

# Employers Guide to Peer Worker Support and Engagement

This course looks at ways employers can support and engage peer support workers in the mental health and addictions care systems.

## INTRODUCTION

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- ☰ 1. welcome
- ☰ 2. about this course
- ☰ 3. table of contents

## ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT WORKERS

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- ☰ 4. sharing
- ☰ 5. what is peer support?
- ☰ 6. what is a peer support worker?
- ☰ 7. importance of mutuality
- 🔍 8. check your understanding

## BENEFITS OF USING PEER SUPPORT WORKERS

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- ☰ 9. how are peer support services used?
- ☰ 10. what value do peer support services bring?
- ☰ 11. scope of peer support
- ☰ 12. a note about recovery
- 🔍 13. check your understanding

## PEER SUPPORT WORKER ENGAGEMENT

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- ☰ 14. what is peer engagement?
- ☰ 15. the ladder of engagement
- ☰ 16. a word about the term peer engagement
- 🔍 17. check your understanding

## INCREASING ENGAGEMENT OF PEER SUPPORT WORKERS

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- ☰ 18. ways to empower peer support workers
- ☰ 19. values of peer support workers
- ☰ 20. empowerment through language
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## OVERCOMING BARRIERS

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☰ 23. barriers that hinder peer practice, satisfaction & engagement

☰ 24. challenges as reported by peer support workers themselves

☰ 25. peer support worker feedback: what do providers need to do

☐ 26. check your understanding

#### SUMMARY & WRAP UP

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☰ 27. summary

☰ 28. next steps

# 1. welcome

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welcome  
TO THE  
**Providers Guide**  
TO **Peer Support**  
AND **Engagement**

Welcome to the *Employer's Guide to Peer Worker Support and Engagement*, a short course that explores the role and needs of peer support workers. Peer support workers can be found in every facet of mental health and substance use services and provide invaluable care and advocacy to a range of communities and populations.

This course is offered by the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions (MMHA) and has been developed through a multi-stakeholder engagement process that included consultation with over 200 peers living in B.C. MMHA's goal is to deliver educational resources that are accessible, evidence-based and consistent with the emerging trends in the field of mental health and addictions. This is one of many learning resources being created to serve this purpose.

The intention of this course is to empower you in your journey to better support and engage peer support workers. At the end of this process, you will be better able to

- Define the role of peer support workers
- Describe the benefits of hiring peer support workers
- Recognize the steps of increased engagement for peer support workers
- Empower peer support workers towards greater levels of engagement
- Analyze barriers that may hinder effective peer support practice and reduce workplace satisfaction and engagement.

## 2. about this course

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This course should take about 30 minutes to complete.

It is made up of a series of short presentations, interactive activities and informal knowledge checks. Some sections will ask you to recognize information after it has been presented. Others will ask you to take that information and apply it in imaginary situations or scenarios.

Regardless, the goal is the same: to help you internalize these important concepts so you can use them in your own work settings.

The course content has been guided by consultations that were held with peer support workers. They were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about the challenges they faced and possible solutions to overcome them. It is with the utmost respect for their experience and wisdom that we share these learnings.

### course navigation

In a more practical sense, we offer a few tips for using this course.

Course navigation is very intuitive and straight-forward. In case there are areas in question, below is an interactive diagram that gives you the chance to explore the functions of different parts of the screen. Click the info buttons below to learn more.

**Provider's Guide to Peer Support and Engagement**

Chapter 1 of 25

**welcome**

about this course

**ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT WORKERS**

what is peer support?

what is a peer support worker?

importance of reciprocity

check your understanding

**BENEFITS OF USING PEER SUPPORT WORKERS**

how are peer support services used?

what value do peer support services bring?

scope of peer support

a note about recovery

scope of peer support

a note about recovery

check your understanding

scope of peer support

a note about recovery

check your understanding

a note about recovery

check your understanding

Chapter 1 of 25

**welcome**

Welcome to the [Providers Guide to Peer Support and Engagement], a short course that explores the role and needs of peer support workers. Peer support workers, who can be found in every facet of the mental health and substance use services, provide invaluable care and advocacy to a range of communities and populations.

The course is offered by BCcampus, and is part of a larger project funded by the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions (MMHA), whose goal is to deliver educational resources that are accessible, evidence-based, and consistent with the emerging trends in the field of mental health and addictions. It is one of many learning resources being created to serve this end.

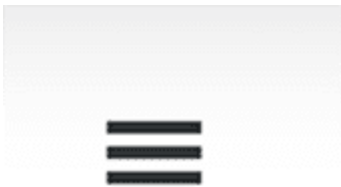
The intention of this course is to empower you in your journey to better support and engage peer support workers. As such, by its completion, you will be able to do the following:

Peer support workers are NOT community support workers.

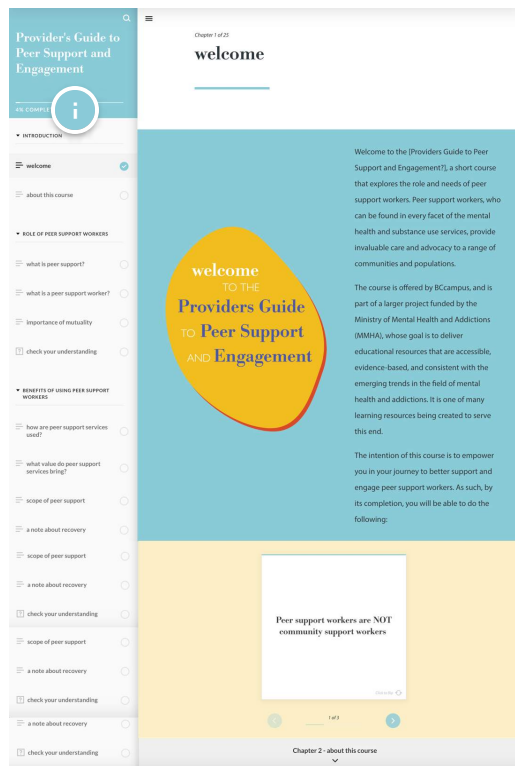
Chapter 2: about this course

The screenshot shows a course interface. On the left is a navigation menu with a blue header containing the course title and a circular 'i' icon. The menu lists sections: 'Introduction', 'welcome' (highlighted), 'about this course', 'Role of Peer Support Workers', 'Benefits of Using Peer Support Workers', and 'Check your understanding'. The main content area has a blue header with 'Chapter 1 of 25' and 'welcome'. Below this is a large blue graphic with a yellow oval containing the text 'welcome TO THE Providers Guide TO Peer Support AND Engagement'. To the right of the graphic is introductory text. At the bottom, a white box contains the text 'Peer support workers are NOT community support workers'. A footer shows 'Chapter 2: about this course' with a dropdown arrow.

## Menu button



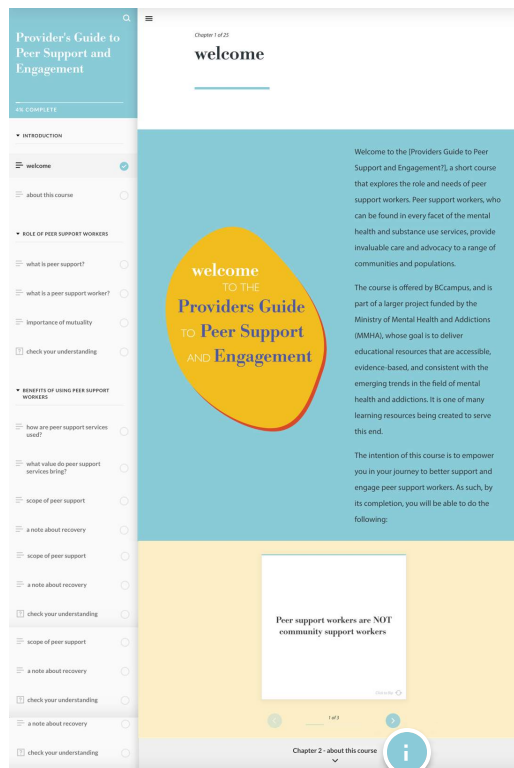
The menu button opens and closes the menu section on the left.



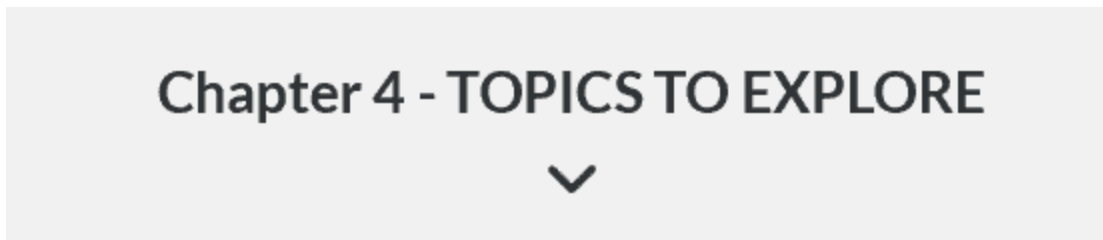
## Course progress



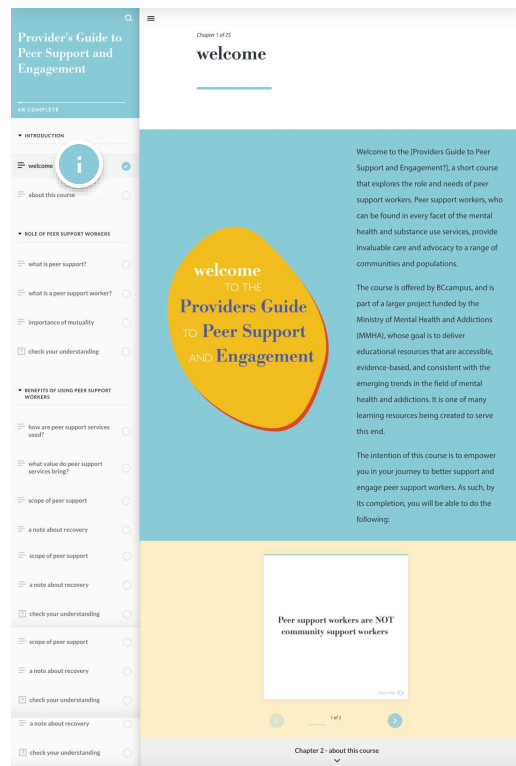
The course progress bar at the top of the menu shows the percentage of the course that has been completed.



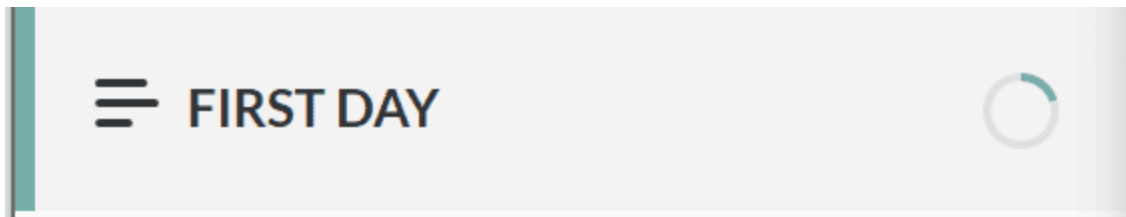
## Moving to next chapter



To move through the course from chapter to chapter, click the 'continue' bar or the next chapter link at the bottom of the screen.



