



## Hidden Relating: The World of Online Support

A Review of

*The Paradox of Internet Groups: Alone in the Presence of Virtual Others*

by Haim Weinberg

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Reviewed by

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Twenty years ago, two young women developed cancer around the same time. One, diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, understandably, withdrew from the world. The other, diagnosed with lymphoma, dutifully followed her doctors' orders but also dove headfirst into the brand new world of Internet support groups. This was the age of AOL and CompuServe discs, available for free in magazines and at the cash registers at local book and record stores—more anachronisms. Insert your five-inch floppy disc into your drive, and you could dial into a whole brave new world of connecting with others.

This second woman immersed herself in this world of online support. She had people to talk to when she did not feel well enough to go out—or did not want to be seen bald from the chemotherapy. She could share her feelings and experiences with others who were going through the same types of experiences in the comfort of her own pajamas—any time of the day or night. And she didn't have to watch them die. Either they were online, or not.

I always felt that the connection this second woman had to her online support system saved her life, whether actually true or not (the first woman died within months of receiving her diagnosis). This is one reason why I was quite fascinated by the appearance of Haim Weinberg's book *The Paradox of Internet Groups: Alone in the Presence of Virtual Others*. He proposes that in spite of what we have come to see as the dangers of the Internet—predators, hackers, identity thieves—we still use it constantly because, as he says, "it is all about relationships" (p. 9). Martin Buber (1970/1996) wrote, "In the beginning is the relation" (p. 69), noting that early languages spoke in relativistic terms—who and where are you in relation to me? Buber described an "innateness" and "longing for relation" in humanity that, he said, "is apparent even in the earliest and dimmest stage" (p. 77).

Fast-forward to the age of the Internet, and that longing for relationship is still apparent, according to Weinberg, and it is thriving online. Weinberg suggests that connectedness via

technology "is the new answer to human isolation and alienation in modern society, and indeed a good answer for the need to be in relationship" (p. 10). Time and distance are no longer obstacles. Weinberg writes:

It makes it easy to feel connected either to friends in other places (through e-mails or social networks), or to a community of people with the same field of interest (through listserves, forums, or professional networks). The quick (sometimes almost immediate) responses to requests or greetings from people beyond the oceans collapse time and space and create the illusion of immediacy. The ability to stay in touch with people we left behind when we relocated softens the feelings of loss. In a world typified by immigration and population mobility, the Internet suggests a solution to reduce psychological difficulties associated with such moves. (pp. 10-11)

However, much of this we have heard before—from the pro- and anti-Internet camps. What makes Weinberg's take different is how he applies it to the study of group dynamics. Weinberg draws upon the work of S. H. Foulkes and his group analysis framework, which in turn draws upon Norbert Elias's work in social relatedness in the political, philosophical, and psychological realms as part of his work in sociology. What evolved from this, according to Weinberg, is a form of group analysis wherein "through the group and the evolving interrelations of its members, the patient first reveals and ultimately heals or treats his or her individual subjectivity" (p. 23).

This may be fine for a group sitting around in a room, perhaps with the benefit of a facilitator/therapist, eye contact with each of the individual members, and the ability to read gestures, body language, and other nonverbal cues. But how do we measure this when we try to translate this group analysis process to cyberspace, where people come and go almost invisibly, where no one can read anything but one's actual verbal statements (unless emoticons are included), and where a facilitator/moderator's presence may also be invisible. Add to that technological difficulties, such as server crashes or other hardware or software problems, coupled with group members' possible inexperience with the technology. Is it still even possible to run group therapy or support groups online?

Yes, Weinberg says, but with caveats. For example, he discusses how some Internet groups and electronic mailing lists become so large that many members may choose to lurk rather than participate actively. However, the size may also lead to people feeling they have no "voice" in the group (p. 38). Similarly, the anonymity of the Internet often allows for greater boundaries but, paradoxically, greater self-disclosure, Weinberg says. Others, he says, may find the lack of visual cues too hard to tolerate. The structure of the Internet allows for maintaining individuality while still finding a culture of community.

In analyzing the specific group dynamics of online electronic mailing lists and support groups, Weinberg refers often to the dynamics he observed running his own mailing lists for many years. The anecdotal evidence he presents is backed up by at least one study—that by Maloney-Krichmar and Preece (2005), who conducted an in-depth longitudinal study to examine the dynamics of online support groups as well as the impact of these support groups on the individual participants. Although the support group that these researchers studied involved those healing from knee injuries, the group dynamics they identified were the same as those Weinberg found important.

Membership patterns, for example, are vital to the consideration of these group dynamics. Usually, there are long-term members who anchor the group—a rotating group of active members at any given time, many of whom provide support and community for new members—and smaller subgroups who may break off and talk or socialize privately. Maloney-Krichmar and Preece (2005) also identified a list of roles, such as information giver, gatekeeper, or harmonizer, that members of the group took on that correspond with many of Weinberg’s observations. Similarly, Barak, Boniel-Nissim, and Suler’s (2008) review of research further supports Weinberg’s findings, suggesting that online support groups can help promote an individual sense of empowerment. These researchers agree with Weinberg’s statements about the effects of the Internet’s anonymity and the resultant paradoxical inhibition–disinhibition. In addition, they added what they called “solipsistic introjection” (p. 1871), suggesting that by reading words of support through an online discussion, one might experience those words as a “voice in one’s head, as though that person has magically been inserted, or introjected, into one’s psyche” (p. 1871).

Although Weinberg may not be introducing new ideas about the Internet, he is bringing awareness to an area to which many people seem to pay little attention, especially therapists, for whom this book seems to be written. And the interest is growing (see, e.g., Chung, 2014) as the number of people who gain access to Internet technology is growing, whereas just 20 years ago, online support groups existed on the fringes, helping people like the young cancer sufferer in her successful battle to regain health. The world of online support, like its real, face-to-face counterparts, has its positives and negatives—its group leaders, troublemakers, and stalwarts. But the more we come to understand the dynamics of these groups, the better we can enhance such support and improve the lives and relationships of the people who need them.

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