

Peer Support

Introduction

“We are all social beings by nature – connectedness and community are necessary if not vital to our wellbeing. The very existence of positive social relationships can be a source of healing for many psychological wounds. Because sexual abuse and sexual assault occurs in relative secrecy – in a state of disconnection between people – reconnecting and building trust are often at the core of healing from sexual violence. Some survivors turn to peer-support initiatives to build connection and heal”¹

As a result of suffering sexual harm, many survivors face relationship challenges with friends, family/whanau and workmates and experience great difficulty interacting with support service providers. These relationship and interaction difficulties can also contribute to their isolation and often make them more vulnerable to addiction, re-victimisation and further abuse. This is why effective peer support hinges on building a trust-based relationship between the survivor and their peer-support-worker (sometimes called a facilitator) and ensuring the physical and emotional safety of the survivor in that relationship. It is this safe and trusted relationship that can provide a real opportunity for the growth and recovery of the survivor...and also for their peer-support-worker.

Peer support initiatives, which were initially applied to help people suffering from addiction and mental health issues, are now applied more widely to assist trauma recovery, disability support, coping with grief, weight loss and mentorship programs, to name but a few common applications. In all of these areas it is the lived experience of the peer-support-worker, their first-hand understanding of their survivor’s experience, that is the essential ingredient for establishing a successful (hope, growth and recovery focussed) peer support relationship.

What is Peer Support?

*“Peer support is **person-centred** and underpinned by **strength-based philosophies**. The life experience of the peer-support-worker creates common ground from which the trust relationship with the person is formed. Empowerment, empathy, hope and choice along with mutuality are the main drivers in purposeful peer support work. There is a great deal of strength gained from **knowing someone who has walked where you are walking and now has a life of their choosing**. In this way it is different from support work, it comes from a profoundly different philosophical base.”²*

“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”³

¹ Rick Goodwin & Mark Patton – Survivors Helping Survivors

² Te Pou, 2009

³ Davidson, Chinman, Sells & Rowe, 2006

Typical characteristics of peer support include the following”

- It is usually facilitated by a trained peer-support-worker not a professional therapist although counsellors and social workers may have some involvement with the agreement of the survivor;
- People engage with each other and others for support that is based on mutual learning from their shared (lived) experience;
- The support may include a mix of self-help, mutual (one-on-one) support, group support and mentoring initiatives.

Peer Support Essentials

“Peer support:

- *Is grounded in the belief that people are their own greatest resource and that adverse life experiences can be sources of resilience and knowledge;*
- *Draws on a shared understanding of recovery;*
- *Focuses on what will sustain recovery – for example, employment, reconnection with family/whānau, achievement and purposeful activities, as well as being included in communities;*
- *Instils hope by being with someone who has been there and ‘through it’; and*
- *Is not about ‘fixing things’ but building on strengths.”⁴*

These essential characteristics are evident in the **six core values** that underpin the Male Survivors Aotearoa (MSA) approach to peer support:

Mutuality	<i>Peer support relies on authentic two-way relationships between people through ‘the kinship of common experience’ – trust-based relationships that enable peers to share their experience in a way that is mutually beneficial.</i>
Recovery and hope	<i>Peer support is sustained by the belief that there is always hope and that resiliency and meaningful recovery is possible for everyone.</i>
Experiential knowledge	<i>Peer support provides access to the essential learning, knowledge and wisdom that comes from sharing personal lived experience of sexual harm and the recovery process.</i>
Self determination	<i>Peer support recognises the right for people to make free choices about their life and to be free from coercion on the basis of their mental distress or victimisation.</i>
Participation	<i>Peer support recognises that people are often their own best resources and acknowledges the right of survivors to choose and lead their own recovery process.</i>

⁴ Power of Peer Support – NZ Mental Health Commission

Equality

Peer support asserts the fundamental right of people who experience sexual harm to have equal opportunities to other citizens and to be free of discrimination.