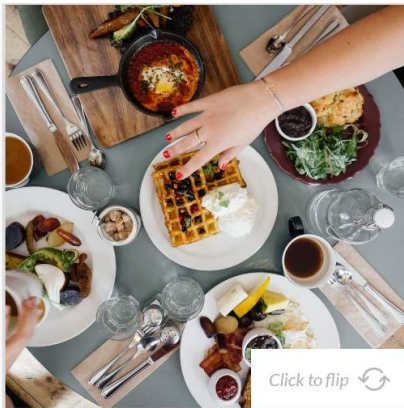
## Navigation through menu



The current module is highlighted in the menu and the progress is shown on the circle icon on the right. The circle will change to a check mark when the chapter is complete.

The screenshot displays a course interface. On the left is a table of contents with sections like 'INTRODUCTION', 'welcome', 'about this course', 'ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT WORKERS', and 'BENEFITS OF USING PEER SUPPORT WORKERS'. The main content area features a 'welcome' heading, a large graphic with the text 'welcome TO THE Providers Guide TO Peer Support AND Engagement', and several paragraphs of text. A pop-up message in the center reads 'Peer support workers are NOT community support workers' with an information icon. The bottom of the page shows 'Chapter 2: about this course'.

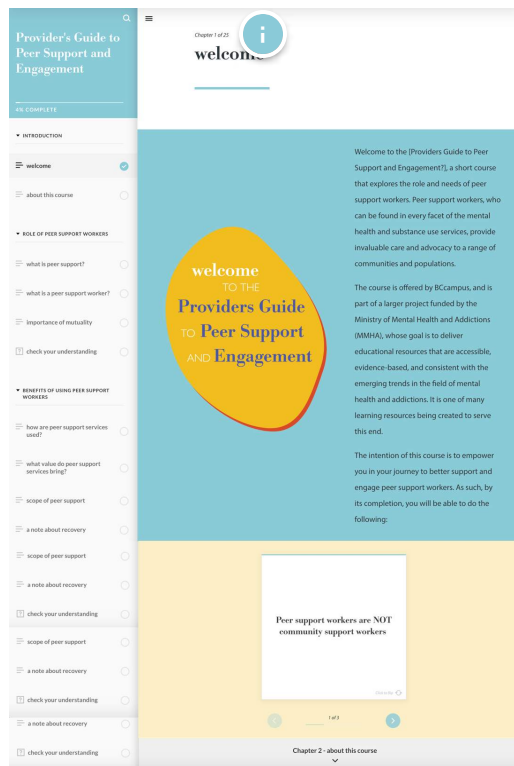
## Interactions



Parks & Recreation often promote the building and maintenance of existing and new parks and trails.



The course uses a variety of interaction types including videos, flashcards, labelled graphics, and quizzes. Each interaction has instructions to help you know what to do.



## Chapter titles

# Chapter 2 of 10

Above each chapter title, the chapters remaining are listed.

## 3. table of contents

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Below you will find a short overview of what topics you'll find in this course.

As you move through these topics, please remember you can always return to this page to revisit the main ideas being explored in each lesson.

### **1. welcome**

An introduction to the course.

### **2. about this course**

How to use this course.

### **3. table of contents**

List of topics and contents.

#### **4. sharing**

—

Personal reflection on peer support.

#### **5. what is peer support?**

—

The meaning of peer support.

#### **6. what is a peer support worker?**

—

What peer support workers do.

#### **7. importance of mutuality**

—

Explores a foundational principle in peer support.

#### **8. check your understanding**

—

Questions to check your understanding.

#### **9. how are peer support services used?**

Where do you find peer support workers?

—

### **10. what value do peer support services bring?**

—

Ways peer support services are useful.

### **11. scope of peer support**

—

The range of work peer support workers do.

### **12. a note about recovery**

—

What recovery means.

### **13. check your understanding**

—

Questions to check your understanding of the material.

### **14. what is peer engagement?**

—

Peer engagement explained.

### **15. the ladder of engagement**

—

Tool for assessing the level of peer engagement in your organization.

### **16. a word about the term peer engagement**

—

Describes two meanings for this term.

### **17. check your understanding**

—

Questions to check your understanding of the material.

### **18. ways to empower peer support workers**

—

Strategies for empowering peers.

### **19. values of peer support workers**

—

Survey showing attributes peer support workers value.

**20. empowerment through language**

—

Advice for how to choose words wisely.

**21. more ways to empower peer support workers**

—

Additional ways to empower peers.

**22. check your understanding**

—

Questions to check your understanding of the material.

**23. barriers that hinder peer practice, satisfaction & engagement**

—

Explores barriers that deter peer workers satisfaction and engagement.

**24. challenges as reported by peer support workers themselves**

—

Survey showing what peers consider challenges.

**25. peer support worker feedback: what do providers need to do?**

—

Peer advice for employers.

**26. check your understanding**

—

Questions to check your understanding of the material.

**27. summary**

—

Summary of main topics covered.

**28. next steps**

—

Suggestions for how to continue and deepen the learning on peer engagement.

## 4. sharing

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Take a moment and think of a  
time someone from  
community shared their lived  
experience with you and  
changed your thinking.

This kind of sharing is priceless. This kind of sharing is  
peer support.

## 5. what is peer support?

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“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. Peer support is not based on psychiatric models and diagnostic criteria. It is about understanding another’s situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain.”

Mead, Hilton & Curtis

Peer support occurs in nearly every facet of our mental health and addictions care systems. It is generally understood to be a relationship of mutual support where people with similar life experiences offer each other support, especially as they move through difficult or challenging experiences.

Peer support can be provided in both group and person-to-person relationships. It can also take place in clinical settings, community groups and workplaces.

The specifics of a peer support relationship will be unique to each individual. It may be the first step that someone takes towards recovery, or it may come years into a person’s journey towards wellness. Regardless, it is considered to have value, either on its own or as a complement to clinical care.

In order for peer support to thrive, attention must be given to the following core principles and values:

**Acknowledgement** —

All human beings deserve to be seen for who they are.

IN ACTION: Peer support strives to acknowledge – and deeply hear – people where they are in their journey.

**Mutuality** —

All healthy relationships are mutual and reciprocal.

IN ACTION: Peer support relationships are co-created, with all parties participating in boundary creation.

**Strength-based** —

Every human being has strengths.

IN ACTION: Peer support intentionally builds on existing strengths. It thoughtfully and purposefully moves in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.

**Self-determination** —

Motivation works best when it's driven from within.

IN ACTION: Peer support encourages self-determination and acknowledges and holds space for resilience and inner wisdom.

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## **Respect, Dignity and Equity**

All human beings have intrinsic value.

IN ACTION: Peer support honours human value by

- Practicing cultural humility and sensitivity
- Serving with a trauma-informed approach
- Offering generosity of assumption
- Addressing personal biases mindfully
- Meeting people where they are
- Serving with a knowledge of equity

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## **Belonging and Community**

All human beings need to belong and be a part of a community.

IN ACTION: Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community and actively works towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support encourages a social justice mindset, and intentionally promotes empathy, compassion and self-compassion.

## Curiosity

Curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.

IN ACTION: Peer support

- Is continually curious
- Challenges assumptions and narratives
- Asks powerful questions
- Offers generosity of assumption to those who think differently
- Knows that listening and asking questions is more important than providing answers

## 6. what is a peer support worker?

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“Empathy is the antidote to shame. The two most powerful words when we’re in struggle: me too.”

Brené Brown

A peer support worker is someone who has lived experience with a mental health, substance use, addiction or a trauma issue who is able to tap into their lived experience and engage in a mutually supportive relationship with someone in the midst of struggling with a similar issue. This role can take many forms, but the essence is the same.

People with lived experience of homelessness, poverty and other intersecting factors other than mental health, substance use, addiction or trauma can also provide peer support services.

Family members, or caregivers of someone with lived or living experience of mental health, substance use, addiction or a trauma issue can also provide peer support services to another family member.

Learn more about specific places peer support worker services are used in the next section.

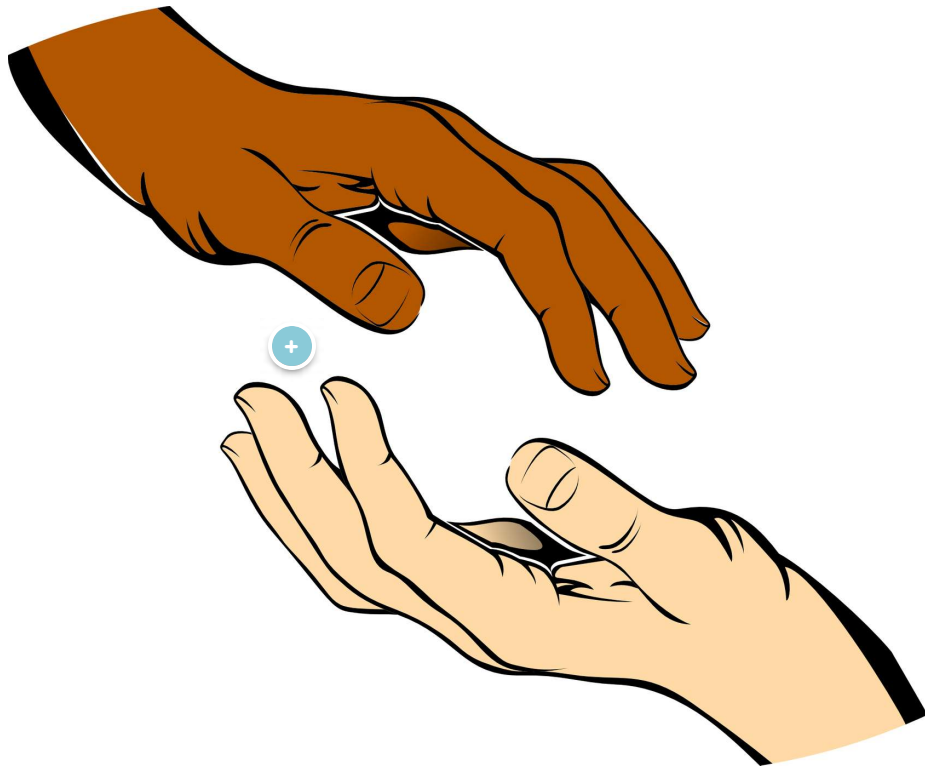
## 7. importance of mutuality

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Let's take a moment to explore in more detail the concept of mutuality. What do we mean by mutuality in peer support?

Click the buttons on the image below to explore this concept more thoroughly.

