

Paving New Ground

Peer Support in the Hospital Setting: Finding Hope in the Moment of Despair

by Gayle Bluebird, RN

Peer Networking

OTA/NASMHPD

Helpful Definitions:

- **Consumer:**

Current or former patient who has a serious mental illness and has received psychiatric services

- **Peer:** A person who has equal standing with another or others, and has had similar experiences as another

- **Peer Specialist:**

Most common term used for self-disclosed consumers who deliver recovery-oriented services. Most often they have specialized training and sometimes a certification

(Bluebird, 2004)

Definition of Peer Support

- *Peer Support is not like clinical support, nor is it just about being friends. 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*

(Mead & MacNeil, 2003)

New Freedom Commission

The New Freedom Commission...called for the complete inclusion of consumers and family members as providers, advocates, policymakers, and full partners in creating their own plans of care

*(The President's New Freedom
Commission on Mental Health, 2003)*

Rationales for Peer Involvement in Mental Health Settings

Providing Empathy:

- One of the key benefits of peer support as opposed to other forms of mental health services is the greater “perceived” empathy that Peer Specialists have for the people they support

(Campbell and Leaver, 2003)

Additional Rationales for Peer Involvement in Mental Health Settings:

- Peers can serve as role models, communicators, mediators, advocates, teachers and legal protectors
- Peers provide support from a perspective of experiential rather than professional authority
(Borkman, 1975)
- First hand experiences provide unique insights and interpretations of situations

Additional Rationales for Peer Involvement in Mental Health Settings:

- Self-help, peer support, and self-advocacy are being recognized as components of wellness, recovery, and even treatment

(Curtis & Hodge, 1995)

- Peers understand the need for reform and often have the initiative to begin the task of creating new approaches to care
- Peers, hired as staff at all levels, promote movement towards an organizational culture shift

Typical Peer Specialist Duties and Responsibilities in In-Patient Settings

- Participate in treatment team meetings
- Facilitate peer support groups
- Provide individual peer support
- Work with people at risk for crises
- Address minor complaints
- Help develop hospital policies



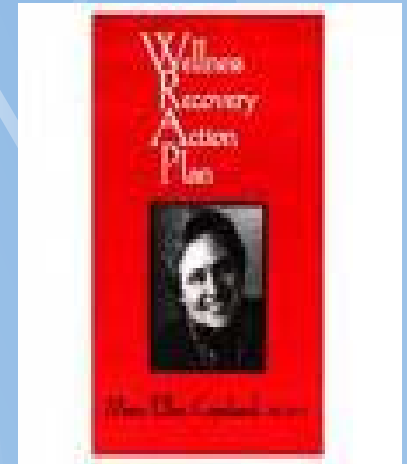
Other Common Responsibilities:

- Involving service recipients at all levels of decision making, including hiring of new employees
- Helping people advocate for themselves
- Administering consumer satisfaction surveys
- Assisting in orientation and training of new employees
- Serving as mentors to people they serve

Example of Peer Roles in Support and Recovery

- One core function of many Peer Specialists is facilitating Wellness Recovery Action Planning (WRAP), a 'personal monitoring system in which an individual documents techniques and strategies for reducing symptoms, as well as for ongoing management and prevention of symptoms

(www.mentalhealthrecovery.com/vtrecovery.html)



Peer Roles in Mental Health Settings:

Individual Benefits

- Acceptance/Empathy/Respect
- Sharing what works/Strategies for recovery
- Empowerment
- Holistic/non-medicalized approach
- Social support
- Reducing psychiatric symptoms and hospital admissions

(Campbell and Leaver, 2003; Clay, 2005)

Peer Roles in Mental Health Settings: *Staff Benefits*

- Potential to be a force for positive change
- Education for mental health professionals about living with a mental illness
- Learn to increase choice within the existing mental health system
- Provides Hope and Optimism
- Reduced workload

(Campbell and Leaver, 2003; Clay, 2005)

Ingredients for Success:

- Preparation of all staff-- Train, Train, Train!
- Flexible Job Description
- A good interview process thought out
- Placing role at appropriate level of supervision
- Hiring more than one person
- Assigning to one unit at first
- Need for advisory and support group

Pitfalls:

- Staff not trained adequately; not knowing what a person should do
- Staff not familiar with recovery principles
- Distrust of peer potential –using them as token
- Peer employee filling traditional role—not recovery role
- Staff afraid that peer will become ill
- Peer worker overworks and is too ambitious
- Staff fear that peers will take over

Examples of Specific Roles: Client Liaison/“De-Briefer”

- Position created in Massachusetts, now in several MA state hospitals
- Conducts individual interviews following seclusion and restraint episodes
- Serves as a full member of the clinical team
- Works preventively with patients at risk for crises
- Works with patients proactively on their treatment plans

(Worcester State Hospital, MA, *in Bluebird*, 2008)

From a Patient Liaison/De-Briefer in Massachusetts:

In some cases peers may be the most able to reach someone, particularly if they approach them with their own history of seclusion and restraint, their history of trauma, or their own vulnerabilities as a person who experiences symptoms from their own psychiatric disability

(Deni Cohodas, Patient Liaison/De-briefer, Worcester State Hospital, MA)

Peer Roles in Inpatient Settings: *Peer Bridger*

- Provides support to individuals in institutions 3-5 months prior to discharge and 6-months to a year afterward in person's home
(Bluebird, 2008)
- Provides intensive support through a balance of social, recreational, and skills teaching
- Establishes linkages to community-based services and natural supports
(Mead & MacNeil, 2003)

From a Peer Bridger Recipient:

- “Having a Peer Bridger helps me to have good self-esteem as well as a belief in my own independence. If I had a relapse, I would call my “Peer Bridger” first, before I called my psychiatrist.”

Ian, Staten Island

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Resources to Consider

Paving New Ground **A Dialogue With Peers & Family Members**



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