



## PRESS INFORMATION

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## Corporate Communication

# UPSIDES: peer support for people with severe mental illnesses

## EU funds international research project

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Many people with severe mental illness such as psychosis or long-standing depression receive insufficient treatment or none at all. This treatment gap is especially striking in low and middle income countries. The nine partners of the research project UPSIDES will establish a network to improve the care for people with severe mental illness through peer support in nine countries, in seven countries including Uganda, India and Sierra Leone. The project will be coordinated at Ulm University and is subsidized over five years with three million Euros by the European Union (EU) and the Global Alliance of Chronic Diseases (GACD).

Peer support is an established intervention where people with mental illness receive support from a person with a lived experience of mental illness. Peer support workers act as mentors and support the clients' path to recovery. The support includes advice in coping with the illness and accompanying clients to medical appointments. "Peer support is an underused resource when it comes to supporting recovery", says the project coordinator PD Dr. Bernd Puschner, head of the Section of Process-Outcome-Research at Ulm University Hospital's Department of Psychiatry II. "People who have a lived experience of coping with mental health problems know best how people in an acute crisis feel and what kind of help they need most. In addition, peer support is a low-threshold intervention. People with mental illness may be more likely to confide in somebody that has been through similar experiences and more readily accept help from a peer support worker than from a mental health professional such as a psychiatrist or a psychotherapist."

In the first phase of the project UPSIDES researchers will set up nine study sites in the seven countries involved. They will analyze which peer support structures are already available at the study sites. These structures will be successively expanded and evaluated for their sustainable effectiveness. "UPSIDES main goal is to establish an efficient and effective peer support network for people with severe mental illnesses not only in low and middle income countries but also in industrialized countries", says Puschner. "This goes hand in hand with our desire to create awareness for the fact that mental health is a human right and that everything should be done to restore it. The basic principle of the project is a cooperation on one level with the partners outside of

Europe when developing and implementing peer support. What we don't want is to simply export 'Western' treatment models."

Better support for people with mental health problems may also have positive economic and societal effects, because UPSIDES will contribute to larger numbers of people with mental illness regaining their ability to work and to improve their socioeconomic status. Changing how mental illness is perceived may additionally protect against stigma and social exclusion. Mental illness causes huge costs not only due to absences from work, but also because of a higher risk of long-term physical problems such as cardiovascular diseases. The project members of UPSIDES hope that they can develop and establish an example of a cost-effective approach to supporting recovery for people with severe mental illness.

The partners of the research consortium will come together in march for a first international meeting in Kampala (Uganda) to plan their initial working steps. Partners besides the coordinating centre which is Ulm University Hospitals' Department of Psychiatry II are: University of Nottingham (**UK**), University Hospital of Hamburg-Eppendorf (**Germany**), Butabika National Referral Hospital (Kampala, **Uganda**), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (**UK**), Ifakara Health Institute (Dar es Salaam, **Tanzania**), Ben Gurion University of the Negev (Beer Sheva, *Israel*), Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy (Pune, **India**) as well as the World Health Organization (Freetown, **Sierra Leone**).

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<http://www.upsides.org>



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