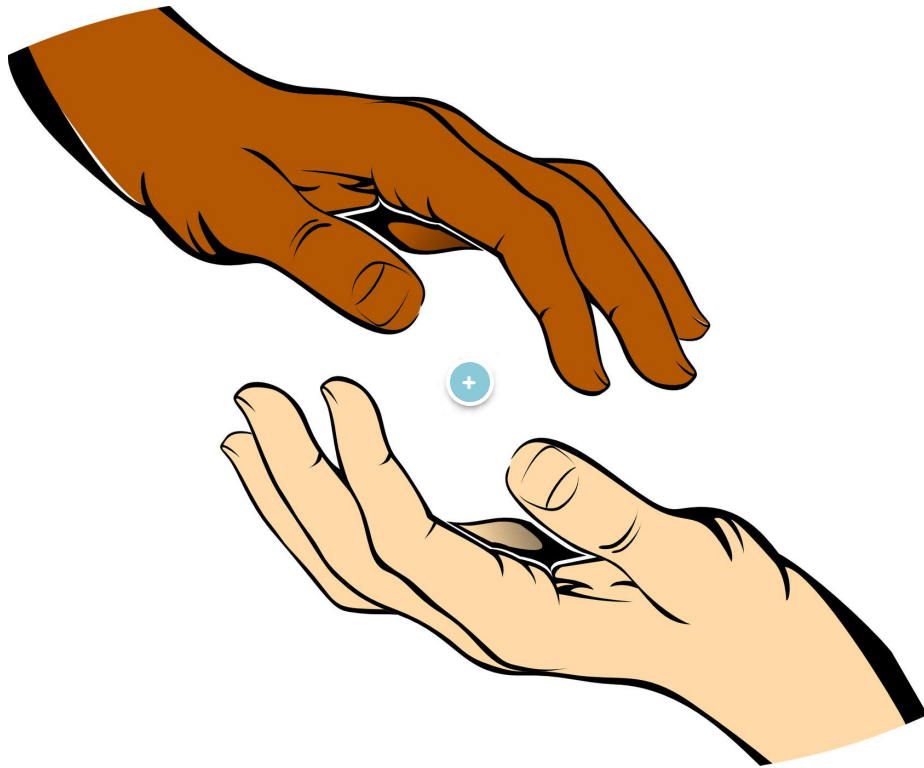




## Reciprocity

**Mutuality is reciprocal.**

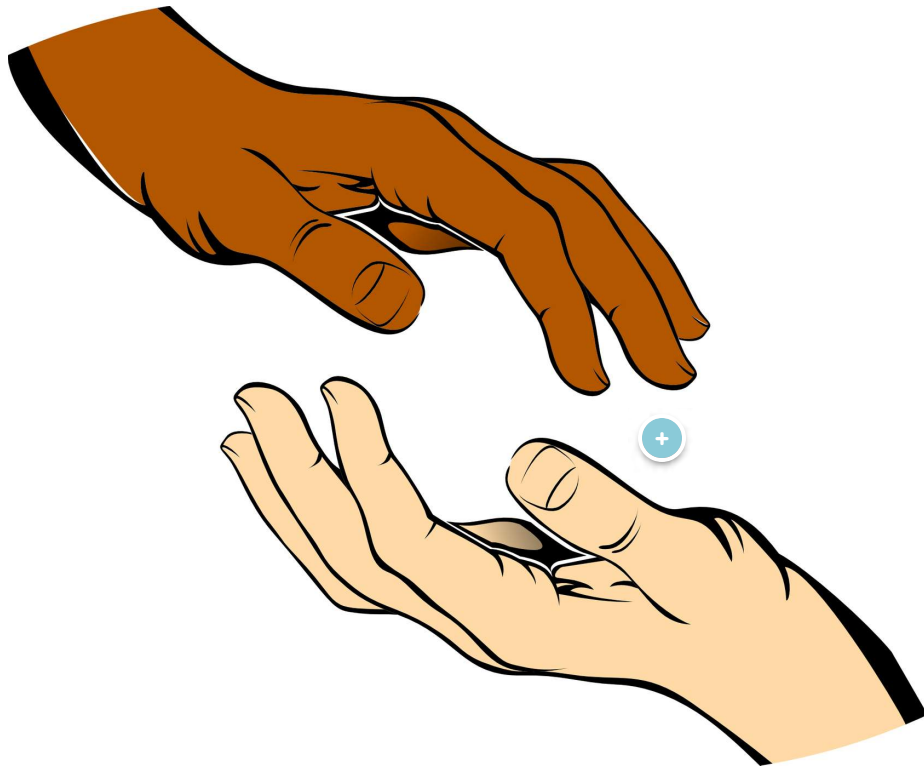
Mutuality means we are walking *beside* someone rather than in front pulling or behind pushing them.



## Give and Take

**Mutuality means that there is give and take in the relationship.**

Healthy relationships require both parties to *receive* and to *give*. The same is true in a peer support environment; creating space for someone to give is an important part of peer support. If the relationship loses balance, if it becomes one-sided, the opportunity for personal growth is lost.



## Learning

### **Mutuality means that both people are learning.**

In a peer support environment, no one has to have it all figured out. Blips and dips are a part of life, and it's ok. Living life means *learning* along the way.

While peer support is based on mutuality, there can still be a power differential in the relationship. The peer support worker must actively work to create mutuality and equality while honouring boundaries and deeply respecting the well-being of the recipient of the services.

## 8. check your understanding

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Let's review some concepts from this section through an informal knowledge check. Feel free to go back and review the previous lessons if necessary.

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*Question*

01/04

Which sentence best explains peer support?

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- [a] A process by which friends help each other
- [b] A source of financial support given to your friends
- [c] A relationship of mutual support where people with similar life experiences offer each other support, especially when they move through difficult or challenging experiences
- [d] A network of equals who help each other advance

*Question*

02/04

Which of the following values are key to a system of peer support: (choose all that apply)

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- [a] All healthy relationships are mutual and reciprocal
- [b] Curiosity supports growth and learning
- [c] All people need to feel part of a community
- [d] All people deserve to be acknowledged for who they are

*Question*

03/04

What is the best description of a peer support worker?

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- [a] Someone with lived experience who works with peers
- [b] Someone who has been homeless
- [c] Someone who has a family member with mental health issues
- [d] A person with lived experience with substance use, addiction, mental health or trauma issue who is able to have a mutually supportive relationship with someone struggling with a similar issue

*Question*

04/04

Which relationship best demonstrates mutuality?

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- Teacher/student
- Expert/novice
- Friend/friend
- Mother/son

## 9. how are peer support services used?

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Peer supports are embedded in community-based mental health and substance use services, clinical settings, as well as harm reduction and recovery-oriented organizations. Sometimes peer supports are stand-alone and are not connected to formal mental health/substance use organizations.

Peer Support services can range from casual/volunteer to those that are more formalized and integrated with clinical teams. The demographic where peer support services are used will determine the level of formality of the program. For example, in schools or in post-secondary, it could take a more casual, volunteer approach to the delivery of peer services. Other settings will likely require a more formalized paid approach to service delivery.

Peer support roles are many and diverse. B.C. has seen peer support show up in both mental health and substance use settings, but many demographics and populations benefit from peer support services. Other examples of where peer support services are used include:

- High schools
- Post-secondary schools
- Workplaces
- First responder groups

## 10. what value do peer support services bring?

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When someone is struggling with a mental health or substance use issue, connecting with another person who has navigated similar issues is essential.<sup>1</sup> Peer support can

- Moderate the effects of life-challenging events<sup>2</sup>
- Be an effective prevention strategy, and provide a sense of empowerment<sup>3,4,5</sup>
- Help a person gain control over their symptoms<sup>6</sup>
- Help mitigate effects of structural violence
- Reduce hospitalization and keep service users connected to care<sup>6</sup>
- Offer social support<sup>6</sup>
- Improve quality of life<sup>6</sup>

The information and empowerment a peer support worker provides can help a person better navigate the potentially complex systems and other forms of help available.

Peer support workers provide a sense of empathy and connectedness. Most importantly, they provide hope – hope in the possibility of a recovery that includes health, wellbeing and resilience.

<sup>1</sup> Creamer et al (2012). Guidelines for Peer Support in High-Risk Organizations: An International Consensus Study Using the Delphi Method. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25. pp. 134–141.

<sup>2</sup> Figley, C.R. & Nash, W.P. (2007). Introduction: For those who bear the battle. In C.R. Figley & W.P. Nash (Eds.) + *Combat Stress Injury Theory, Research, and Management*, pp. 1–10. New York: Routledge Psychosocial Stress Book Series.

<sup>3</sup> Corrigan, P.W. (2006). *The impact of consumer-operated services on the empowerment and recovery of people with psychiatric disabilities*. *Psychiatric Services*, 57. pp. 1493–1496.

<sup>4</sup> Dumont, J.M. & Jones, K. (2002). *Findings from a consumer/survivor defined alternative to psychiatric hospitalization*. *Outlook*. pp. 4–6

<sup>5</sup> Resnick, Sandra G. and Roseheck, Robert A. (2008). Integrating Peer-Provided Services: A Quasi-experimental Study of Recovery Orientation, Confidence, and Empowerment. *Psychiatric Services*. DOI: 10.1176/appi.ps.59.11.1307.

<sup>6</sup> Ochocka, J., Nelson, G., Janzen, R., and Trainor, J. (2006). A longitudinal study of mental health consumer/survivor initiatives: Part III – A qualitative study of impacts on new members. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 34. pp. 273–283.

# 11. scope of peer support

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Peer support services are relationship-based. They are about mutuality, sharing and connection.

It's imperative for organizations that run peer support services to understand the unique nature of peer support. If peer support is treated the same as clinical services, the uniqueness that peer support brings to the table can be lost.

The goal of peer support relationships is to use the power of connection to expand hope and move towards a greater sense of wholeness. What the peer and peer support worker do together can vary greatly; each person is met exactly where they are.

When the goal of the relationship is connection, it doesn't really matter what people choose to do together. Activities can include:

- Working towards self-identified goals
- Attending classes
- Getting outside
- Participating in community events

It's also important to understand that peer support is not to be confused with other types of services. Read the cards below, and remember to click the card to read the backside as well.

Peer support workers are different from community support workers

They may provide support with errands and tasks at times when needed, but that is not the purpose of the relationship.

1 of 3

Peer support workers are more than advocates

Peers model self-reliance to service users to guide them toward advocating for themselves.

Peer support workers listen.

They support their peer to identify their goals and

desires and to support them in

2 of 3

Peer support services are different from peer-delivered services

**Peer support workers** are people with lived experience

who receive training to provide support to others who are dealing with mental health and substance use issues. *Training is an*

3 of 3

## **fluidity**

Finally, if peer support workers are tasked beyond the level of mutuality and support, there is a risk of losing the time and flexibility needed to build successful relationships. The task of relationship building cannot be itemized too specifically. There needs to be room for spontaneity. For this reason, it's recommended that the scope of peer support work be kept loose and fluid.

## 12. a note about recovery

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Recovery is a word that is used frequently in mental health and substance use settings. It is a word that can bring up positive or negative feelings for people.

Recovery-oriented organizations recognize that recovery is a process, not an end goal. It is not about getting to a mythical finish line, but rather the process of growth.

Like anyone in recovery, peer support workers will be on a spectrum and should be supported wherever they are. Regardless of their recovery status, they bring with them a rich experience that deepens their ability to connect with those they walk beside. This is what lived – and living – experience means. Recovery isn't dependent on the absence of using substances. People can use substances and be engaged in recovery.

