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Helping You Helps Me!

Values and Principles of Peer Support

By The Self Help Alliance

A recovery driven mental health and addiction system is a system that accepts and works within the Values and Principles of Recovery. Peer support is an essential aspect in the recovery journeys of many. As such, a mental health system of care that incorporates and respects peer support will value:

- **Mutuality.** The peer relationship is based upon the belief that there is a reciprocal relationship; both parties benefit from being engaged in a mutual exchange of experience and information.
- It is the **shared common experience and the lived experience** of individuals with the lived experience of a mental health and/or addiction issue (peers) that provides a context that allows people to work together. Through that shared common experience, a relationship begins, and allows for a common starting point. This leads to different and deeper understanding of what that experience means and how it defines and shapes our present situation.
- **Shared Responsibility and Shared Accountability.** Each person shares in the responsibility of making the relationship meaningful for themselves and each individual is accountable for their own thoughts, feelings and actions with respect to the relationship.
- The **importance of relationship** is honored. The relationship that is developed is based upon trust, lived experience and the encouragement and nurturance of hope. The peer relationship provides opportunities to risk within a safe environment – relationship is the fundamental component of peer support . The peer support relationship is also characterized by the use of inclusive and respectful language.
- **Confidentiality** is essential to the relationship. Both parties need to feel secure in the knowledge that items discussed and shared will not become public information or shared without permission.
- **The principle of empowerment** is upheld. Peer support provides opportunities for individuals to identify and remove the barriers in their life that have prevented them from exercising their own sense of power.
- **Peer support is non-hierarchical and reciprocal in nature.** The peer support relationship is characterized by mutuality and equity and is non-hierarchical in its approach – participants come into the relationship as equals.
- The **Non-judgmental and inclusive** nature of peer support. The importance of acceptance, tolerance, accommodation and not judging a person is critical for the development of peer support. There is a recognition that the individual is accepted where they are at in their life and are not turned away from peer support – there are not any exclusionary criteria for peer support.



Continued on page 2...

The Language of Madness

By Allan Strong

The issue of the use of language in the world of mental health has been contentious for some time. It can be seen everyday as those who work in the field, those who seek support, and those who try to understand "mental health" struggle to put words to their experiences. We struggle with words like, "mental health issues", "mental problems", "consumer", "consumer-survivor", etc. We dance around words like "illness", trying all we can to not to use it.



of their story. As it stands now for many, the ability to be the author has been taken.

The greatest challenge and opportunity for individuals is to regain control of the language used to shape, define and give meaning of the context of their lives.

The issue for me then becomes not one of the correctness of the words used, nor the desire not to offend. However, it becomes

an issue of how do we give control of language back to those who need it to make sense of their experience.

I make these observations because I feel that we have become captive to what we think the language should be, instead of allowing language to be the ever-changing reflection of our beliefs and values.

Throughout history, language has constantly changed to reflect the ongoing evolution of our thoughts, values and beliefs about the world around us. Language is, and always has been, the symbols we use to understand the world around us.

This brings us to question of the language of "madness".

The language of "madness" has become the language of a dominant world view imposing its interpretation of experience on a less powerful group. Simply put, professionals (doctors, social workers, therapists, etc.) tell us what we are experiencing. Their interpretation then becomes the de facto worldview, which we are told we have to accept in order to "get by".

The ability for an individual to be able to use their own language to define and express how they understand their experience is an important process for individuals to undergo as they begin their journey of recovery. Individuals need to be able to assert control over the telling of their own story. They need to be the author

In another sense, I do not think it worthwhile to try to discover the "right words". Instead, it might be more worthwhile to assist individuals to find their own words that give meaning to their experience. In turn, have the system of care honour and accept that "definition" of experience, instead of their imposed definition.

Essentially, it is not the words, but rather who has the authority to use them and for what purpose that is important. Those who have the ability to set and shape the context are those who have power. Right now, this power rests primarily with a cadre of professionals, instead of those who are most directly impacted and affected by how language is used.

As I see it, the question to be answered and discussed is not about the words, but instead, who has the authority to wield them and define the experiences of individuals.

Who is charge and who is leading the process?

Is it the individual or the representatives of the system?

