

## A Peer Support Provider on their Duties

*"I'm a Peer Support Specialist in the Mental Health Department. As a trained and Certified Peer Support Specialist, my lived experience with emotional and psychological pain allows me to assist others with similar difficulties and challenges by promoting and modeling wellness and recovery.*

*My goal is to promote self-determination, personal responsibility and empowerment and assist others in regaining control over their own lives and over their own recovery process.*

*I support and encourage each Veteran to see themselves through their capabilities not their limitations, to embrace themselves as they are and celebrate all they long to be, and to find their own unique pathway to recovery based on their individual unique strengths, needs and experiences."*

## Veteran's Reactions to Peer Support

*"It helps that you as a peer support specialist understand where I'm coming from."*

*"Thanks for listening to me as a peer."*

*"You've been a patient on the inpatient unit, like most of us, and now you're working full-time. That really inspires me."*

*"I'm glad that this group is being led by someone who knows where I have been."*

## Mental Health Providers on Peer Support Services

"The peer-to-peer model is an exceptional example of the innovative ways in which we can help the system overcome its own barriers. Peer-support programs are not just empowerment programs. They are an expression...and an example...of the way the system is going to have to fundamentally change to foster healing relationships and create an environment conducive for recovery." *Kathryn Power, M.Ed.*

"There are things a peer supporter can do that no one else on the team can. There is just no substitute for lived experience of mental illness, particularly in someone trained to share it in a helpful way. In addition to the unique ability to engage Veterans into the recovery process and numerous other direct benefits to the Veterans, I have found the peer support specialist to also have a transformative effect on other team members. Our peer supporter has truly helped to transform our team culture and make our effort to support the recovery journey of Veterans more authentic. She has personally taught me more about recovery than anyone."

*Dan Bradford, MD, MPH, Durham VAMC*

"...In my experience peer counselors understand the recovery process at its basic level as they live recovery every day." *Julie A. Feely, LCSW*



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# Understanding Peer Support Services in Veterans Health Administration (VHA)



## What is Peer Support?

**Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help** founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful; it is a process dedicated to promoting empowerment and self-determination in the service of recovery.

## What is a Peer Support Provider in a mental health setting?

A person with a mental health and /or co-occurring disorder, **who has been trained** to help others with these disorders identify and achieve specific life and recovery goals. A peer support provider is a person **who is actively engaged in his/her own recovery**. A peer support provider is a person **who volunteers or is hired** to provide peer support services to others engaged in mental health treatment.

## What is the purpose of a Peer Support Program?

- To provide opportunities for Veterans to take control of their own recovery.
- To teach and support the learning of skills needed to facilitate one's recovery.
- To make Veterans aware of available services and choices.
- To help Veterans develop a sense of wellness and self-worth.
- To bring a unique perspective to the treatment teams on which they work.

## What do trained Peer Support Providers do?

**They serve as role models** by sharing their personal recovery stories, showing that recovery from mental illness is possible.

**They teach** goal setting, problem solving, symptom management skills and a variety of recovery tools.

**They empower** by helping others identify their strengths, supports, resources and skills.

They advocate by working to eliminate the stigma of mental illness.

They act as community liaisons by identifying social supports in the community and encouraging the expansion of local community resources.

## Advantages to Peer Support

**Studies have demonstrated the positive impact peer support makes to the recovery of people with serious mental health conditions:**

- Improves social functioning and quality of life
- Lessens the sense of loneliness, rejection, and discrimination
- Fosters independence
- Improves ability to deal with mental illness
- Increases access to resources beyond the VA
- Improves skills necessary to recover
- Improves communication with providers
- Improves employment outcomes
- Provides comfort and support
- Fewer hospitalizations
- Use fewer crisis services
- Improves the effectiveness of the mental health delivery system

## Myths and Misperceptions of Peer Support

*“The Peer Support Provider would have difficulty with all the paperwork and not able to handle the stress and demands of the job.”*

Stress is a very individual response to specific situations. It is not true that people with mental illness cannot handle stress. Stigma persists among many mental health providers who continue to believe that recovery is not possible for consumers.

*“Since Peer Support Providers are not licensed independent professionals, who will be responsible when something bad happens?”*

Peer Support Providers must complete VACO approved training and pass a rigorous competency assessment to perform their peer support role, including crisis management. Peer Support Providers are similar to addiction therapists or other non-licensed providers.

*“The Peer Support Provider is not aware of professional boundaries.”*

Peer Support Providers are provided formal guidelines and supervision governing client/staff boundaries and explicit policies and practices that determines how information is shared.

*“Client records should not be shared with Peer Support Providers because they cannot maintain confidentiality.”*

Peer Support Providers are provided the same orientation as non-peer staff and are held accountable to the same policies and procedures to manage and control the disclosure of information.