*Also, people can use substances and still provide peer support services.*

The foundation of peer support rests on the belief that recovery is possible for all. Click the buttons below to better understand some concepts related to the recovery process.

### Harm Reduction

- A harm reduction approach means recovery isn't dependent on the absence of using substances. **This is true for both peers and peer support workers.**

## Life's Curves

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- Life doesn't always move in a forward-moving trajectory. It's full of curves and unexpected turns. Setbacks are a very normal part of the recovery process. If setbacks are normalized, they can be seen as powerful opportunities for learning, growth, introspection and self-awareness. **This is true for both peers and peer support workers.**

## Recovery

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- Recovery is a transformative, self-directed exploration. It's an opportunity for discovery – to see what may not have been visible before. It also is a chance for resurfacing and developing hope, self-determination, resilience, purpose, presence and belonging. It's the revelation of a new sense of being in the world. **This is true for peers and peer support workers.**

## Self-determination

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Each person's journey is centred in self-determination because there are multiple different paths a person can take. When we listen to our inner wisdom – that force that guides our self-determination – we can figure out what is best for ourselves. **This is true for peers and peer support workers.**

## Strength-based

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- Peer support takes a strength-based approach to service delivery, so rather than reacting or responding to the effects of the struggle – or the lapses away from abstinence – the approach is to see services as the opportunity to create a new paradigm that is built on hope, connection, joy, and thriving. **This is true for peers and peer support workers.**

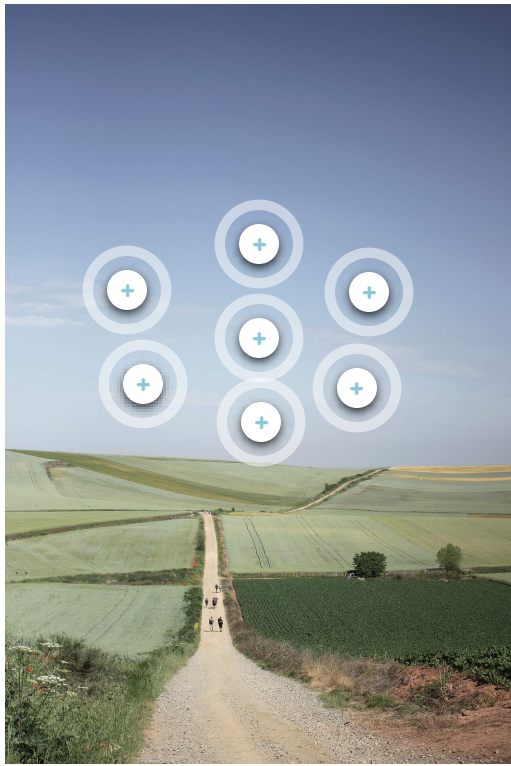
## Varied Approaches

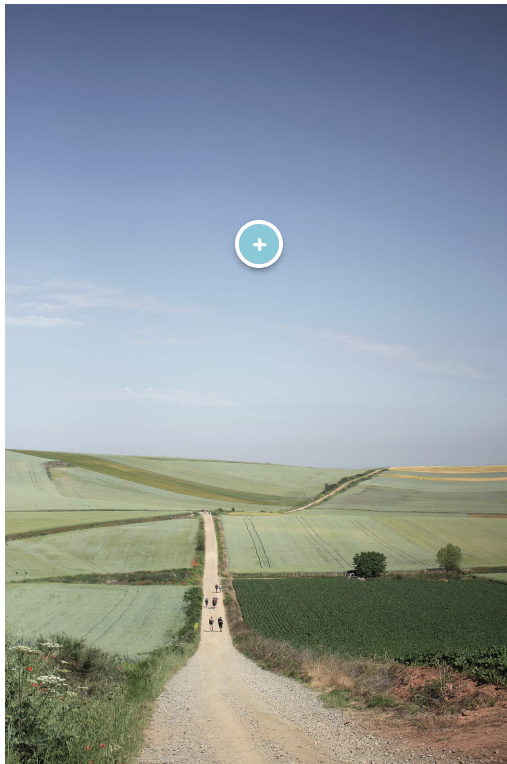
- An abstinence approach may work for some people, but it doesn't work for others. It sets a very narrow path that can seem impossible. This means other approaches must be explored. **This is true for peers and peer support workers.**

As has been mentioned previously, a system that embraces recovery sees the people they serve as whole people and chooses not to define people by their illnesses, struggles or substance use issues. **This is true for peers and peer support workers.**

Below is a graphic to show the non-linear nature of recovery. Recovery isn't a destination. It's an explorative voyage.

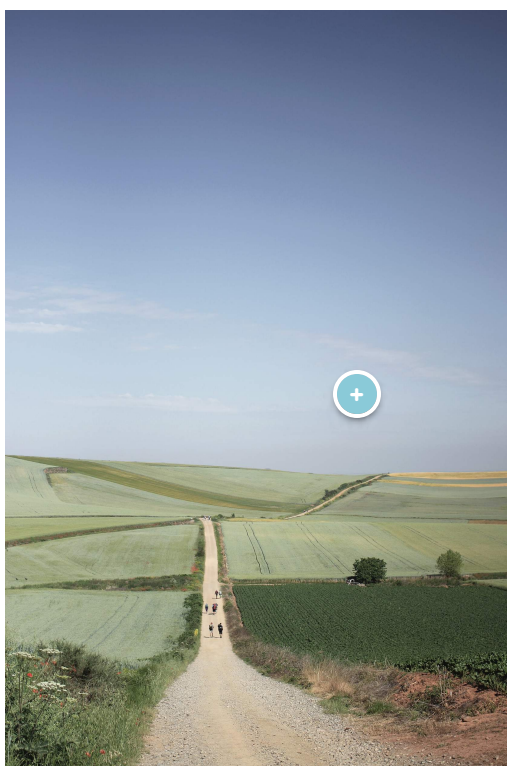
**recovery is the process of building...**





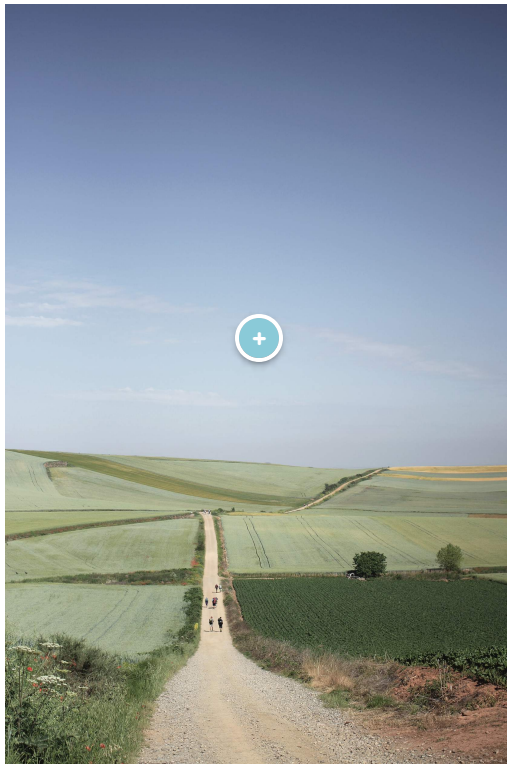
## Self-determination & Personal Responsibility

I am taking every opportunity to steer my own life.



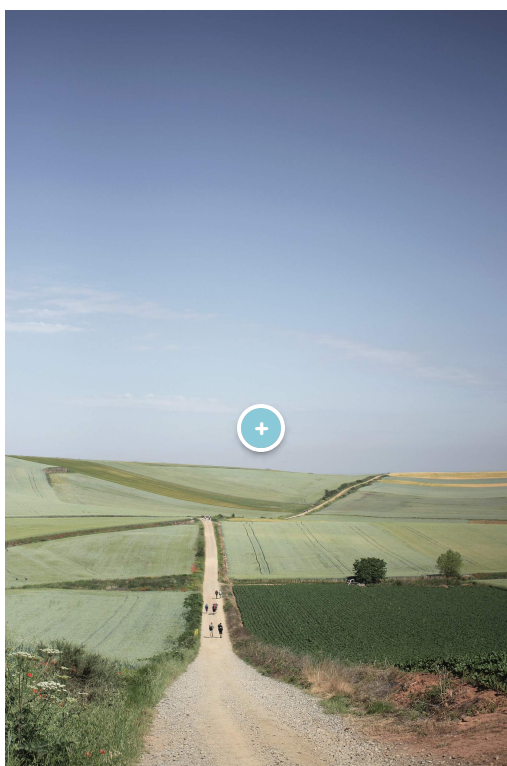
## Hope

I am working to believe that there is possibility even in uncertainty. I know that hope is a very courageous act, and it's ok if I don't always feel hopeful.



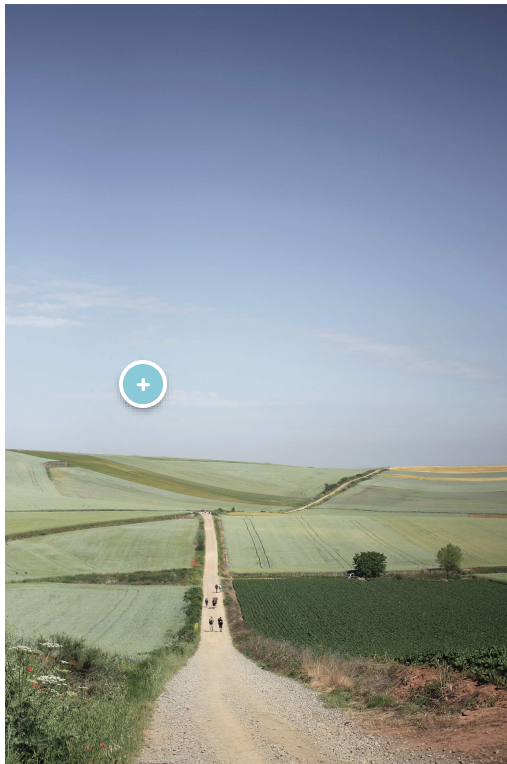
## Resilience

I know I can do hard things. As I get through tough times, my strengths become more visible.



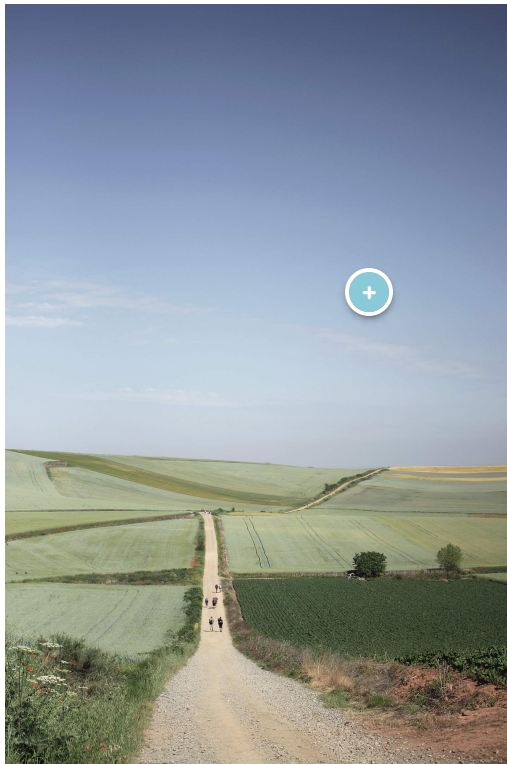
## A Sense of Who I Am

I am working to see all of myself – the strengths and developing bits – and I choose to offer self-kindness.



