Peer support

The nature of peer support

Peer support is one of the interventions within a wider comprehensive approach to assisting staff to cope with the stress that comes from their work. It describes a supportive relationship between people who have experiences in common. In the NHS context, peer support describes the work of healthcare practitioners who provide emotional and social support for colleagues who share a common work experience in the same specialty. Peer support can be provided in both group and one-to-one relationships and can take place in community groups, clinical settings, and workplaces. Regardless of its setting, peer support is considered to have value, either on its own or as a complement to clinical care.

An important corollary is the necessity for practitioners who offer and receive peer support to recognise the limitations of this approach and what it is not. It is not, for example, a form of counselling or psychotherapy and, quite properly, there are limitations to the confidentiality that one member of staff should offer another.

The values and value of peer support

Peer supporters draw from their experiential knowledge - the happenings, emotions, and insights of their experiences - as they listen to and interact with peers who seek their help.

There are five core values that are essential to peer support. They are:

1. Experience in common: peers share similar backgrounds, experiences, interests, or goals
2. Safety: peer support has structures in place to create physical and emotional safety and one of those structures is the supervision that peer supporters should be offered
3. Choice and control: peers have choice and control in how they are involved in their peer support
4. Human connection: peers develop meaningful connections with one another
5. Freedom to be oneself: peers feel able to express themselves and be themselves in peer support.

Principles of practice

Principles of practice for a peer supporter include:

> Encourage self-determination by working with each peer to co-create and explore options rather than simply providing direction

> Interact in a manner that keeps the focus on the peer rather than themselves and maintains a peer relationship that is open and flexible, making themselves available as necessary to a reasonable extent

> Use appropriate language and interact in a manner that focuses on the peer's requirements

> Share aspects of their experiences in common in a manner that is helpful to the peer, demonstrating understanding

> Practice self-care, monitor their own wellbeing and be aware of their own needs for the sake of their mental health, recognising the need for health, personal growth, and resilience when working as a peer supporter

> Use appropriate communication skills and strategies to assist in the development of a relationship that cultivates trust and openness

> Empower peers to work towards identifying an appropriate time for ending the relationship with the peer supporter

> Respect professional boundaries of all involved when exploring with the peer whether engaging with other professions, for example, occupational health, might be appropriate

> Facilitate connections and refer peers to other resources whenever appropriate

> Know personal limits, especially in relation to dealing with crises, and ask for assistance when appropriate

> Maintain high ethics and personal boundaries and this includes being clear between supporters and each peer about what are those boundaries, the limitations to confidentiality that need to be in place and who else in the organisation is to know about each peer's use of the service

> Participate in continuing education and personal development to learn or enhance skills and strategies that will assist in their peer support work.

Practising peer support

Peer support of a formalised nature assumes that peer supporters learn how to ensure that the critical aspects of hopefulness, recovery-orientation, empowerment, non-judgmental acceptance, and trust are promoted within the peer support relationship. Other important components include:

> Knowledge about limits and boundaries for the sake of each person within the relationship

> Understanding the importance of self-awareness and self-care to maintain wellness and resilience, and avoid relapse as much as it is possible to do so

> Understanding how to prepare with the peer for the end of the peer support relationship.

Guidelines for training peer supporters

The formal objectives of training are to share knowledge and to develop skills. In addition, each potential peer supporter should contribute to the learning and skills development by the application and contribution of their shared life and clinical experiences. A training programme for peer supporters should address the following themes:

> An introduction to peer support and its fundamental principles

> An introduction to the skills for peer support

> Concepts and methods that enable peer support

> Opportunities to practice methods and techniques.

Concepts and methods that enable peer support

Training for peer support describes the following:

> How stress and distress affect healthcare staff and why it is important to understand the differences. What coping looks like and why coping is not always a positive response to stress and distress

> What mental disorders are likely to arise after emergencies and how to respond to people who may have them

> Understanding the concepts of emotional labour and psychological safety and how to apply them to the process of peer support

> Understanding and developing active listening skills

> Developing an understanding of what is a group and how it differs from a team

> Understanding what social support looks and feels like and why it is important

> Understanding personal and collective psychosocial resilience

> Knowing how to build supportive relationships.

Two fundamental matters

1. Fundamental to the training for peer supporters is the need to ensure that there are opportunities to practice methods and techniques in a safe environment.

2. Another fundamental matter is that peer supporters should be supervised by qualified mental health practitioners.

For the accompanying infographic please visit https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/about-us/responding-to-covid-19/responding-to-covid-19-guidance-for-clinicians/wellbeing-and-support/supporting-healthcare-professionals

Source: Williams R, Kemp V, Stokes S.* Peer support: an introductory briefing document.

*Members of the team working on the Psychosocial and Mental Health Programme of the Faculty of Pre-Hospital Care in the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.