

# BUILDING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

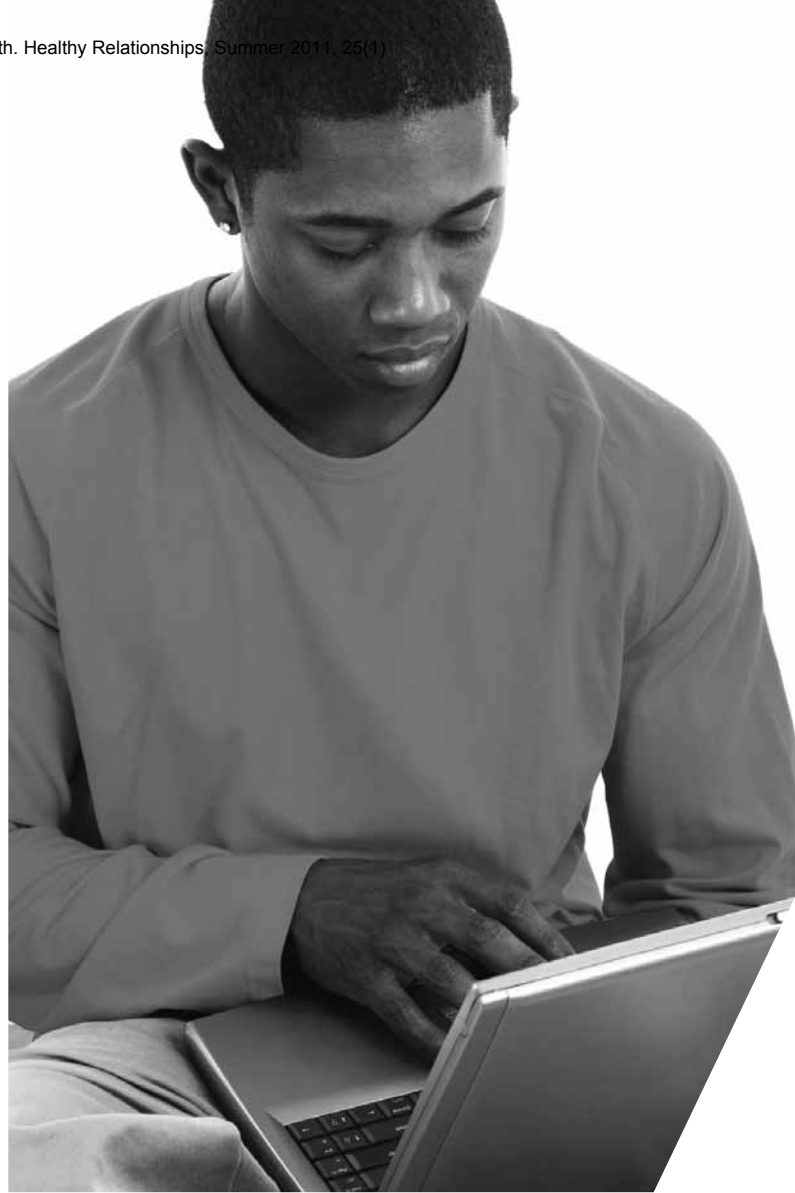
**M**arch 2010: A new site is launched. It is like no other site that has ever existed. More than a year of planning and research goes into this site before it is made available to the public. It is a site made by and for young adults living with mental health conditions. The site is StrengthofUs.org.

StrengthofUs.org is the brain child of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). NAMI is the largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness. In order to gather data about what young adults living with mental health conditions would want in a website that was meant for them, NAMI sent out a survey to 16-to-25-year-olds that asked them about their online habits and activities and what resources they would want to see in a web community designed for people like them. From this survey, NAMI formed a phone-based Expert Advisory Group to discuss the creation of the future website. The Group was made up of survey respondents NAMI handpicked based on their detailed and thoughtful responses to the questions posed. I, Wesley Kittel, was one of those picked. There were at least five of us from around the country, and I was happy to represent my home state of Nevada. Dana Markey, NAMI program manager, organized the whole project.

The first phone call was all about the website. We were emailed questions in advance about what we would like the website to be like. The questions asked us to think about what content to feature, what the site should look like—we even had to come up with the name of the website. Dana ran all of the Expert Advisory Group’s monthly conference calls. If members couldn’t make a particular call, they could read the meeting minutes, which were emailed to all members. Any questions members had could be answered via email.

