Peer Support Program

This is intended to help you establish a Peer Support Program. It is based on a literature review of Best Practices Identified for Peer Support Programs. Shared experience is the foundation for peer support as it fosters a sense of trust and credibility necessary for people to open up and discuss their problems, reducing the sense of stigma. Peer Support Programs are not a substitute for professional Psychological/Medical support.

# Purpose

Peer support is a non-judgmental, safe and supportive relationship between people who have a lived experience in common in order to provide emotional and social support. In the workplace, employees with lived experience are selected and trained to provide peer support to other employees within their workplace. Click here to enter text. ’s PTSD peer support program will be multifaceted and address four main areas: crisis intervention and support, group support, peer mentoring, and peer education.

# Scope

This program applies to all employees in all sectors who may be suffering from a mental health illness including PTSD. The Peer Support Program is available for all staff, past and present, who have suffered from work-related PTSD.

# Roles and Responsibilities

## Senior Leadership

Senior Leadership of Click here to enter text. is responsible for providing all employees with a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. The Senior Leadership of Click here to enter text. will ensure that this program is applied in a timely, consistent and confidential manner. To support a peer support program Click here to enter text. leadership will

* Provide resources and funding for the Peer Support training and education
* Regularly monitor organizational practices and systems for barriers to achieving an effective peer support program
* Provide an effective and fair complaints process
* Lead by example
* Engage community supports for external funding

## Managers/Supervisors

Managers and Supervisors are responsible for promoting and updating employees on the peer support program and setting an example of appropriate behaviour. This includes communicating the policy and procedures for the peer support program and taking appropriate action in a sensitive and confidential manner, if involved.

## Peer Support Workers

A Peer supporter is someone who can offer assistance and support to promote another peer’s own personal recovery journey and has some form of lived experience. It is important to remember that a Peer Supporter is **not a primary care provider and should not give medical advice or diagnoses**, but instead encourage their peer to seek the appropriate support and care from a professional.

Our Peer Support Workers will:

* Participate in training sessions
* Actively support the peer support program and support groups
* Understand the limitations and boundaries inherent in this role including confidentiality guidelines
* Identify ambiguous situations in relation to boundaries and use critical thinking to determine how to best proceed
* Learn about a peer’s boundaries and respect that they may not be the same their own
* Communicate and negotiate personal limits and boundaries with the peer
* Recognize vulnerability to create a safe and trusting relationship
* Identify when a boundary has been crossed and determine how to best respond
* Recognize personal limits
* Escalate crisis and potentially hazardous situations as required by legislation
* Maintain contact with community supports
* Maintain employee and peer confidentiality

## Employees

Employees are responsible for treating coworkers with respect in the workplace. Employees are also responsible treating all parties, situations, and learned information in a sensitive and confidential manner.

Our Employee’s will

* Comply with policies, procedures and the program
* Listen to coworkers and encourage engagement in the program if needed
* Reduce stigma by participating in positive conversations

# Peer Support Worker Eligibility

The peer support program will be comprised of selected volunteers and peer nominated individuals with lived experience that are prepared to provide peer support to other employees within their organization. Lived experience with a mental health challenge or illness is a fundamental requirement, as the relationship is based on the connection and understanding that comes with having experienced a similar challenge. Those with lived experience as a family member or loved one suffering from a mental illness or PTSD may also be eligible.

The peer support program is focused on recovery and finding common ground in challenges and issues, rather than the specific illness or symptoms. It is not necessary that the diagnosis or specific details are provided to the peer support worker.

The peer support worker must be on a transition path towards hopefulness and recovery, as well as have self-care, resiliency strategies, and the ability to determine when stressors or stress levels are reaching an unhealthy level.

The following are a set of core competencies that were identified in a report on Peer Support Training prepared by *Addictions and Mental Health Ontario* and the *Canadian Mental Health Commission Guidelines for Practice and Training of Peer Support.* (Sunderland & Mishkin, 2016). These competencies should be considered when selecting staff to be members of your peer support program team.