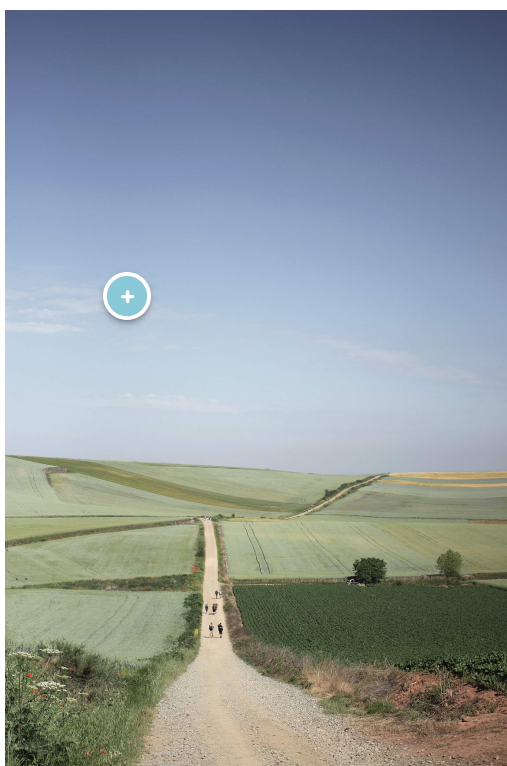
## Connection

I understand that relationships and belonging are important for my well-being. I am working on creating community.



## Meaning & Purpose

I get to figure out what is meaningful to me and pursue it.



## **An Awareness of My Humanity**

I am not perfect and that's ok. I am learning to be more aware of my emotions & feelings, stressors, boundaries and limitations.

## 13. check your understanding

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Let's review some concepts from this section with an informal knowledge check. Feel free to go back and review the previous lessons if necessary.

---

*Question*

01/04

In what types of spaces are peer support services used? (choose all that apply)

---

- [a] Post-secondary institutions
- [b] Overdose prevention settings
- [c] Recovery-oriented mental health and substance use organizations
- [d] Child, youth and family services
- [e] Hospital emergency departments

*Question*

02/04

In which instances would peer support services be useful? (check all that apply)

---

- [a] To provide social support for someone navigating their mental health concerns
- [b] To help someone gain control and stability in their substance use
- [c] To improve the quality of life for a person experiencing homelessness
- [d] To identify strategies in supporting someone at risk of an opioid overdose
- [e] To help identify resources for someone experiencing institutional and systemic oppression

*Question*

03/04

Which is the better approach when providing a scope for peer support workers?

---

- [a] Keep the scope of the job flexible and accommodating
  
- [b] Make the scope very specific and narrow

*Question*

04/04

What best characterizes the idea of recovery?

---

- [a] Recovery means instant abstinence
- [b] Recovery is person-centred, individualized and a journey, not an end point
- [c] Abstinence never works
- [d] Peer support workers can't support others and be in recovery at the same time

## 14. what is peer engagement?

---

This course was created through peer engagement: dozens of peers were asked to contribute at different stages of the process. Without their involvement, its wisdom would ring hollow. It would lack the knowledge and insights that come from actually experiencing something. It would be mere speculation.

[POTENTIAL PEER QUOTE]

Effective peer support worker engagement by the provider results in the active participation of people with past or present lived experience of drug use, substance use or mental health challenges in research, programming and policy settings. The principle behind peer engagement is that people who have experienced something should have a voice in shaping policies and interventions that affect their lives.<sup>1</sup> Peers have deep insights into answers because they have knowledge and understanding that non-peers can't receive from formal training or post-secondary degrees. Examples of peer work include research partners, assistants and advisors; outreach and harm reduction workers; partners in policymaking; educators; mentors; service providers; and program directors, coordinators and assistants.

Engaging with peer workers is at the heart of harm reduction. Given that peers are the experts, they provide valuable insights about the experience of accessing harm reduction services in their communities.<sup>2</sup> It's important to acknowledge that much of what we know of as harm reduction is built on the knowledge and lived experiences of pioneers in the sex worker, LGBTQ+ and drug user communities. This expertise is essential to better understand local risk environments.

Therefore, the importance of engaging peers in this work can't be overstated. Lives depend on it.

<sup>1</sup>“Nothing About Us Without Us” Greater, Meaningful Involvement of People Who Use Illegal Drugs: A Public Health, Ethical, and Human Rights Imperative [Internet]. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network; 2006 Mar. Available from: <http://www.aidslaw.ca/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Greater+Involvement+-+Bklt+-+Drug+Policy+-+ENG.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Lazarus, L., Shaw A., LeBlanc, S., Martin, A., Marshall, I Z., Weersink, K., et al. Establishing a community-based participatory research partnership among people who use drugs in Ottawa: the PROUD cohort study. Harm Reduct J. 2014;11:26.

# 15. the ladder of engagement

---

What does peer engagement look like? And how do you assess the level of engagement that’s happening in your organization – or that you would like to happen in your organization?

The charts below show there are four main incremental steps – inform, consult, involve, collaborate – before arriving at the most meaningful level of engagement, empowerment. By reflecting on these steps, you can determine your organization’s desired level of peer engagement and what needs to happen to change it.

Click the tabs below to read more.

## INFORM

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	
<p>The goal of this stage is to translate balanced and objective information to the community using language and a method that makes sense to them. It also means to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	
------	---------	------	---------	--

The promise here is: We will keep peers informed in a way that makes sense to the community.

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>At this stage, peers make up an audience for presented decisions.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>An example of this step on the ladder of engagement would be to present a regional overdose prevention strategy to peers at a syringe access program.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>Peers are leaders of decisions.</p> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b> Empower peers to develop the overdose prevention strategy themselves and implement that initiative.</p>				

# CONSULT

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>The goal of this stage is to obtain feedback from peers on harm reduction programming, policies and decisions, including alternatives and analyses of those initiatives.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>The promise in this step is: We will seek your feedback on harm reduction initiatives. We will keep peers informed, listen to and acknowledge their concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how peer input influenced the decision.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>At this stage, peers provide feedback after decisions are made.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	
<p>An example of this step on the ladder of engagement would be to receive feedback from peers on the feasibility and uptake of an overdose prevention strategy that has already been developed.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	
<p>Peers are leaders of decisions.</p> <p>EXAMPLE: Empower peers to develop the overdose prevention strategy themselves and implement that initiative.</p>				

**INVOLVE**

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	
<p>The goal of this stage is to work directly with peers throughout decision-making processes to ensure that the community’s concerns and aspirations are understood and considered.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>The promise to peers at this stage is: We will work with peers to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the initiatives and provide feedback to peers and the community as to how their input influenced the decision.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>At this stage, peers provide feedback before decisions are made.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>An example of this step on the ladder of engagement would be to consult with peers before an overdose strategy is developed; use knowledge from peers to develop the overdose prevention strategy.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	
<p>Peers are leaders of decisions.</p> <p>EXAMPLE: Empower peers to develop the overdose prevention strategy themselves and implement that initiative.</p>				

## COLLABORATE

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	
<p>The goal of this stage is to establish equal partnership with peers in all aspects of decision making, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	
<p>The promise of this step is: We will work with peers to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
At this stage, peers are equal partners in decisions.				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
An example of this step on the ladder of engagement would be to partner with peers in developing the overdose strategy with them – from beginning to end.				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
Peers are leaders of decisions.				
EXAMPLE: Empower peers to develop the overdose prevention strategy themselves and implement that initiative.				

# EMPOWER

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>The goal of this stage is to place the final decision about harm reduction initiatives in the hands of peers.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>The promise of this step is: We will implement what the peers decide.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>At this stage, peers are leaders of decisions.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE	E
<p>An example of this step on the ladder of engagement would be to empower peers to develop the overdose prevention strategy themselves and implement that initiative.</p>				

GOAL	PROMISE	ROLE	EXAMPLE
<p>Peers are leaders of decisions.</p> <p>EXAMPLE: Empower peers to develop the overdose prevention strategy themselves and implement that initiative.</p>			

Source: [Peer Engagement Principles and Best Practices, A Guide for BC Health Authorities and Other Providers, written in Partnership with Peers and Providers](#), BC Centre for Disease Control, Harm Reduction Program, January 1, 2018.

## 16. a word about the term peer engagement

---

As was mentioned in the previous lessons of this section, the term peer engagement is used in this course to refer to the idea of employers engaging peers.

It's worth noting that, in the world of harm reduction, peer-led organizations often use the term peer engagement in a slightly different way. In such cases, peers are the ones engaging others and aren't the ones being engaged.

For some, these two uses of peer engagement may never cause confusion. But for those who cross between the worlds of employer and peer-led services, this explanation may help to avoid potential misunderstandings.

## 17. check your understanding

---

Let's review some concepts from this section with an informal knowledge check. Feel free to go back and review the previous lessons if necessary.

---

Question

01/01

Drag the engagement level on the left with a description on the right that best matches it.

≡ Involve	Peers make up an audience for presented decisions
≡ Inform	Peers provide feedback after decisions are made
≡ Collaborate	Peers provide feedback before decisions are made
≡ Empower	Peers are equal partners in decisions
≡ Consult	Peers are leaders of decisions

# 18. ways to empower peer support workers

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There are many ways to empower peer support workers toward greater levels of engagement.

## Peer Networks

Peer networks operate as both formal and informal health information sharing systems. Peer networks can be beneficial because people who have mental health, addiction or substance use issues often mistrust health care and service providers. Instead, they are more inclined to see others who have similar challenges as the most reliable and knowledgeable sources of information. As such, peer networks promote engagement because they create a sense of community and solidarity, build peers' capacity, and give people the opportunity to discuss and act on issues that matter most to them.

## Clear Expectations

When expectations are clear from the beginning of a project, a mutual understanding is set that helps prevent potential conflicts. Clear expectations increase transparency and foster trust between the employer and peers. These expectations should be set verbally and in writing and include the scope of the project, how peers and providers will contribute to decisions, as well as clarity around communication, leadership, training, support, compensation and confidentiality issues. This step helps create healthy and clear boundaries between providers and peers.

## Compensation

Compensation approaches for peers will vary from person to person. Regardless, setting up compensation early on is important in order to establish expectations, overcome bureaucratic hurdles and prevent delays in payment. Wisdom and experience have shown that peers should be compensated for the entirety of their engagement process. They should not be expected to volunteer their time.

Compensation should be fair and consistent. Inadequate pay can create tension and lead to resentment and misunderstandings about power dynamics.

Payment procedures can be complicated and will require thoughtful communication with the peers themselves. Issues to consider include:

- Options for payment in cash or cheque
- Financial institution barriers
- Income assistance/disability
- Employment earnings exemptions
- Compensating expenses (such as telephone, travel)

The [BCCDC Paying Peers Guide](#) is a good place to begin when exploring this issue.