Who has the power of the language? ■

Values and Principles of Peer Support

By The Self Help Alliance

...Continued from page 1

- The **non clinical approach** of peer support. There is not a reliance on clinical diagnosis, labeling or treatment in peer support. While information about clinical interventions may be discussed and provided, treatment is not the outcome, principle or nature of peer support.
- **Peer support provides and promotes the opportunity for participants to achieve difference and to learn.** Through involvement with peer support, individuals have opportunities to understand their experience differently. By appreciating a different way of seeing their experience, growth can occur. The "re-contextualizing" of experience comes about by the unique opportunity that peer support provides through the sharing and exploring of the shared, common lived experience of the participants. ■

Not Just for Mental Health: Peer Support in Other Areas of Life

By Keely Phillips

When someone says peer support, many of us think of mental health. That is mainly because this is what our experience has been, but peer support is not just for mental health. Peer support can be effective in helping with a whole gambit of life events, traumas, and physical health concerns. Here is just a brief list of other areas of life peer support has shown to be helpful:

- adolescence and bullying
- university students
- death
- divorce
- breastfeeding
- LGBTQ
- war experiences
- refugee experiences
- addictions
- cancer
- diabetes
- spinal cord injury
- HIV / AIDS
- chronic pain
- fibromyalgia

Peer support helps us to cope with change. When we talk with people who are feeling as we are, or have been through what we are going through, we learn from them skills to better cope with that change in our own life. When I first moved out of my parents' house to go to school, it was helpful to talk with those who had already gone through that change process. Student residences have resident advisors, who are upper year students, for this same reason. We access peer support all the time in everyday life; whenever we ask our friends, family members, or co-workers to share their experiences with us to better prepare us or help us cope with our own experiences, we are accessing peer support.

The language of peer support varies depending on the focus. Here are some examples of peer support going by another name:

- Peer support among war veterans related coping with PTSD and other trauma associated with war is sometimes called Operational Stress Injury Social Support. The name says nothing of mental health as there is stigma associated with words like "PTSD," or what used to be called "shell shock."
- For those looking to overcome substance use issues, they may have a 'sponsor'; someone who has been through the process of addiction themselves.
- A formalized example of peer support takes place in Quaker communities (a religious sect). They make use of what is called a 'Clearness Committee'. This is a group of peers that one goes to when faced with a dilemma. The committee does not give advice, but works with the person to explore alternatives, promote communication, and provide support.
- It is becoming common for new mothers to be paired with a woman who has been through the birth process; this experienced woman is called a 'doula.'
- In the realm of chronic disease, peer support focuses on self-management. Here is how it works: An individual attends a self management (or peer support) meeting where (1) information is exchanged (2) emotional support is provided (3) mutual reciprocity of giving and receiving help occurs. As a result, an individual has increased their: self confidence, perceived social support, mood, understanding of self care. Studies show that all of this leads to (1) improved quality of life (2) improved health behaviors (3) improved chronic disease control (4) decreased hospitalizations and death.



Never do the groups/individuals above us the words 'peer support' to describe what they do, however, in all of these examples, peer support is provided.

What is it about peer support that makes it so useful to coping with other so many areas of change? Most importantly peer support is accessible: it is not dependent on a skill level, most often is free, and does not require a certain level of illness or wellness in order to access. Second, it is complementary. Peer support is not a replacement for other types of help or treatment but rather works alongside other treatments without contradicting them. Wherever you are in the journey of a new or challenging experience, peer support can help. ■

(Sources:

Operational Stress Injury Social Support <http://www.osiss.ca/>.

Quaker Clearness Committee <http://www.fgcquaker.org/library/fosteringmeetings/0208.html>.

Building Peer Support Programs to Manage Chronic Disease: Seven Models for Success. Heisler. 2006. <http://www.chcf.org/publications/2006/12/building-peer-support-programs-to-manage-chronic-disease-seven-models-for-success>

Reaching Out - Tools for Recovery

Making Friends

Spending time alone is a wonderful thing we can do for ourselves. It gives us time to attend to our spirituality, read books, write and do other things that interest us. However, humans are social creatures, so it is also important for us to have social networks that can provide us support, expose us to new experiences, and often, to just have fun with. Here are just a few ideas to help you get started on friendship:



- **Be yourself.** A true friend will like you for who you are, not who you pretend to be.
- **Spend more time around people.** If you want to make friends, you need to get out to where the people are.
- **Volunteer.** Volunteering is a great way for all of us to meet people. Working together builds bonds, and brings you in contact with those who have similar interests and values.
- **Talk to people.** You can join all the clubs, sports teams, and classes you want, but unless you talk to people, you will have trouble making friends. You can talk to anybody, anywhere. When working a long bus ride away from home, I noticed the people who were on the bus with me everyday. After working up the courage to talk to a few, I had found company for my long trip, and a new friend.
- **Make eye contact and smile.** If people perceive you as grumpy or unfriendly, they are less likely to be receptive. Try to avoid frowning, or expressions that may lead others to think you disinterested.