One of the hardest things the Expert Advisory Group had to figure out was what to name the site. I took it upon myself to come up with as many names as I could think of. One of the finalists was, “Out of Many, One.” But there, among the list of at least fifty possible names, would be the name that would stick: StrengthofUs.org. It was perfect; the group loved it and, most importantly, there was no site with that name in existence already so we could register the domain name as our own.

After the StrengthofUs.org name became official, the NAMI team began building the website—putting the ideas of the Expert Advisory Group into action. There is a fictitious person who is everyone’s friend (similar to how MySpace founder “Tom” friends all members on that so-



cial networking site). This character’s name is Chuck and his email is handled by NAMI staff. People can email Chuck if they have questions or concerns about the site or life in general. There is a space called The Wire, where people can write 140-character messages back and forth to each other, much like Twitter. We created a social networking site where members can create profiles, manage their own privacy settings, upload files (pictures, video, audio recordings), add friends, write blogs, join or start groups—very much like what you would expect from any social networking site. The Expert Advisory Group was called in to become Beta Testers for the site, to be followed by a larger group of other Beta Testers identified from participants of the original survey. The site was in Beta from January 2010 to March 2010, and then it was launched for the general public.

From the beginning of the site launch, I took ownership of the site. When I say, “I took ownership,” I don’t mean that I literally became the site owner or Webmaster. What I mean is that I treated it like my own. I poured myself into it from the very beginning. To me, it was my baby. I poured myself into answering the NAMI survey when it had come out a year before. I poured myself into being an active

member of the Expert Advisory Group. I was a thorough and active Beta Tester and I was going to pour myself into helping grow the site as best as I could. To me, the site was a dream come true. Becoming mentally ill at age 18 was hard for me. I didn't want people to go through what I went through. I wanted young adults just starting college to learn from my mistakes and realize that they are not alone. For many young people, the signs and symptoms of mental illness start to show around age 18 through the early 20's—the same age many of us enter college. If I could be the person to help someone gain strength and make it through the transition from high school to college successfully, I would be proud of myself.

I started out by writing blog posts about myself and my experience with mental illness. I continue to write as many blog posts as I can about topics that I think could be helpful to transitioning youth, such as: starting a mental health journal, getting enough sleep in college, using a phone alarm as a reminder for taking medicine, etc. I treat The Wire as my own personal Twitter account where I can be myself and not worry about the impressions of others. I try to foster a community of mutual respect and encouragement of one another. The site is called StrengthofUs.org for a reason—we are all trying to gain strength from each other to heal from mental illness and continue with our lives. We write encouraging notes, comments, and emails to each other and we respect each other. We withhold judgment and try to be as polite and respectful to each other as we can. Sounds like the opposite of most websites, right? There are members who are gay, lesbian, Christian, atheist, pagan, Jewish—there is a space for everybody. There is an LGBT Support Group, a Pagan Group, a Christian Group, and there are many other groups for various interests such as

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be a member of the web community to get to this section.

Fostering a web community is like fostering any other kind of community. It takes time, effort, and care from committed members. Of the Expert Advisory Group, only I and one other member are still active on the StrengthofUs.org site. We love helping the StrengthofUs.org family because in many cases, we've been there ourselves. We've been hospitalized, we've experienced crisis, and we've recovered or are still recovering. I envision StrengthofUs.org as being

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Weight Management, Car Enthusiasts, Video Gaming and much more. There are groups for the various mental health conditions: Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective Disorder, Bipolar, ADHD, OCD and many others. If a member feels that there is not a group for him or her, he or she can create a new group!

The most popular sections of the website used by registered members are The Wire, Blogs, Think Positive (a section where Chuck has a weekly prompt to help users think positively), and Vent This (a section of the site where members can vent whatever frustrations they are having and get encouragement from other users). The Resources section, however, is the part of StrengthofUs.org that is accessed most often, probably because you do not need to

a long-lasting community where members enrich and encourage one another. They share personal stories and ideas that make a difference in the recovery of young adults with mental illness. It starts with one person who says "There's got to be a better way." The person finds the better way and shares with others his or her experience, so that others can benefit from it and become stronger than they were before. That is what StrengthofUs.org is all about. For more information, please visit [www.strengthofus.org](http://www.strengthofus.org).

#### AUTHOR

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