## Objectives for Engagement

In order to establish a collective vision before a project begins, expectations of its scope should be clearly outlined and understood. The goals and strategies should be discussed and any questions or concerns should be addressed early on, especially related to its engagement process. Defining the project scope together develops rapport and trust and provides an opportunity to address the needs of peers.

Some projects will require one-time engagement opportunities, while others will be an ongoing process and project. Longer term engagement opportunities are beneficial in that they develop relationships and trust between providers and peers, as well as capacity among peers. “One-off” engagement opportunities are not recommended and can be seen as “tokenistic” engagement.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Arnstein, S.R. A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. J Am Inst Plann. 1969 Jul 1;35(4):216–24.

## Training and Capacity Building

Engagement is higher when peers and other team members are given the chance to develop capacity – the skills, abilities and knowledge they need to thrive. Building capacity sets peers and other team members up for success in the future. It can also take a strengths-based approach, in which the strengths each peer brings to the group are identified, encouraged and developed.

## Supports

Engaging peers and other professionals in policy, practice and research can sometimes evoke emotionally charged topics that may bring up experiences of stigma and discrimination. The stories and language used at the table could also change power dynamics and feelings of exclusion.

### **Mental/Emotional Supports**

To best mitigate the potential for emotional turmoil, providers should check in with peers regularly to see how they are doing professionally and personally. Some support could be set up in advance, such as regular debriefing sessions to help resolve any unresolved issues that came up in the course of the day.

### **Substance Use Support**

In projects where there are many peers at the table, peers will be at different points in their drug use, ranging from full use to abstinent. Any of these peers may find it difficult or triggering to interact with one another, so providers can play a role in creating a safe space for peers regardless of where they are at in their use.

Providers and peers can work together to develop a plan to respond to triggers. For example, a buddy system or check-in process can be used to debrief.

### **Financial Planning Support**

Financial strategies and other life skills training can be offered to help peers prepare for their new source of income. Possible ways to support financial planning include:

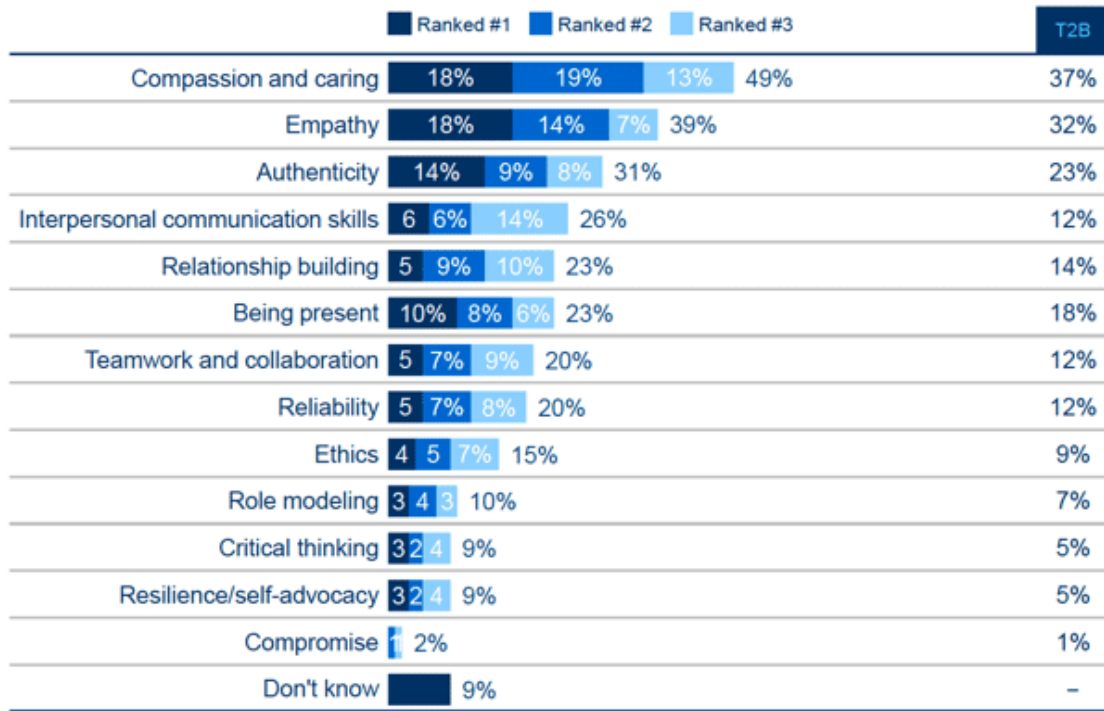
- Helping with bank accounts and budgeting
- Changing pay frequency (in other words, all at the end of the month or end of project)
- Making alternate payment arrangements when paying cash (for example, meeting and being paid at the bank so they do not have to carry around a large sum of cash)

As always, direct consultations with peers is the best way to determine possible solutions for providing support.

## 19. values of peer support workers

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To better engage peer support workers, it's useful to understand what they see as the most important values or attributes for peer support workers to have.



As you can see from the chart, which is based on a study commissioned by BCcampus, compassion and caring stand out as the most important value or attribute for those who work in peer support, followed by empathy.

Three people in ten rank authenticity as one of the most important attributes, while one-quarter include interpersonal communication skills, relationship building and being present in their top three.

## 20. empowerment through language

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Peer support uses person-first language. Person-first language is about acknowledging every person as having intrinsic value. Person-first language avoids defining someone by a diagnosis or challenge they are experiencing. When we don't choose person-first language we are, perhaps unintentionally, supporting stigma.

Language has power. The words we choose can actually contribute greatly towards creating the realities where we live. When we think of life in those terms, using person-first language is of utmost importance.

Consider the chart below:

# Language matters...



## 4 guidelines to using non-stigmatizing language

### 1 Use People-first language



Person who uses opioids

vs.

Opioid user OR Addict



### 2 Use language that reflects the medical nature of substance use disorders



Person experiencing problems with substance use

vs.

Abuser OR Junkie



### 3 Use language that promotes recovery



Person experiencing barriers to accessing services

vs.

Unmotivated OR Non-compliant



### 4 Avoid slang and idioms



Positive test results OR Negative test results

vs.

Dirty test results OR Clean test results



VISIT [towardtheheart.com](http://towardtheheart.com) FOR MORE INFORMATION



CREATED BY BCCDC HARM REDUCTION TEAM

Adapted from Broyles et al. Confronting Inadvertent Stigma and Pejorative Language in Addiction Scholarship: A Recognition and Response. Substance Abuse 2014



BC Centre for Disease Control  
An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

Last Updated: December 6th 2017



Refer to a person before describing his or her behaviour or condition. Say: “Person with a cocaine-use disorder” instead of “cocaine user” or “addict.”



Avoid terms that reinforce a belief that addiction is a failure of morals or personality, rather than a medical issue. Say: “Addictive disease” and “substance use disorder” instead of “abuser” or “junkie.”



Use language that promotes recovery. This means healthcare professionals should use language that conveys optimism and supports recovery, and respects the person’s autonomy. Say “Opted not to” and “not in agreement with the treatment plan” instead of “unmotivated” or “non-compliant.”



Avoid slang and idioms. Slang terms and idioms have negative connotations and a significant level of stigma attached to them. Say: “Positive” or “negative” when referring to drug tests, instead of “dirty” or “clean.”

CONTINUE

This video continues our exploration of the theme of person-first language.

## 21. more ways to empower peer support workers

---

Let's review some additional recommendations for peer engagement and consultation. Click each title in the list below for more information.

### **Adopt a set of Values and Principles** —

Acknowledge that traumas have been generated by well-intended initiatives. Adopt values and underpinning principles that hold your project accountable.

### **Reflect on Your Own Processes** —

Reflection is uncomfortable, but necessary. Examine the policies and procedures within your program and identify areas in need of change.

### **Review the Literature** —

Peers have paved the way in developing engagement & consultation recommendations – extend beyond scientific databases and seek out publications by people with lived/living experience.

---

**Pay Peers** —

For small asks. For big asks. Always pay people with lived/living experience for their contributions. Follow provincial peer payment guidelines.

---

**Challenge Power Structures** —

Create opportunities for peers to lead project deliverables. Support peers to take on co-chair roles, and above all else, trust their experience. Know that consultation is still tokenizing behaviour.

---

**Options...for Everything** —

Wherever possible, ask peers what works best for them. Then individualize your process to accommodate those needs and wants.

---

**Be Iterative. Be Flexible. Be Humble.** —

You are not the expert. You will be wrong. That is ok, provided you can adapt to feedback. Do not invite peers to your project if you do not intend to act on their feedback. Value lived experience.

---

**Seek Diversity**

Be direct with your intentions. Under-represented communities should be prioritized, and barriers to their involvement should be addressed accordingly.

### **Process Over Outcomes**

Understand that your outcomes are null and void if your process is harmful, tokenizing or oppressive.

### **Meet People Where They Are At**

Literally and figuratively. Seek opportunities to learn about other programs and organizations. Invest in their work as much as you would like them to invest in your work.

SOURCE: *Recommendations For Peer Engagement & Consultation: Lessons from the Provincial Peer Training Project*, BCcampus.

## 22. check your understanding

---

Let's review some concepts from this section with an informal knowledge check. Feel free to go back and review the previous lessons if necessary.

---

*Question*

01/08

You need the help of a peer support worker to perform a service. Your budget isn't large, but you do have money that could be used to pay the person. What should you do?

---

- [a] Encourage the person to volunteer out of the goodness of their heart
- [b] Offer to pay the person a small amount
- [c] Always compensate the person with what you, the employer, consider to be a fair wage
- [d] Discuss payment with the person and come to a mutual agreement

*Question*

02/08

An organization has decided to hire a group of peers for the first time to help with a policy consultation. In the process of interviewing peers, they ask questions that bring up stigma issues with some of the peers. They also have a series of disagreements with peers about payment amounts, which causes much grief and embarrassment for the peers involved. Nevertheless, the project is ultimately fruitful because the peer support workers provide great input. According to peer support values, was this project a success?

---

NO

YES

*Question*

03/08

A peer support worker has been engaged for a short-term project. At the end of the project, the peer support worker is given a gift card for the grocery store for their services, but the peer support worker is upset because they expected a cash payment instead. How could this problem have been avoided? (choose the best answer)

---

- [a] There is no problem. The peer support worker has been paid
- [b] Payment arrangements should have been discussed up front
- [c] A cheque should have been the method of payment
- [d] Cash should have been given

*Question*

04/08

In the course of a project, the peer support worker misses a day of work without calling in. It turns out the previous day's discussions had triggered the worker and they needed time to recuperate. What might be the best way to engage the worker to avoid this problem. (choose the best answer)

---

- Chastise the worker so they understand the consequences of their actions
- Replace them with someone new
- Put a buddy system in place for debriefing at the end of every day
- Punish them by not paying for the day they missed

*Question*

05/08

A long-term peer support worker who is very reliable and well-intentioned is feeling overwhelmed by their situation. They don't feel they have the skills needed to handle some new problems that have arisen. What would be the best solution?