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“Formalized” Peer Support Toolkit Soon to be Made Available

By Deborah Deforest

The Ontario Peer Development Initiative's 'Formalized Peer Toolkit' was recently rolled out earlier this year. This toolkit was supported in the Committee on Mental Health and Addictions final report, *Navigating the Journey to Wellness: The Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan for Ontarians*;



“The select Committee therefore recommends Mental Health and Addictions Ontario should ensure that institutional and community-based service providers actively seek to involve peer support workers in all aspects of service delivery and take advantage of the Ontario Peer Development Initiatives Peer Support Toolkit Project that will enable peer support organizations to accredit peer workers.”

It has been noted in this report that the Toolkit is the way of the future. All community based services are asked to give attention to this toolkit and to provide opportunities for peers to work among other mental health professionals within the province. This, in turn, gives opportunities to individuals with lived experience of the mental health and addiction system to be accredited and considered a valuable piece of the system.

It has been proven time and again that the power of peer support lies in the mutuality and connection within the experience of having a mental health issue. Many have come to relate and connect to others through similar experiences, the sense of belonging and community, and the realization that they were not alone. It has been essential to know that there were

others in similar circumstances who understood where you came from. It is the power of mutuality and connection that leads many further along in their recovery journey. I have spent many hours supporting others in very informal ways. At no time was there an expectation of results other than the mutual sharing of experience, a sense of empathy and relief, and something to think about. That is what informal grassroots peer support is all about. However, with this new tool being rolled out, will this accreditation encourage the formal mental health system to take the peer supporter role more seriously and appreciate the positive outcomes that it creates? How will this new accredited support align with the more informal type of peer supports already in existence?

According to O.P.D.I., the toolkit trainees will be given a certificate upon the completion of 50 hours of class time and a 50 hours internship. During this internship, individuals provide a one-on-one, scheduled type of peer support in a limited time setting. As an alumni and one the 28 with the privilege of being chosen for the first training session and internship, I am certain that many will benefit from the content of this curriculum. Not only was the experience a great opportunity to meet others from across the province who have the same passion, but it created an environment of exchange, encouragement and the drive to continue this good work. I know I am looking forward to seeing the outcome of this new tool and the shift that it may create for peer support in the future. ■

My Personal Perspective on Advocacy

By Paul Reeve

I am pleased to offer my reflections on the subject of advocacy from my own life's experiences on my journey of wellness.

Advocacy continues to be important in my own life. It has helped me through many different experiences. There are many definitions of advocacy, but the one I like best is "Supporting a Cause." I like this because it is open, and a part of my own recovery began when I realized that the most important cause was myself!

I see advocacy as having three branches: vision, voice and choice. The vision is about looking to see where you want to be, and finding out what your dreams and passions are. Voice is about stating what you want for both yourself and others. Choice is shaped by what we believe about ourselves and the world, resulting in our attitudes and what strategies we implement.

In order to create change, we first need to gain knowledge and find our voice. Advocacy can be individual or working with others to effect change. I believe I can only effect positive change if I take ownership of my life and responsibility for my behavior. It is important to find one's own power in a system that often encourages dependence, and asking the question: "Under what authority do I let my power be taken away?" It is also important to look at the risk of working for change.

It is hard to change what feels right in the full sense of personhood. Obstacles to positive change can be self defeating talk, distorted beliefs and "stinking thinking." We may also encounter resistance from others, doubts that we can do it, and the misuse of power.



Artist: Mikayla Goving

To overcome barriers, we need to uncover and gain a clear understanding of what is really going on. We need to recover from negative effects of the past and move into healing the wounds that may be holding you back. These can include physical, emotional, mental, and social components. Another step is to discover. This can include discovering your gifts and the opportunities that exist to express them.

Explore what is needed to move ahead, how it can be done, who to get help from, when is the best time to pursue your goals, why would you do this, and why now?

The serenity prayer can be useful: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

There are many areas, both individually and collectively, where things can be changed. For example, income supports, housing, employment, human rights and using a wellness model of health with consumers as full partners.