**Lived Experience**

* Ability to relate to the experience and challenge that the peer may be experiencing as a result of exposure to trauma
* Ability to detect when their own stressors and triggers may result in unhealthy or unwanted attitudes or behaviours and a willingness to request assistance
* Ability to demonstrate a sense of hopefulness and strong belief in recovery
* Personal commitment to self-care through stress management and resiliency strategies

**Interpersonal Skills**

* Ability to demonstrate active listening skills which takes a genuine interest in their peer, valuing them as an equal
* Ability to engage peers and encourage action
* Demonstrate warm, empathetic and non-judgmental behaviours and actions towards others
* Encourages peer to explore options and co-create solutions
* Ability to appropriately share their own experiences in a manner that provides insight and assistance to instill hopefulness and focus on recovery

**Critical Thinking**

* Demonstrate ability to identify issues or problems and explore and evaluate information to guide the development of a resolution
* Encourages open dialogue focused on improved understanding of issues or problems, and/or potential solutions
* Ability to determine true needs of the peer (talking vs. action to initiate change)
* Recognize the importance of the issue to the peer and approach dialogue in a non-judgmental manner and work with the peer to explore options
* Ability to detect when the peer is approach or in a crisis situation and work with the peer to explore alternative paths and/or knowing when to engage additional resources or help

**Teamwork and Collaboration**

* Clear understanding or roles and responsibilities and knows when to engage additional resources for support
* Understands available support systems and understand how they can help
* Ability to collaborate with others in order to solve problems and achieve results
* Treats peers with respect and accepts individual differences
* Keeps people informed and facilitates conflict resolution
* Encourages peers to fully participate

**Ethics and Reliability**

* High regard for emotional and physical safety of peer while ensuring confidentiality is protected and ensures all interactions are intended to achieve the emotional and physical safety
* Demonstrates unconditional respect for their peer, their time and their needs
* Commits to ongoing learning and personal development to fulfill their role as a peer supporter

The peer support worker is not a substitute for professional psychological or medical help. A mental health professional will be consulted and help guide the peer support program and peer supporter(s).

# Training

Our organization is committed to providing adequate and appropriate training for peer support workers. A multifaceted approach to training will be taken, such as participating in role-play, simulations, presentations, videos, readings and demonstrations. This training will include

* Basic peer support training: will provide an overview of the roles and responsibilities of a peer support workers and develop support skills.
* Family peer support training: will provide an overview of challenges that may arise within family of care support
* Crisis management training: will be a mandatory training for all peer support workers to provide information on how to identify, manage, and report a crisis situation.

Peer Support training will require biannual re-training to facilitate networking of peer support workers, promote on-going self-care, and provide additional skill opportunities.

Additional training will also cover the following topics:

* Confidentiality
* Facilitating groups and communication skills
* Psychological First Aid
* PTSD awareness, signs and symptoms
* Suicide risk and prevention
* Signs of potential substance problems
* Addressing Stigma
* How to support recovery and return to work
* Support through self-care and wellness plans
* Awareness of possible symptoms and potential side effects of medication
* Cultural competency include the role of ethnicity, race, spirituality, gender, sexual orientation, and local community
* Available supports within the organization and community resources
* How to address situations that go beyond their expertise

Peer support workers and responders will meet on a monthly basis for debriefing.

# Supplemental Support and Community Resources

Peer support workers will work flexible hours and make themselves available as necessary to a reasonable extent. Internet and telephone support will be made available to all peer support workers.

Ongoing training and development will occur over time as a peer support worker, however, there is a risk of burnout, stagnation, or straying from the peer support model, as it is common to work independently within challenging environments. The Peer Support Program at our organization will maintain a connection with community resources of practice to encourage peer support workers to connect with others and provide opportunity for learning and the sharing of wisdom, and remind each other of the guiding values.

# Peer Program Models and Structures

Peer support will be multifaceted in the following four areas: crisis intervention and support, group support, peer mentoring, and peer education. Peers will have the opportunity for one on one or group support.

The peer support team will be comprised of 5-10 volunteer members who will lead implementation efforts. Part of the peer support team will include the peer support group leader who will facilitate the weekly group meetings. Employees who volunteer will have a dedicated phone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Approximately 10-20 peer support workers should be invited to participate, with the option of consulting as a peer educator versus a direct peer mentor.

Monthly peer support worker meetings and debriefings will be held where they will review roles and responsibilities, as well as participate in role-play, and learn from video excerpts, handouts and narratives.

The peer support team will speak to employees at safety meetings or other events in an effort to promote the peer support program. The peer support program will also be included in new hire introduction and onboarding, and in organization newsletters and email distributions. Peers are also able to contact the contact peer support workers directly.

