

Understanding What Useful Help Looks Like: The Standards of Peer Support Cheryl MacNeil, Ph.D. and Shery Mead, M.S.W.

In this article we would like to share findings about how peer support is providing a positive alternative for people accessing the mental health system. “When consumers/survivors talk about what helps them, they generally credit some person who believed in them, who respected them; someone who made a genuine person-to-person connection with them” (Bassman, 2001, p. 22). These are the kinds of interactions we hear people talking about when they are involved in peer support.

Peer support is not like clinical support, nor is it just about being friends. Unlike clinical help, peer support helps people to understand each other because they’ve “been there,” shared similar experiences and can model for each other a willingness to learn and grow. In peer support people come together with the intention of changing unhelpful patterns, getting out of “stuck” places, and building relationships that are respectful, mutually responsible, and potentially mutually transforming. In other words people come to a peer support program because it feels safe and accepting. By sharing experiences and building trust, peers help each other move beyond their perceived limitations, old patterns and ways of thinking about mental health. This allows members of the peer community to try out new behaviors and move beyond the “illness culture” into a culture of health and ability (Mead and Copeland, 2003).

While peer support communities are coming to relate to and feel safe with each other because of their shared experiences, they sometimes get stuck replicating power dynamics they experienced in the mental health system. This has led to conflict, chaos, and role confusion, which is then understood through evaluation as failure (McLean, 1995). Peer support communities can attempt to avoid these dynamics by articulating standards of peer support. In other words, “How do we know when peer support communities are on track?”

We recently partnered with a community of peers to design a participatory study that would help us begin to define the standards of peer support (MacNeil, 2003). Our study included the perspectives of people affiliated with a peer center operated by Sweetser in Brunswick, Maine. Peer support providers, traditional service providers, and people who accessed support services worked with us throughout the study. Here are the standards of peer support that we identified:

Standard #1: Peer support promotes CRITICAL LEARNING and the re-naming of experiences - People involved with peer support eventually tend to think of themselves, the idea of crisis, their rituals of care, and their relationships with others very differently. Because the trauma-based orientation of the peer support culture helps people to better understand how traumas of the past have been viewed through a medical lens, peers begin to redefine who they have become, how they have become, the nature of helping relationships, and what they will need to do to heal.

Examples of indicators include:

- Realizing you are not crazy.
- Understanding that your emotional distress is an appropriate response.
- Redefining your roles.
- Taking power in relationships.
- Developing wellness strategies.

Standard #2: The culture of peer support provides a sense of COMMUNITY - Peers will tell you that peer support is, “Something you can't buy. You can buy intensive care. You can buy medication. You can even buy diagnoses. But you can't buy community.” The support received in a peer relationship gives people a sense of security and, “a sense of belonging somewhere.” It is a relationship where you are allowed to have the time you need to talk to people. Peer support is not about fixing things. Great value is placed in the power of being seen and heard. Peer supporters encourage each other to be witnesses of past and present stories, and to validate, not judge, a person's experience.

Examples of indicators include:

- You are not told what you have to do.
- Validation and witnessing is more important than fixing.
- Acceptance for where a person is at.
- A sense of kindredship in sharing similar experiences.
- An atmosphere of hope and celebration.
- Members are both leaders and followers.
- A place to make friends and to know you are not alone.
- A place to be yourself.

Standard #3: There is great FLEXIBILITY in the kinds of support provided by peers– Peers support each other around their preferences or needs. A peer community strives to create a range of possibilities to keep people included. This could mean creating roles that would allow a peer to feel included, inviting another peer into one's home as a support option, providing transportation, taking care of a peer's pet if they need to go on an appointment, making a phone call for someone, and providing a range of other day-to-day supports as needed.

Examples of indicators include:

- Program is experienced as a place to stretch your comfort zone.
- Range of possibilities explored to keep people included.
- Work with people around their unique preferences and needs.
- Conflict or tension is defined as an opportunity.
- Encouragement is given to share talents and expertise.