Let us be a voice in doing things differently for ourselves and others who will follow. It is time to take action and become an advocate for yourself and/or others! ■

If you have advocacy questions or you would like to submit to "Ask Reeve" contact Paul Reeve, Advocacy Coordinator, directly at 519.763.4014 x 202, toll free 1.888.255.2642 x 202, or email reevep@self-help.ca. If you do not see your questions in print, please note Paul responds to all questions on an individual basis.

Another Good Bye

By Brenda Gateman

To tell you how I'm feeling is difficult to say,
But there are those
Who would claim, "but you've made it this way."

Again I've had to say good bye.
Do they have any idea
Of the many tears that I cry?

To those who claim they know what's right,
Do they know what it's like to constantly fight?

I have some thoughts, and often wonder,
When you go to your homes,
For us, there is no easy slumber.

You close the door and turn away
Another case, another day.

Without my child a broken heart,
And how does she feel all the days we're apart?

The Power of Sometimes

By Deborah Deforest



Artist: Deborah Deforest

I was speaking to a peer recently and we were discussing the topic of mental health. I found the conversation so profound and thought provoking; I thought it necessary to immediately write down my thoughts on the matter. There is no right or wrong answer to this idea, only the incitement of consideration and the inducement of conversation.

When we as peers have moments of self doubt, it is through the mutual exchange of relational encouragement that we may gain a wholesome perspective of ourselves. What, if by chance, peers were to use the language of "sometimes"? How much more powerful, or powerless, does that perspective of self become?

I will give an example. If in conversation a peer were to articulate that an individual were sometimes to experience an event in a certain way; any feelings, be it guilt, anger, envy or pleasure, not usually associated with that event, would be deemed as neither appropriate or inappropriate, but rather just one feeling of many.

As a society, we are often weighed down by absolutes. We must feel this way or that about a situation. We are stifled by the perception that not all feelings or thoughts are considered acceptable. We forget about the unending possibilities of emotions. When sometimes is used, it gives room for learning, growth, individuality and a feeling of being alright with ourselves. Many of us who have experienced the mental health and addiction system, through the use of perceived normality's, boundaries and proprieties, have been stifled from recovery by the impossible restrictions of standards to thoughts and feelings imposed by so-called 'normal people'. However, with the use of the power of sometimes, language gives room for personal power, uniqueness and a sense of belonging. It dissolves the absolutes and makes way for options.

May we continue to use this powerful word to provide hope, possibility and the opportunity for recovery for all those whom we connect with; our peers, our loved ones and ourselves. ■

Reaching Out - Tools for Recovery

...Continued from page 4

- **Start a conversation.** You can do this by commenting on the weather, requesting help ("Can you help me decide which one of these is a better gift for my niece?") or a compliment ("I love your shoes."). Follow up immediately with a related question: Do you like this warm weather? What kinds of gifts do you normally buy for children in your life? Where did you get shoes like that?
- **Introduce yourself** at the end of the conversation. If the other person does not offer it, ask them their name and remember it! If you are able to remember things from your past conversation(s), you will come across as someone with the potential to be a good friend.
- **If you find a common interest, ask him or her more about it.** If you find they attend a club or team, this is a perfect opportunity to ask about joining them. If you clearly express your interest and follow through, you may find you are enjoying this interest together.
- **Do not pressure someone into being friends with you.** Never try to talk someone into attending something they do not seem interested in, avoid calling too many times, and refrain from overstaying your welcome.
- **Take friendship slowly.** Intimacy cannot be forced to grow quickly; friendship takes time. Of course, if things are going well, you may feel like rushing, but be sure to check the pace of your new friend. Too much too fast can cause a friendship to turn sour, and not everyone will be able to voice when they are feeling uncomfortable.
- **Choose your friends wisely.** Sometimes you may realize that certain friendships are *unhealthy*. If this is the case, ease your way out of the friendship as gracefully as possible. Cherish those friends you make who are a positive influence in your life, and do your best to be a positive influence in theirs.
- **Be a good friend.** Once you have started spending time with potential friends, remember to do your part (i.e. initiating some of the activities, remembering birthdays, asking how the other person is feeling) or else the friendship will become unbalanced, and an uneasiness or distance is likely to arise. ■

Send along your comments about a recovery tool that assisted you on your recovery journey, or a recovery related question. Please send your letters to:

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The Need for Empathy

By Mikayla Goving

“The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy”
~ Meryl Streep

Empathy is the ability to recognize and identify with the feelings of others, and, some would argue, also includes the ability to respond appropriately to those feelings. The importance of empathy is most clearly recognized when we look at situations where empathy was not present. Mary Gordon uses the extreme examples of the Holocaust and South Africa under apartheid, during which individuals were subjected to horrific cruelty and violence. In both situations, a great deal of propaganda and intimidation went into convincing people that the Jews and the black South Africans were something less than human. Ordinary people, like you and me, were influenced enough that they stood by and watched these terrible events happen, some even participating. Others, instead, ignored the propaganda, stood up against these injustices, and helped victims. One of the main differences between these two groups was empathy (Gordon, pg 30).