---

- Offer to send them to a workshop for additional training
- Tell them to keep trying; experience is the best teacher
- Hire someone else to do the job properly
- Give them a book to read

*Question*

06/08

According to a survey of peer workers, \_\_\_\_\_ and caring are the most important values for those who work in peer support.

---

Type your answer here

---

*Question*

07/08

Which of the following is non-stigmatizing language?

---

- Person who uses substances or person who uses drugs (PWUD)
- Junkie
- Addict
- Substance user

*Question*

08/08

Which of the following would be the most empowering way to describe someone?

---

- Non-compliant
- Person experiencing barriers to accessing services

## **23. barriers that hinder peer practice, satisfaction & engagement**

---

Despite good intentions, barriers often emerge to hinder peer practice, satisfaction or engagement. Click through the following slides to read more.

Barriers exist for peers to participate in engagement opportunities. It's critical for those who are about to engage with peers to consider these barriers and to take steps to remove them.

## Childcare

BARRIER: Responsibilities to children may prevent peers from giving their full attention at meetings.

SOLUTIONS:

- Arrange childcare
- Offer compensation for childcare
- Allow the child to be present (if topics being covered are appropriate)

## Literacy

**BARRIER:** Peers may not be able to read or understand materials developed for providers. It may be stigmatizing or difficult to disclose a low reading comprehension or learning disability or to assume that an individual has a disability.

**SOLUTIONS:**

- Give peers materials days or weeks in advance so they have the opportunity to review and reflect on the material.
- Developing trust and facilitating discussion about literacy early on in the engagement process is important.
- Peer mentors can develop materials that are accessible to other peers by using non-technical words and by clearly defining all acronyms, which can be placed on flip charts or in a glossary in meetings and reports.
- Create an environment in the group that gives permission to ask word meanings and acronyms.
- Peers reviews of the documents and presentations used should ensure the language is accessible to the community.

## Communication

BARRIER: Peers may not have access to telephone, computers or email.

SOLUTION:

- If peers do not have access to email, computers or telephone, providers can mail hard copies of materials to peers, or work with local agencies to provide access to telephone or Internet on a weekly basis.

## Location

**BARRIER:** Meetings are most often held at governmental organizations and other agencies and some peers have never been in these spaces and so may not know how to find the building, office or room itself.

**SOLUTIONS:**

- Providers must arrange and pay for travel, particularly for out-of-town peers, and meet peers in the lobby or off-site before the meeting.
- Other peers can help mentor those who are new to an environment.

**BARRIER:** Urban centres can be triggering for peers.

**SOLUTIONS:**

- Discuss possible solutions with peers, including possible support options.
- Find other locations to hold the meeting, away from urban centres.

## Travel

**BARRIER:** Engagement opportunities may happen away from peers' local areas, posing a range of challenges.

### SOLUTIONS:

- Discuss with each individual peer what mode of travel they are most comfortable with and try to accommodate peers if they are uncomfortable with certain modes of travel or have physical disabilities that may make their attendance challenging.
- Ensure peers hold legal identification (for example, a driver's license) required for air travel.
- Meet peers at the airport or hotel and accompany them to the meeting to help keep meeting times on schedule.
- Reimbursement for expenses may be an issue for some peers. Arrange for peers to receive cash travel-related payments in advance, then request a receipt. Misunderstandings and lack of expectations for payment of travel can be stigmatizing and develop unbalanced power relationships between peers and providers.
- Set expectations for travel expenses and reimbursement procedures well in advance of the meeting.

## Substance Use

**BARRIER:** Engaging peers involves working with people who use or have used illicit substances. Peers who face opioid or other substance withdrawal symptoms will not be able to be fully present or contribute to the meeting – undermining the goals of engagement altogether.

### SOLUTIONS:

- Providers should have available sterile supplies and arrange for a local peer or peer-based organization to consult with out-of-town peers on where and how to use more safely.
- For peers who are staying alone in a hotel room, providers, peers or peer mentors can develop a drug use plan, especially if peers are using drugs from a new city or source (dealer).
- Carry dosages (carries) may need to be arranged well before the meeting.
- Peers may need to pick up their medication the morning of the meeting, which may require a later meeting start time.
- Information on supervised consumption sites or overdose prevention sites should be made available. Transportation to and from these sites may be offered.

## Peer Substance Navigators

**BARRIER:** For out-of-town peers, it may be dangerous to navigate the local drug use scene and find a source that they can trust or a place they can use safely.

**SOLUTION:**

- Peer navigators who are familiar with the local scene or who have relationships built with peer-based organizations can help out of town and other peers navigate the local drug use scene.

## Setting Ground Rules for Meetings

**BARRIER:** Lack of ground rules makes peers feel unsafe to discuss controversial issues.

**SOLUTIONS:**

- Meeting ground rules help create a safe space for peers and providers to engage openly and honestly.
- Generate a list of ground rules in one of the following ways:
  - Provide a list of ground rules (usually developed from previous meetings) for the group and ask whether they are agreeable.
  - Allow the group to generate the entire list.
  - Ask the group to come up with a list but prompt them toward particular rules that are often important to the success of engagement. This is generally the most effective approach.

Using a flip chart and developing the ground rules together makes for an opportunity to build a sense of cohesion with the group.

## Building a Work Plan

BARRIER: Uncertainty about how the work will proceed and last.

SOLUTIONS:

- Develop a work plan that outlines the overarching short-term and long-term goals. A work plan gives details about each activity for each objective over time. Work plans often answer these questions:<sup>1</sup>
  - What resources will you need?
  - What activities have you planned?
  - What is the timeline for each activity?
  - What is the product for each activity?
  - Who is responsible for the activity?
  - What is the result for each objective?

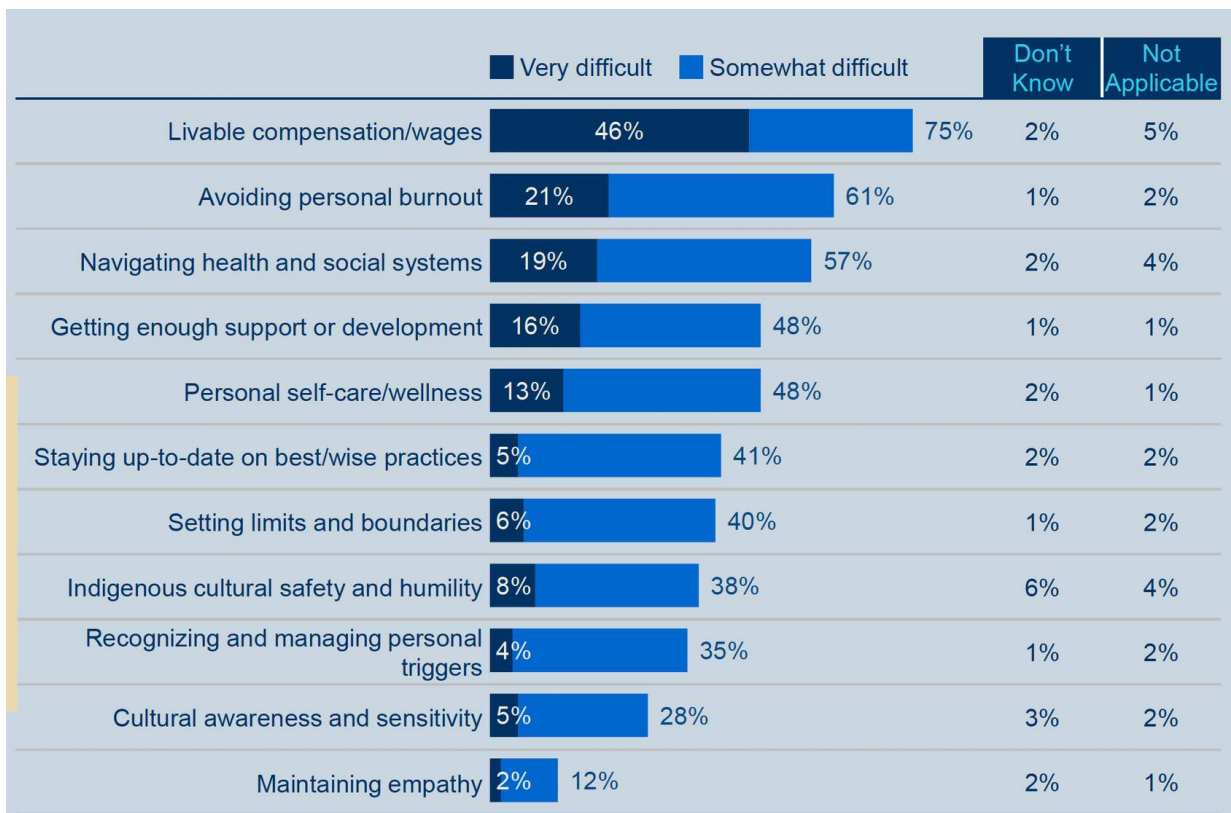
Keeping a clear and concise idea of the project scope, goals and where the team is at in reaching those goals can be paramount to the success of a peer engagement project.

<sup>1</sup>Tools for Community Building: A Guide for Helping People Plan Projects in their Community [Internet]. Nunavut Literacy Council; Available from: [http://www.ilitaqsiniq.ca/sites/default/files/files/tools\\_for\\_community\\_building.pdf](http://www.ilitaqsiniq.ca/sites/default/files/files/tools_for_community_building.pdf)

## 24. challenges as reported by peer support workers themselves

Despite the benefit of being able to positively impact the lives of others, peer support workers experience many challenges while performing their jobs.

BCcampus engaged a marketing firm to ask peer support workers directly the biggest challenges they face.



As you can see, living compensation or wages stands out as the greatest challenge for peer support workers, followed by avoiding personal burnout and navigating health and social systems.

Those with less than five years of experience are significantly more likely to find getting enough support or development and setting limits or boundaries challenging.

As providers, it can be helpful to see the answers to this question and ponder how you can help peer support workers avoid or overcome them.

## 25. peer support worker feedback: what do providers need to do

---

What do peer support workers indicate are real problems – and solutions – to their work? The following suggestions are based on conversations with several focus groups of peer support workers. They provide a glimpse into what's on their minds and what they'd like to see change.

