, Derrick reports that being able to review different topics each week — including relationship building, coping with stressors, healing from anger, setting boundaries, and positive thinking — have helped him to improve his health and recovery. Derrick says that: "Picking a topic helps the group focus on what issues are affecting everyone and encourages participations." Donald cites the group setting as a safe place that helps him feel engaged and able to accept support from others. The group provides socialization in a structured environment, and he feels encouraged to learn and try new skills. He also says that "participating in a group with a peer facilitator creates an environment where everyone shares a common language," and this is important to him.

The peer-run Seeking Safety programs are also demonstrating effective clinical outcomes. A claims review from a pilot sample of peer-led Seeking Safety program participants suggested that the program could lead to lower utilization of costly behavioral health services, as well as reduced inpatient readmission rates.²

Optum's Seeking Safety program is designed to foster a safe setting for those who have experienced trauma and have behavioral health conditions, to develop skills and strategies to help them live healthier and fulfilling lives. By offering groups that are peer-led, Optum's Seeking Safety program is able to reach people that have previously had difficulty engaging in traditional clinical services due to issues of trauma and safety. The core concepts of Seeking Safety encourages people who have suffered trauma to find a safe environment to engage with their peers, respect themselves, and develop and use healthy coping techniques to achieve their recovery goals.

Reference:

1. Chartier MJ, Walker JR, Naimark B. Separate and cumulative effects of predicting adult health and health care utilization. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2010;34(6):454–64.
2. Based on a sample of 77 members who enrolled in the Seeking Safety Program between March 2014 and August 2015. Members included in the analysis were required to have behavioral health claims 90 days before and after program participation (N=61). Optum Consumer Solutions Group Healthcare Analytics, June 20, 2016.

Other Resources for Seeking Safety:

Najavits, L., Hamilton, N., Miller, N., Doherty, J., Welsh, T., & Vargo, M. (2014). Peer-led Seeking Safety: results of a pilot outcome study with relevance to public health. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 46(4), 295-302

Najavits, L. M. (2002). *Seeking Safety: A Treatment Manual for PTSD and Substance Abuse*. New York: Guilford Press.

Optum has implemented the Seeking Safety program in several states.

Optum continually solicits feedback in order to better understand the impact of this program on participants. Some of the group member's comments include:

"Seeking Safety has taught me that there is help and there is hope."

"My facilitator has helped me feel safe in discussing the traumas without having to relive the traumas."

"I have learned tons of coping skills and use them daily."

"[I have] learned how to be honest and that it's important in life and recovery."

"I can set healthy boundaries now. I've never have been able to do that before."

"I know what my triggers are now thanks to this group."

"I know what PTSD/Trauma is. I can deal with both thanks to this group and the leader."

"I love coming to this group. It's been very helpful with my PTSD and trauma. Also with my recovery. I think it's helped me more than anything else."



11000 Optum Circle, Eden Prairie, MN 55344

Optum® is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are the property of their respective owners. Because we are continuously improving our products and services, Optum reserves the right to change specifications without prior notice. Optum is an equal opportunity employer.