## Crisis Support

Peer support during critical incidents and crises can facilitate coping and help liaise to workplace and health services. For the Crisis Support team, a two-tiered on-call schedule will be implemented which includes a primary and a backup peer support worker.

**Suggested steps to stabling crisis support**

* Peers will be available 24/7 during crises or critical indents
* Peer support workers can be reached on their phones, or via email access
* The peer support program is available during and outside of work hours to a reasonable extent
* Group support will be offered during work hours, exclusively
* The peer support program integrates with our Organization’s commitment to PTSD prevention and management.

## Support Group

Multiple individuals who meet to share experiences. This provides an opportunity to learn from each other and strengthen the social network.

**Suggested steps to establishing a support group**

* A volunteer peer support leader will lead the Support Group meetings
* They will be responsible for leading the group meetings, undergo extensive crisis training, and facilitate meetings
* Situations that go beyond their expertise will be escalated as per the protocol in this program
* The support group will be held once a week and operates on a “drop-in”/open basis
* The group will be kept small to about 10-15 people at its maximum
* The peer support group meetings will be communicated to staff via email distribution and organizational newsletters.

## Peer Mentor

This is a one-to-one relationship between a peer supporter and the individual. This type of program provides individual attention and advocacy, however it is highly dependent on the skills and abilities of the mentor to provide assistance.

**Suggested steps to establishing a peer mentor program**

* Volunteer staff who have a similar lived or shared experience with PTSD will be recruited to act as peer mentors. While this is not a paid position, additional support such as internet and phone access will be provided
* Volunteers will also have more flexible work hours, sick leave, quiet work areas, acceptance of unusual behavior, and will have time off for appointments
* Staff are able to engage with the peer mentor by contacting them directly

## Peer Educator

The role of the peer educator is to lead a short course on awareness or resiliency that includes an interactive discussion. The focus of this program is on access to information and it is generally a short-term intervention. This type of program typically does not provide ongoing support.

**Suggested steps to establishing a peer educator program**

* There will be at least 3-5 peer educators, also referred to as peer support consultants and will deliver some training and assist with
* Peer support workers will have this option upon initial volunteer
* Education will be delivered via simulations, role play, video segments, handouts, and readings
* Class size will be between 10-20 individuals to encourage discussion

# Evaluation

The Peer Review Program shall be re-evaluated annually through a Peer Responder Assessment and Peer Support Group Questionnaire. This short, optional, anonymous survey will be administered to employees to determine if they are aware of the peer support program, if they have used it, were satisfied, or have suggestions for improvement.

Key metrics that will be evaluated include a decrease in both short and long term disability related to PTSD, an increased utilization in the employee assistance program (EAP) and an increase in psychologist’s costs in the benefits plan. Indirect metrics may include improved job satisfaction, reduced turnover in important operational roles and reduced employee complaints.

# Confidentiality

Maintaining confidentiality is integral to the success of the Peer Support Program as it protects fellow workers and encourages willingness to participate. All persons involved in the peer support program (including but not limited to mental health provider, peer support workers, peers in group support, etc.) are required to maintain appropriate confidentiality of all medical or private information, consistent with Click here to enter text. confidentiality policy requirements and applicable legislation. These requirements extend to information learned through any source and are irrespective of whether the peer support services are delivered internally or externally.

Any documentation that an employer may have in their possession which contains information about the mental health and/or mental healthcare of the first responders should have restricted access and disclosure, except with the written permission of the first responder and/or as required by the applicable legislation. This information is not to be used for disciplinary measures.

As part of the peer support worker program and confidentiality program, there will be no investigation as a result of sharing, and no report back to a supervisor or leadership. However, confidentiality may be broken in the following circumstances:

* There is disclosure or evidence of an imminent risk to life or attempted suicide
* There is disclosure or evidence of a serious risk of harm to others
* There is disclosure or evidence of physical, sexual or serious emotional abuse or neglect
* There is disclosure or evidence of serious self-harm (including substance abuse that may be life-threatening)
* There is evidence of a serious mental illness
* Requirements of applicable provincial or federal legislation
* Written permission from the first responder

In the event that confidentiality will be broken, the individual will be advised of the actions and the local 911 services will be notified.

# Reporting and Recordkeeping

The requirement for confidentiality shall not supersede standard emergency response measures when there is imminent risk to life. The peer support worker shall be adequately trained on when and how to raise concerns.