Standard #4: Peer support activities, meetings and conversations are INSTRUCTIVE - Peer support offers people an opportunity to extend their resource networks. Peers share all kinds of information, talents, and expertise. Peers value each other's expertise and recognize how the instructive dimension of peer support is

reciprocal. They are both teachers and learners in any given day. If someone comes up with an idea they are encouraged to develop it. When conflict or tension surfaces, it is defined as a learning opportunity.

Examples of indicators include:

- Atmosphere promotes trusting oneself to figure things out.
- Collective-problem solving is encouraged.
- Alternative healing strategies are encouraged.
- Genuine and inclusive feedback provided.
- Conversation is respectful.
- Conflict or tension is defined as an opportunity.
- There is a presence of potent activities.
- Activities and people are interesting.
- Encouragement is given to share talents and expertise.
- People are invited along to participate in a variety of ways.
- Atmosphere promotes trusting oneself to figure things out.
- There is value in experience and common wisdom.
- Every person is a teacher and a learner.

Standard #5: There is **MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY** across peer relationships- There is respect among people involved with peer support regardless of their 'condition.' There is a range of responsibilities embedded in the relationships of the peer community. Examples in our study included the responsibilities of: 'using one's voice'; 'raising expectations'; 'taking charge of one's circumstances'; and 'moving forward'. Discarding systems' labels that shape thinking and action is also important to being responsibly involved with peer support.

Examples of indicators include:

- All persons should be considered equal.
- People are present when they are the subject of conversation.
- Everyone has something valuable to share.
- Building of honest relationships that are essential to healing
- Taking charge of your daily routine and affairs.
- You are expected to go forward in your process.
- Fancy language and labeling practices carry little value.
- You are expected to be honest with yourself and others.

Standard #6: Peer support is being clear about and **SETTING LIMITS** - In the absence of the strict and permanent boundaries that enclose a person's contact with professionals, the more permeable and personal conduct of peer relating creates a need for peers to stay alert to what they say and who they say it to as they work to honor each others' experiences. Peers have to be clear with themselves and each other about what they can and cannot do and why this is so.

Examples of indicators include:

- There is compassion.
- Looking out for each other.
- What safety means in a relationship is negotiated.
- Experienced as a safe place to be yourself.
- Provided the 'tools', education, and knowledge to respond.
- There are consequences for making others feel unsafe.
- Policies and procedures pertaining to safety are discussed.
- Emotional safety and validation in being heard.
- Freedom of expression.
- Feeling like you are not being judged.
- Knowing that you don't have to have all the answers.
- An appreciation for 'the long haul' of the healing process.
- Being able to disclose.

Standard #7: Peer support involves sophisticated levels of SAFETY –Peers in our study talked about safety on a number of complex levels including: emotional safety through validation; the safety one feels in a compassionate interaction; safety in having people advocate for you; safety in the ability to express yourself freely; and safety in being able to disclose. What safety means to each peer and among peers in a peer support relationship has to be mutually negotiated. Safety also means that peers are developing the right tools and seeking education to support one and other, and that they accept the consequences of making others feel unsafe.

Standard: Peer support is being clear about and SETTING LIMITS.

Examples of indicators include:

- Respecting the confidentiality of the community.
- Parameters of 'what is tolerable dissonance' within the community are negotiated.
- Composition of the community is taken into consideration when defining limits.
- Expected to reflect upon and articulate personal limits.
- Understanding that limits will change and be redefined as the learning process unfolds.
- Levels of intimacy vary from individual to individual and require acknowledgement.
- Being clear about what you can and cannot do and why this you can and cannot do and why this is so.

Over the years we have studied many peer initiatives and the cumulative evidence indicates that peer support is a positive and potent recovery-oriented alternative. Peer support communities provide a safe haven for many. Peer support is quickly gaining credibility and growing in fame. Peer programs are popping up everywhere and in every form. It is critical at this time in the evolution of peer initiatives that clear standards be established for "What is Good Peer Support." As Bassman (2001) has commented, "The

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consumer/survivor/ex-patient dissatisfaction with the existing mental health system is not a denial of the need for help, but rather a criticism of what is passing for help” (p.22). Honoring standards of peer support will help everyone to be clear about what useful help looks like.

References

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