

# Culturally based online peer support group brought mental health benefits during COVID-19

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A new online culturally based support program, CHATogether may serve as an effective peer support model during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, according to a new study from researchers at Yale. The research was presented at the American Psychiatric Association's Annual Meeting, held online this year.

The Yale Compassionate Home, Action Together (CHATogether) group was initially designed to use theater vignettes to promote emotional wellness in Asian American youth/young adults and their families. Through social media outreach, it encouraged members to cope with COVID-19 by using productive and creative outlets. Early in the pandemic, it expanded its purpose to serve as a support group for its members.

The CHATogether groups are made up of people with similar experiences and challenges that provide emotional support for each other. They "empower one another through creating a social network," which provides hope, empathy and advice to tackle everyday problems experienced by peers.

The group meets weekly online and begins with check-ins with each member. Group members then work together to create family conflict scenarios and role-play dialogs on topics especially amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as cross-cultural challenges in Asian Americans, academic expectations in homeschooling, Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ conflicts within Asian families. Members create skits based on their [personal experiences](#), allowing them to work through their own internal conflicts and to gain a sense of agency.

To assess the potential peer support outcome, the research team, including Eunice Yuen, M.D., Ph.D., Alan Lee; Jae Eun Song; Jessica Vigneron; Andres Martin, M.D., M.P.H., and Steven Sust, M.D., conducted a qualitative focus group among the 10 CHATogether members who joined the group since pandemic started. Based on preliminary results, the authors identified four major ways in which the program had a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of participants:

1. Providing the safe and supportive environment strengthening the bonds between the members, increasing the sense of belonging, thus encouraging engagement.
2. Providing structural consistency/stability with regular meetings and consistent group functions. Weekly meetings provided a sense of control and hope in the midst of

- uncertainty during the shelter-in-place.
3. Through adapting the group to virtual platforms, [group members](#) experienced the inherent strengths of a growth mindset and cognitive flexibility when facing challenges.
  4. Supporting healthy coping skills through sublimation and altruism. CHATogether may serve as an effective culturally based support group for Asian Americans, the authors conclude. Future directions include investigating potential effectiveness in other minority communities.

**More information:** More information on CHATogether: [Youtube](#), [Facebook](#)

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