

What is Peer Support?

By Moe Armstrong

Skills:

Must be interested in other people. Job requires both outreach and ability to keep people engaged. A Peer Specialist is somebody who can self-identify with their own psychiatric condition and the mental health system. One of the skills of being a Peer Specialist is being able to talk and listen at the same time. The listening is not a form of active listening but an authentic interest in the people and the situation with the support meeting or interaction with people in the programs. Peer Specialists are those who want to learn more about mental health and mental illness. A Peer Specialist is someone who is willing to learn from others. A Peer Specialist is someone who is able to share their own struggles and dilemmas. The model of the Peer Specialist is "Ask a lot of questions, get a lot of opinions." The skills that are needed to become a Peer Specialist are enthusiasm, authentic interest and a willingness to learn. A Peer Specialist shows up on time and stays for the time period that they are contracted to be on site or with another person. A Peer Specialist understands that their job is to be with other people and that being with other people can be hard work. Learning how to be attentive and sincere is an important part of being a Peer Specialist. Many times, a person might be tired, might not have the strength or energy to give their full attention to other people. But learning how to stay with it, stay with other people, and stay in the situation, and work through dilemmas and conflicts is an important part of being a Peer Specialist. Learning how to not become oppositional but supportive is a characteristic of the Peer Specialist. Peer Specialists work towards always finding the common experience, the common ground, and the common characteristics of mental illness and try to lessen the personal anguish that can come from mental illness. That anguish is real and can be lessened by both the Peer Specialist and the person with whom they are working. This is done with honest and self identity, which the Peer Specialist can bring to the workplace. Understanding personal trials and tribulations and solutions can go a long way to help reduce the anguish of mental illness. Peer Specialists need to be encouraged to understand the skills and practice of psychiatric rehabilitation. Psychiatric rehabilitation, done through a Peer Specialist, might have a different characteristic than psychiatric rehabilitation by a professional. The Peer Specialist might spend more time with the person. The Peer Specialist might travel to places with the person. The Peer Specialist might do outreach telephone calls and home visits more regularly than the professional. That friendly, flexible connecting, which the Peer Specialist brings, is important. However, the Peer Specialist is part of and works in the mental health system and needs to understand and continue to learn psychiatric rehabilitation skills and practices.

Job Roles:

Willing to work with others.

Show up on time.

Willing to find new information and learn about mental illness.
Willing to participate in the psychiatric rehabilitation community.
Willing to work in the mental health system.
Willing to work through problems toward solutions.
Understanding that consumers as employees (Peer Specialists) is a new idea and acceptance might take time.
Willingness and ability to sit with someone and discuss unpleasant symptoms, memories, and experiences.
Willingness to self-disclose.
Willingness to continue on the job consistently despite doubts and self-discouragement that often occur with mental illness.

On the job training:

Attending mental health programs is one of the best ways for a Peer Specialist to eventually work in mental health. First, people must believe in the program and its effectiveness. That comes through attendance and willing participation. The Peer Specialist is someone who has grown up and experienced the mental health system. Their time in the mental health system is part of the training. However, the training should be put in perspective. Not everybody's experience in the mental health system is favorable. The Peer Specialist must understand what they experienced, what was positive and what was negative, and must work through these issues before he/she attempts to work in the mental health system. Going on the job itself is a form of training. The employee is able to see how they do, where they succeed, where they fail, where they need improvement. The supervision that the Peer Specialist will receive is more akin to job development and job coaching. There are ongoing follow-up telephone calls from supervisors to see how the Peer Specialist is doing on the job. Peer Specialists also get together semi-annually to discuss new ideas, new directions, and understanding their own past experiences.

Supervision:

Peer Specialists supervision is different than traditional supervision. The supervisor is expected to be encouraging, nurturing and supportive. The supervisor should be familiar with the practice of psychiatric rehabilitation. The supervisor has a dual role: supervisor and job coach. As the Peer Specialist is someone who has a mental illness, the supervisor must have an understanding of psychiatric rehabilitation while at the same time ensuring that the person is able to perform the job. If the Peer Specialist does not perform to the job description standards, we will refer him/her to another employment position.