



Peer Support: Tip Sheet

“There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom... For example when we teach our students about the heart we teach them that the heart is a pump; a type of organic machine with valves and chambers. And indeed, in time they learn to recognize the anatomical heart in all its detail. After passing their final anatomy exam we say, ‘This student knows about the heart’. But in wisdom we would have to doubt this statement. Wisdom would seek the form or essence of the heart. It would have us understand that there is another heart; the heart that can break; the heart that grows weary; the heart that leaps with joy; the one that lives in my body and in your body.”

(Deegan 1995:91)

Definitions:

Listed below are a few definitions as to what constitutes peer support:

“Peer support is a naturally occurring, mutually beneficial support process, where people who share a common experience meet as equals, sharing skills, strengths and hope, allowing people to learn ways of coping from each other. Formalized peer support begins when persons with lived experience, who have received specialized training, assume unique designated roles...to support an individual’s expressed wishes”. (Ontario Peer Development Initiative)

“Peer support is based on the belief that people who have faced, endured, and overcome adversity can offer useful support, encouragement, hope, and perhaps mentorship to others facing similar situations” (Davidson, Chinman, Sells, & Rowe, 2006).

Peer support is “a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility and agreement of what is helpful. Peer support is....about understanding another’s situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain. When people find affiliation with others whom they feel are “like” them, they feel a connection. This connection, or affiliation, is a deep, holistic understanding based on mutual experience where people are able to “be” with each other without the constraints of traditional

(expert/patient) relationships. Further, as trust in the relationship builds, both people are able to respectfully challenge each other when they find themselves re-enacting old roles. This allows members of the peer community to try out new behaviors with one another and move beyond previously held self-concepts built on disability, diagnosis, and trauma worldview.” (Mead, 2003)

Family Councils & Peer Support

At its core, a Family Council is a peer support group. Fellow Council members can understand what you’re experiencing and empathize. It includes affirmation, information, emotional support, and perhaps even practical support (perhaps visiting fellow Council members loved ones to provide additional connections and contact). It’s really about knowing that you are not alone.

Having a loved one move into Long-Term Care is a huge change for the new residents and their family. Family members often say that the first 6 months are especially difficult and come with a wide range of emotions. Some people feel guilty that their loved one is now living in LTC. Others feel relieved, which can make them feel even guiltier. Some people may be dealing with depression or feelings of helplessness. Research shows that stress levels of caregivers often increase after their loved one enters LTC. It’s a whole new world with new challenges, expectations and routines. Supporting families through the initial transition phase and beyond is an immensely valuable service a Family Council can provide to its members.

How does Peer Support Work in a Family Council

1. One common strategy is to include a set amount of time at each meeting for open sharing. Set aside at the beginning or end of your meeting, for example 30 minutes, for open sharing. Include this section in your agenda for each and every meeting to ensure that members know when to expect time for sharing. Then, at the meeting ask how many people need time to share. If, for example, 3 people express a need to share, they each get 10 minutes to talk (30 minutes / 3 people = 10 minutes each). If 10 people need to share, they get 3 minutes each. Keeping to the established time allotted means that members understand the structure of the sharing session.
2. Establish that concerns raised or challenges discussed in the sharing session will be kept confidential and will not be included in meeting minutes as new business or included as concerns raised. This ensures that members have freedom to speak knowing that their concerns and challenges raised will be kept confidential and establishes that the open

sharing time is not the time for concerns to be brought forward formally for discussion or review by the Council.

3. Don't underestimate the power of connecting one-on-one or in smaller groups! Leaving time before or after meetings provides time for Council members to connect with one another and share challenges and successes. Leaving time at the end of meetings means members can chat over refreshments and build interpersonal connections, building a strong team and effective Council.
4. The definition of peer support for Family Councils must remain flexible but the following principles apply to both Family Councils and peer support groups:
 - Respect
 - Confidentiality
 - By members for members. For a Family Council, our saying is 'by families for families.'
 - Discussing problems and exploring solutions
 - Building a culture of positive mutual support
 - Advocacy on shared issues
 - Education

Core Connecting skills:

The experience of being heard: Don't underestimate the power of listening. Sometimes all we need is someone to listen and understand. Peer support is successful because it allows individuals to connect with likeminded peers who understand their challenges.

Preparing to listen: it can be an overwhelming experience to have someone share their burden/challenges with you. This is why it is important to prepare yourself before engaging in peer support. This means tuning into your own feelings and emotions and making space to listen to someone else without becoming overly emotionally involved or taking on the challenge of "fixing" the problem. Preparing to listen means preparing to empathetically understand someone.

Minimizing distractions: When engaging in peer support ensure that your environment suits the occasion. Minimize noise and distraction.

Attending: Attending simply means being present in the moment. This is one of the greatest tools when it comes to peer support.

Observing: Stay in tune with your peers emotions and needs. If it appropriate to reach out and offer a comforting touch then do so. Be aware of the moment and do or say what feels right. In

addition observing and being in tune with your peer allows you to not only hear the words but hear the feeling and hear the message.

Silence: Any conversation is bound to run into silence. Don't fear silence. It's a great tool when engaging in peer support. In fact, allow room for silence don't rush to fill it. This give everyone in the room time to think on what is being said and formulae new thoughts.

Strength based: Strength based simply means rooting your conversation in strength. Instead of becoming bogged down by our challenges focus on the positives, sites of strength, and opportunities for growth, change and renewal.

Role of a peer support

1. Understanding and empathizing with group members.
2. Provides supportive listening and validation of other's experiences.
3. Only encourages peers to share what they feel comfortable sharing and remain mindful of what details may or may not be helpful.
4. Shares "what worked for them" rather than gives advice or tells others what to do.
5. Asks permission to give advice and makes sure the receiver knows they can take what resonates with them and leave the rest.
6. Creates an environment of comfort and ease to talk and share experiences.
7. Uses boundaries and self-care. Is self-aware and self-reflective.