Though the examples above are events from our past, many feel that we still live in a world divided by: culture, religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, money, and many other factors. A major step that we can all take to closing the divide is empathy.

Empathy allows us to understand the perspective of others. As Mary Gordon states “if we cannot put ourselves in [another’s] place, we will not recognize his experience and what he feels” (Gordon, pg 31). The lack of empathy leads away from support and caring of others, and in extreme cases, takes us closer to violence and brutality .

Nature is on our side when it comes to being empathic to those around us. Research has shown that individuals are able to recognize emotions in the faces of people of various ages and ethnicities. The expression of human emotion is universal.



The Empathy Symbol

“...Our emotions and the need to have them understood by others are so basic that the visible signals of how we are feeling have become essential aspects of humans around the world” (Gordon, pg 33).

This understanding of how others feel is the first step to building relationships, and in peer support, the relationship is the most important element. Without empathy, there would be no peer support. Peer support, within the mental health and addiction system, is helping another person to move on with his or her life and work towards recovery. This involves helping that person get in touch with what he or she thinks would improve the quality of their life, setting goals, and helping them identify and remove barriers. Without the ability to care for and empathize with another, there would be no motivation to do these things.

We all have the ability to empathize with others. The sharing of life experiences, whether related to mental health or others aspects of our lives, makes it easier for us to better understand the emotional experiences of another. Empathy is to have a concern for other people that creates a desire to help them, support them and care for them. Just as peer support if reciprocal, so is empathy. The more a person feels that they are cared for, their desire and ability to care for others is increased.

“When you understand your own feelings and can recognize those of others, you are able to reach out and make connections” (Gordon, pg 36). ■

(Sources:
Gordon, M. (2007). Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child. Thomas Allen Publishers, Toronto.
The Empathy Symbol: A symbol for today. <http://www.empathysymbol.com>)

Words of Peer Support

R	E	S	P	O	N	S	I	B	I	L	I	T	Y	H	I	K	N	G	O
Q	E	E	H	N	E	O	X	A	L	C	A	S	H	A	R	E	H	O	S
A	H	S	T	O	J	M	U	T	U	A	L	I	T	Y	K	O	V	E	W
S	U	P	P	O	R	T	D	F	G	C	O	P	Y	H	T	A	P	M	E
M	C	A	R	E	A	F	R	M	T	R	V	B	J	L	I	H	E	M	P
I	S	F	W	C	C	T	A	H	D	S	E	N	M	Y	R	W	E	Q	L
T	H	G	F	L	A	T	E	I	D	F	E	M	P	O	W	E	R	W	R

- Care
- Empathy
- Empower
- Love
- Mutuality
- Peer
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Support
- Share

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The views expressed are those of the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Self Help Alliance.

*NEW—For Your Inspiration

"I've learned that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he/she handles these three things:
a rainy day,
lost luggage,
and tangled Christmas tree lights."
~Maya Angelou



"It is one of the most beautiful compensations in life that no man can sincerely try to help another, without helping himself."
~Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." ~ Plato

"Empowerment happens when a person who is seen as the problem begins to see him or herself as part of the solution"
~Saul Alinsky

"A friend is someone who is there for you when he'd rather be anywhere else"
~Len Wein

"Wait long enough and people will surprise and impress you. When ... you're angry at them, you just haven't given them enough time."
~Randy Pausch

Journaling Ideas

- Choose one of the quotes on this page and write your thoughts on it.
- What is it like to be touched by someone you love? Describe that feeling.
- The thing that makes me a good friend is...
- Have you had a conversation with someone recently that was particularly interesting? Write about it.



We Want to Hear From You!

Send along your articles, images, letters to the editor, comments or views about topics in this newsletter or other topics related to the mental health system. Please note that any items submitted may be edited for space and other needs of the "Changing Lives Newsletter."

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