Peer support plays an important role in coping with many chronic health problems. Peer support may, however, contain a risk. Research has indicated that people with a high social comparison orientation (SCO; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) are, on the one hand, more interested in peers, but may, on the other hand, be negatively affected when they are confronted with peers who are worse-off (e.g. Groothof, 2004). The present research studied the influence of SCO on the affective consequences of social comparison with worse-off peers during peer support among fibromyalgia patients.

We predicted that fibromyalgia patients, as they have a higher SCO
- seek more contact with other fibromyalgia patients
- identify themselves more strongly with worse-off fibromyalgia patients
- experience more negative affect when meeting worse-off fibromyalgia patients because of this increased identification

Method

Participants: 88 fibromyalgia patients were recruited at support group meetings and through the website of a Dutch organization for fibromyalgia patients.

Social comparison orientation (11 items, alpha = .82). “I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life”, “I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do” (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Contact with other fibromyalgia patients
“How often do you attend meetings with other fibromyalgia patients?” “How often do you go on the internet to meet other fibromyalgia patients?” (1 = never, 4 = very often)

Results

As fibromyalgia patients have a higher SCO,
- they seek more contact with others fibromyalgia patients, but only through the internet (r(86) = .25, p < .05), and not through regular meetings (r (87) = -.01, ns).
- they identify themselves more strongly with worse-off peers (r(85) = .39, p < .001).
- they experience more negative affect when meeting peers who are worse-off (r(84) = .36, p = .001). Mediation analyses showed that this increased negative affect is due to identification with worse-off peers (perfect mediation).

Conclusion

Despite the many beneficial effects of peer support, the present study showed that as fibromyalgia patients have a higher need to compare themselves with others, they are more negatively affected by social comparison with peers who are worse-off, because they tend to identify themselves with worse-off peers.

References