CONTINUE

### What do providers need to do?

Use the full capacities of peer support workers (PSWs)

### What makes doing it difficult?

- PSWs aren't trusted
- PSW work isn't valued
- PSWs aren't seen as capable

## SOLUTIONS

- Give providers examples of successful PSWs
- Explain best practices of working with PSWs
- Include peers at the leadership table
- Perform regular performance reviews so PSWs can receive and give feedback
- Create an orientation for providers about PSWs

### **What do providers need to do?**

Create more jobs that are sustainable

### **What makes doing it difficult?**

- Lack of career path for PSWs
- Contractor status can limit the necessary benefits for PSWs

## SOLUTIONS

- See peer support work as a legitimate career path, and provide training/support to walk that path
- Clarify the skills/attributes necessary for PSW jobs
- Include PSWs on hiring teams to help develop job postings and expectations
- Explain to unions what PSWs are doing. Allow for more unionized peer roles
- Create pilot projects to gather evidence and foster potential change in career options
- Create fact sheets about current practices in hiring and supporting PSWs
- Enhance mentorship and supervision roles
- Structure advancement career trajectory for PSWs so there is clarity about long-term possibilities
- Remove the stigma of moving PSWs into other roles
- Change government regulation so they make exceptions for peer support workers using drugs and acknowledge the misconception that people using drugs are incompetent
- Get the employer to name the compromise needed to make someone hireable. Peer support workers often are left not knowing what they need to do to be hireable
- Fund PSWs to create their own job-related resources that support other peers

**What do providers need to do?**  
Pay equitably

**What makes doing it difficult?**

- PSWs are exposed to high levels of stress and the benefits offered don't always address those needs

## SOLUTIONS

- Design benefits for the specific needs of PSWs
- Dedicate more funds towards hiring PSWs
- Get peer payment exemptions to help fears of losing disability status
- Provide financial aid worker to advise PSWs on payment options
- Explain the history of PSWs being taken advantage of, especially regarding pay

**What do providers need to do?**  
Improve relationships with  
PSWs

### What makes doing it difficult?

- No experience in building relationships with PSWs
- No training provided for how to build relationships with PSWs

## SOLUTIONS

- Remember to do small things, like give praise or say thank you
- Respect the value of lived and living experience
- Treat PSWs as equals, not as children
- Put PSWs in leadership roles
- Listen to PSWs opinions
- Create safe feedback channels
- Support PSWs to do the work that is needed
- Provide training and education to administrators about PSWs
- Include PSWs in conversations about policy changes
- Treat PSWs as professionals who do meaningful work
- Treat PSWs as an integral part of the team
- Conduct regular surveys and reviews about PSWs' satisfaction levels
- Allow peers to share what they are comfortable sharing
- Recognize that people "show up" in different ways
- Research people with lived and living experience to increase understanding
- Listen to each PSW's authentic story. Everyone is different
- Recognize that not everyone will be willing to share their traumas

### What do providers need to do?

Acknowledge that lived and living experience is an expertise

### What makes doing it difficult?

- Stigma attached to PSW work, even when certification happens
- PSWs often have outsider status and aren't seen as

## SOLUTIONS

- Recognize that lived and living experience is equivalent to academic credentials
- Authorize more research to validate peer support work
- Contribute, collect and review data about use of PSWs in your organization
- Recognize that PSWs can move in and out of lived and living experience, and that this process only adds to their expertise
- Educate non-peer workers on the value of PSWs
- See the PSWs' strengths – for example, as a group of peers who have persevered in the face of adversity

### What do providers need to do?

Allow a place for collaboration  
with those who have lived or  
living experience

### What makes doing it difficult?

- Assumptions about  
PSWs' life experiences  
that discourage  
collaboration

## SOLUTIONS

- Create an infrastructure that includes those with lived and living experience at the decision-making table
- Include peers in leadership decisions
- Include PSWs in staff meetings, team meetings and informal social gatherings
- Give peers the opportunity to lead training sessions
- Create more training opportunities for people with lived and living experience
- Allow people with lived and living experience to lead research projects, not just be the subjects
- Adopt an attitude of working together for mutual benefit
- Encourage staff to advocate for PSWs when they aren't being treated fairly
- Take the ideas of PSWs seriously
- Regularly ask PSWs if they feel heard and included
- Create a culture that is collaborative, not punitive

### **What do providers need to do?**

Develop specialized on-boarding procedures for PSWs

### **What makes doing it difficult?**

- Providers aren't used to doing this and are more used to a "one size fits all" approach

## SOLUTIONS

- Take each person on a case-by-case basis. Everyone has different experience levels and may need specialized attention
- Adopt something like a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP). This helps each person identify when they are well and what they need to do to maintain wellness.
- Set clear boundaries of roles and expectations around self-care
- Don't make cultural assumptions about how people self-care
- Normalize a debriefing process as a means for maintaining healthy boundaries and defusing stress

**What do providers need to do?**  
Use appropriate language

### What makes doing it difficult?

- Ignorance of the power of language
- Bad habits

## SOLUTIONS

- Train all staff on respectful language usage
- Listen to peers explain why certain words and word choices are harmful
- Allow peers to have authentic responses to what is said to them
- Be aware of how language is used to talk with – and about – peers
- Gather information respectfully
- Ask people how they want to be identified

### **What do providers need to do?**

Understand how organizational hierarchy leads to power imbalances between providers and PSWs

### **What makes doing it difficult?**

- Management often doesn't see themselves as part of the problem

## SOLUTIONS

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- Recognize the power and privilege that comes from being the employer, and the privilege can be used to re-enfranchise people
- Take an anti-oppressive course to increase awareness
- Build ideas of allyship and continuous growth and learning into strategic plans
- Use techniques, like LEAN, that include action planning that involves the whole organization, not just the management team

## 26. check your understanding

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Let's review some concepts from this section through an informal knowledge check. Feel free to go back and review the previous lessons if necessary.

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*Question*

01/05

A peer support worker with lived experience and a proven track record of contributions is not able to commit to attending a key policy meeting for personal reasons. When asked, the peer explains that daycare is too expensive and they need to look after their children that day. What solutions might help overcome this barrier? (choose all that apply)

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Allow the child to be present

Find another worker

Arrange for childcare

*Question*

02/05

A peer support worker is asked to attend an important meeting in another city in the province. This peer has never flown before and is afraid to do so. What might be some steps to address this problem? (check all that could apply)

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- Arrange a bus ticket instead
- Provide cash in advance to cover travel costs
- Make sure they have a passport for identification
- Meet them at the bus station and take them to the conference space

*Question*

03/05

A peer support worker who is currently using illicit drugs is asked to attend an overnight meeting in another city that requires a short flight. They are hesitant. What might be done to make them able to commit? (check all that apply)

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- Ask them to bring their own supplies
- Ask them not to reveal their drug use plans — to keep it secret instead
- Provide sterile supplies and arrange for a local peer to consult on where and how to use more safely
- Arrange in advance how carries will be made on the airplane
- Provide information about supervised consumption sites or overdose prevention sites

*Question*

04/05

A new peer support worker with amazing lived experience has been hired for a project. Based on the interview process, the provider isn't confident the peer support worker can read very well. Part of the on-boarding process involves reading documents to get the worker up to speed on the project. How can this situation be handled? (choose all that apply)

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- Give materials to the new worker in advance so they have plenty of time to read on their own
- Rewrite the materials using more accessible language and terminology
- Talk with the new peer support worker directly and build trust about this issue
- Ask the peer support worker about their literacy levels at the next team meeting

*Question*

05/05

A peer support worker hired for a project does not have access to a telephone or computer. How can you communicate with them? (choose all that apply)

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- Let them solve the problem themselves
- Help provide them with access to a computer and internet through a local agency
- Mail them hard copies
- Arrange times they can use a computer in the office to check emails

## 27. summary

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Let's review some of the key concepts covered in this course.

### Role of Peer Support Workers

- *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.
- *What is a peer support worker?*  
A peer support worker is someone with lived experience with a mental health, substance use, addiction or trauma issue who engages in a mutually supportive relationship with someone in the midst of struggling with a similar issue.
- *Importance of mutuality*  
Mutuality is the foundation of peer support. Mutuality is about reciprocal action, give and take, as well as being able to assume a humble posture of learning.

### Benefits of Hiring Peer Support Workers

- *How are peer support services used?*  
Peer support services are used in a variety of settings, including formal and informal organizations. Peer support work can be both paid and voluntary.
- *What value do peer support services bring?*  
Peer support services can moderate life-challenging events, prevent or reduce hospitalizations, build self-

control skills, offer social support and improve the overall quality of life.

- *Scope of Peer Support*

Peer support is different from clinical service. Peer support is based on mutuality and shared connection. This connection becomes the point of inspiration upon which trust, support, and healing rest. Peer support workers aren't community support workers, advocates or providers of peer-delivered services. In order to perform their duties, peer support workers must be given flexibility to adapt to the needs of each peer.

- *A Note About Recovery*

Recovery is a process, not an end goal, and requires time, effort and patience. Not all recovery assessment is measured by the goal of abstinence. Recovery means striving for self-determination and hope. Peer support workers may be at many points along the path towards recovery. This invaluable lived and living experience can be used to help peers.

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## **Peer Support Worker Engagement**

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- *What is peer engagement?*

Peer engagement is active participation of peers in research, programming and policy settings. Peer engagement is at the heart of harm reduction.

- *The ladder of engagement*

The ladder of engagement is a tool to help assess peer involvement levels in a project or organization. It quantifies peer involvement into five steps: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowerment, with empowerment representing the highest level.

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## **Increasing Engagement of Peer Support Workers**

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- *Ways to empower peer support workers*

Peer engagement can be increased in many ways, including by building clear expectations, addressing fair compensation, crafting a memorandum of understanding, defining objectives of engagement, arranging opportunities for training and capacity building, accessing peer networks and assuring proper supports are in place.

- *Values of peer support workers*

Peer support workers value caring and compassion, empathy and authenticity as key traits in their service to others.

- *Empowerment through language*

Language has the power to heal and uplift. Using person-first language avoids defining someone by a diagnosis or challenge and instead encourages seeing them as they truly are – valuable and noble.

- *More ways to empower peer support workers*

Other recommendations for peer engagement include: centring your organization around values and principles; adopting a culture of organizational reflection; seeking literature written by peers; paying peers for all asks; supporting peers in leadership roles; working to accommodate peer’s individual wants and needs; developing a humble approach that embraces peer feedback; seeking involvement from under-represented communities; striving for integrity in both process and outcomes; and learning and investing in other programs and organizations.

## Overcoming Barriers

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- *Barriers that hinder peer practice, satisfaction and engagement*

Some potential barriers that hinder peer workers include: lack of childcare; literacy deficits; lack of access to regular communication; challenges with travel and meeting locations; issues with substance use when traveling; and a lack of ground rules and/or uncertainty around work plans.

- *Challenges as reported by peer support workers themselves*

The biggest challenges to engagement, as reported by peer support workers themselves, are lack of livable compensation/wages, risk of personal burnout, and the inability to navigate health and social systems.

- *Peer support worker feedback: What do providers need to do?*

When interviewed, a focus group of peer support workers suggested providers make improvements in a few areas: make efforts to use the full capacities of PWSs; create more sustainable jobs with equitable pay; improve relationships with PSWs; acknowledge PSWs value and work towards a more collaborative relationship with them; develop specialized onboarding procedures for PSWs; use appropriate language around and about PSWs; and work towards a better understanding of how organizational hierarchy creates power imbalances between providers and PSWs.

## 28. next steps

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Congratulations! You've completed the course.

Now that you've explored ways to support and engage peer support workers, consider these next steps.



Use a stigma audit tool. What's a stigma audit tool? In order to help employers like you, a stigma audit tool has been created by Pivot Legal Society. It is used to help you self-assess your organization to see if there are stigmatizing or oppressive practices within the workplace that can be changed. You can access such a tool [here](#).



Visit the list below to enhance your knowledge and expand your awareness of resources available in the community about peer support and peer support workers.

Resources...