Peer Support is Person-Centred

The differences between some therapeutic programmes that tend to be ‘illness-centred’ (often a deficit-based approach) and the ‘person-centred’ (strengths-based approach) of peer-support can be summarised as follows⁵:

Illness-centred approach...the diagnosis is the foundation	Person centred approach...the relationship is the foundation
↓ Begins with an illness assessment	↑ Begins with welcoming – outreach and engagement
↓ Services are based on diagnosis and treatment needed	↑ Support is based on the persons experience and the support they request
↓ Services work towards illness-reduction goals	↑ Support works towards quality-of-life goals
↓ Treatments is symptom driven and rehabilitation (recovery) is disability driven	↑ Support is focussed on hope and recovery and is aspirational – moving towards wellbeing
↓ Recovery from the illness sometimes results after the illness, and then the disability is taken care of	↑ Personal recovery is central from beginning to end
↓ Track illness progress towards symptoms reduction and cure	↑ Track personal progress towards recovery
↓ Use techniques that promote illness control and reduction of risk damage from the illness	↑ Use methods that promote personal growth and self-responsibility
↓ Service ends when the illness is cured	↑ Peer support is voluntary; people engage or disengage as they choose
↓ The relationship only exists to treat the illness and must be carefully restricted throughout, keeping it professional	↑ The relationship may change and grow throughout and continue even after support ends

⁵ Informed by ‘Guidelines for the Practice and Training of Peer Support’ published by the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

Some Benefits of Peer Support

The Experience

Meeting with people who speak your language

When you are in a peer support relationship (one-to one or in a peer group), it's common to share your experience and talk about what you've been through and what you've done— things that relate to why you are there and why you are seeking support. It's helpful to know that you are in conversation with a person, or speaking to a group of people, who understand what you are talking about.

Learning with people who have been where you are

You will meet people who started out where you are, have had similar experiences and have moved forward to a place of recovery. This provides an opportunity to develop coping skills as you learn how others have navigated their life challenges. And it provides you with a regular reminder that healing and hope are real possibilities.

No judgment

No matter what you've been through, what you say or how you say it, your peers have likely been through it, seen it before, or heard it from someone else. There is no need to fear the judgment of your peer support person or the group when you are doing nothing more than sharing your own experience.

Focussed on hope and recovery

Peer support is not about what is bad, wrong or doesn't work but rather about what is possible and what can be achieved together. You will work with people who are not focussed on problem solving or fixing weaknesses but rather concerned with building on your strengths to co-create something new for the future.

The Outcomes

Some of the benefits commonly reported by people who participate in effective peer support activities are:

- Increased self-esteem and self-confidence
- A sense of purpose
- Increases motivation to implement life changes
- Increased involvement in meaningful activities
- Increases in the quality and number of relationships – greater social support network
- Increased resilience and quality of life
- A greater sense of wellbeing and increased ability to cope
- Longer periods of wellbeing
- Increased ability to communicate with and deal with other support services
- Positive outcomes where other services have failed.
- An opportunity to 'give-back' by helping others

Common Challenges of Peer Support

Keeping it safe and comfortable:

Informed consent

It is important that people entering into a peer-support relationship are fully informed about how the relationship is intended to work; the outcomes it may achieve; and what other alternative support options are available to them. It should always be their own decision to enter, sustain or leave the relationship and to be their own judge of what is best for them. This includes acknowledging the risks in the relationship and agreeing how their safety will be maintained.

Privacy and confidentiality

For people to feel 'safe and comfortable' in a peer support relationship they must be assured about the confidentiality of the information they share. They are entitled to know from the outset what personal or private information will be kept, how it will be protected and to be assured that this information will not be shared with others without their permission except as required by the law or in circumstances necessary to ensure their safety or wellbeing or the safety of others.

There are two commonly accepted exceptions to confidentiality which should be discussed with the participants:

- If there is reason to believe that a child or youth needs protection; and
- If someone states they have plans to harm themselves or someone else

Observing boundaries

It is also important that the boundaries or limits of a peer support relationship are understood and respected by both parties. The information and experiences that are shared in confidence within the relationship create mutual obligations to ensure that this shared knowledge is not used inappropriately in other social or work situations that occur outside the relationship. It is also important for participants to negotiate their personal boundaries that protect their personal space and other relationships. Respecting these boundaries is essential to create a safe environment and to preserve the mutual trust that enables the peer support relationship to be effective.

Enabling effective participation

Assuring ethical behaviour

For people to participate fully (openly and with confidence) in a peer support relationship they will need assurance that the person facilitating the relationship (the peer-support worker) will operate in an ethical manner – i.e. will operate in a way that:

- acknowledges their intrinsic human value and uniqueness;
- is focussed on achieving positive outcomes;
- builds a trust-based relationship
- respects their privacy and the confidentiality of their information;

- respects their autonomy – right to full information and decision making;
- demonstrates honesty and integrity – communicates openly frankly and sincerely;
- is always fair – even handed and impartial;
- reflects best practice peer support;
- is always professional; and
- has a responsive and positive regard for cultural diversity and difference

Managing unhelpful group behaviours

For people engaged in peer-support groups, the expression of intense emotions or negativity can be both helpful and problematic. Being part of a peer-support group can help people talk about and sooth painful or scary feelings. On the other hand, the expression of intense emotions or negativity can result in people leaving the group or causing a lot of strain on the group's ability to provide support to its members.

It is important that the peer support group members have agreed to a set of guidelines (sometimes called rules) that prescribe how the group will deal with unhelpful or disruptive behaviours. Effective peer-support group guidelines would normally include statements that establish a 'group etiquette' such as:

- Listening without interrupting
- Avoiding personal or side conversations during the meeting
- Acceptance of differences (including social, cultural, linguistic differences or where an individual is in their recovery journey)
- Respecting each other's opinions
- Refraining from judging people
- Using first-person language ("I" statements)
- Sharing the group's time so that everyone has an opportunity to participate

Managing group membership

While there are benefits in having peer support groups with members at different stages of recovery, members who have worked a lot on their healing may experience frustration with others who may seem "unaware" or "raw." Furthermore, group members who are relatively new in their recovery may be triggered by group members who can talk with ease about the details of their victimization.

This can be a challenge for groups as well as a risk for individuals themselves - e.g., "I don't belong" or "my needs are insignificant."

Also, given that connectedness is a key benefit of peer-support, it is important that participants who are new, or from a minority group are welcomed and do not feel like outsiders or left out.

The risk is that participants who feel isolated and do not feel their needs have been adequately met will feel let down and feel like they do not fit in, which may well reinforce a negative view of themselves or negative feelings for others.

It is important that there are clear guidelines, including a careful vetting process, for welcoming and retiring group members and that these guidelines are endorsed by the group.

It is also important to be able to provide other support options for people who are ejected from a group or decide to leave a group where they no longer feel safe or are unable to participate effectively.

Sharing misguided or inaccurate information

While sharing information between members of a peer support group is intended to be positive, there is a risk that the information shared may impede or disrupt the recovery journey of another member.

The information, though provided in good faith in sharing recovery experiences, may be inaccurate or possibly harmful and unduly influence or misguide a group member's decisions relating to their medications, treatment options, situational behaviours etc.

It is important for both peer-support-workers and group members to remember that 'what works for one person may not work for another', and to be ever mindful that the group may not have the expertise or experience to properly advise members who seek to copy or emulate another member's recovery decisions.

Providing competent and expert support

There is always a risk that the reticence of many survivors to participate in therapy-based recovery pathways, due to unhelpful personal experience or simply a reluctance to admit they may need therapeutic help, may result in survivors seeing peer support, either one-one-one or within groups, as their only recovery solution.

It is important to remember that peer-support is not intended to be a 'fix-all' solution for survivors of sexual abuse. Depending on a survivor's circumstances, peer support may only be one element within a more complex recovery program that involves other professional services such as counselling or social work support.

Peer-support-workers should be appropriately trained to appreciate the potential of peer support; to understand the ethics and standards that should apply to the provision of peer-support services; and to recognise and appreciate situations where it is appropriate to refer a survivor to another support option to advance their recovery.