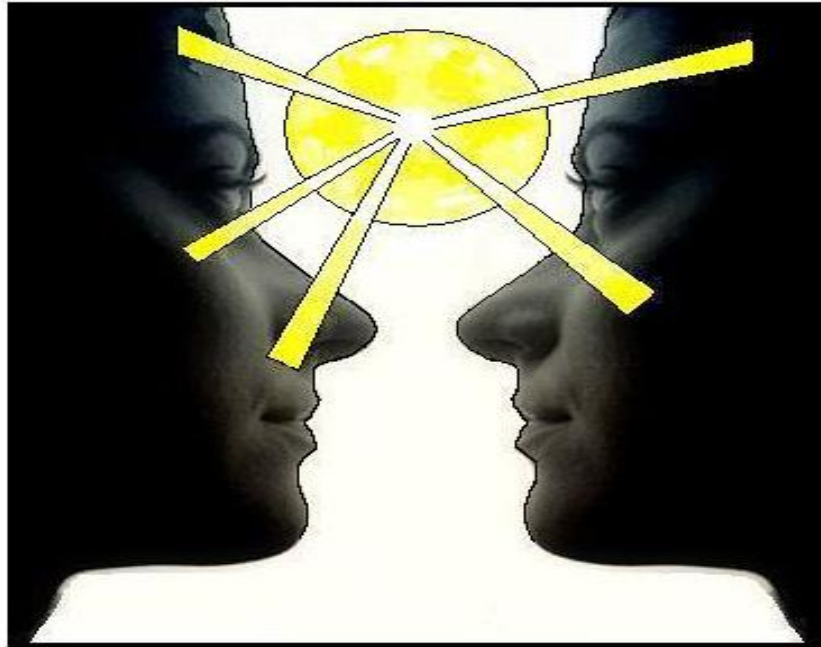


# ‘Peer Supporters in mental health’



By Terry Bowyer

# Aims of presentation

- To tell my story and route to the peer worker role.
- To share my experiences of being this type of worker.
- To share the things I have learned and the insight gained.
- To encourage debate about the future of the mental health field when using peer supporters.

# My recovery story...

The best place to start when talking about the peer role is to tell that persons story. We promote recovery based on our lived experience and our 'journeys' from illness to wellness.

- First of many breakdowns in 1998 – diagnosed with PS aged 22.
- Experienced all the classic symptoms – delusions, paranoia, mania, and depression.
- Many hospital admissions (sectioned 5 times) – plus prison
- Tried a whole range of medication – anti-psychotics, anti-depressants, mood stabilizers, depot injections, sleepers/sedatives
- Experienced tremendous loss and despair of mental illness – losing friends, career, my future, and the person I was before.
- An extremely painful ordeal – I suffered greatly and lost all hope. It felt like falling into an 'abyss'
- Descended into the world of illicit drugs and spent years abusing substances and relapsing. I hit rock bottom – my '*turning point*'.

## Now recovered:

- Stable for over 7 years avoiding relapse. Living independently in the community and have engaged fully with all my treatment.
- Clean from all substances inc' cigs and alcohol.
- I have a much improved quality of life – pursuing work, hobbies, leisure and social activities, and enjoying life again.
- Found the most effective neuroleptic medication – *Clozaril*.
- My symptoms have been significantly reduced. Mania + depression have levelled out, paranoia is manageable, delusions are transient and no longer crippling. I remain mostly 'in reality'
- My cognitive functioning has returned - memory, logic, problem solving, constructive thought, all improved.
- My energy levels have returned- built a *tolerance* to medication.
- For me this had to the final outcome: '*Getting back into the world and living my life again*'.

# My route to the peer worker role...

My journey of recovery eventually led to me working in the field of mental health. After many differing types of involvement activities I ended up becoming a Peer Specialist for a local forum in Dorset.

- Started in research for Rethink Mental Illness helping produce 2 projects about recovery.
- Became an activist for this charity involved in campaigns/lobbying
- Entered governance role and fundraising.
- Learned about the PSW role when I met Gene Johnson from Recovery Innovations USA.
- Staff role Rethink MI. Piloted the PSW role for one year for the charity. 6 months in a community service – 6 months in a housing service.
- Main role now is as a Peer Specialist for the Dorset Mental Health Forum since 2010.

# What is peer support?

Is the use of people with lived experience of mental illness and recovery to aid, help, and support other people who either access services or work in the field of mental health.

The skills, knowledge, and experience we can offer is priceless to those who may be unwell or to other mental health workers who would benefit from our input.

It can be formally organised & structured into something specifically delivered or it can exist informally and appear naturally in a variety of settings.

A potential peer supporter can:

- Approach mental health issues from their own 'real' angle.
- Use their own special empathy and insight to help others.
- Be an 'expert by experience'.
- Be a 'role-model' for recovery.
- Instil hope and self-belief in those who do not have it.
- Work in a **dual identity** that is both a worker and someone who accesses services.
- Educate, enlighten, and enable others on their journey.

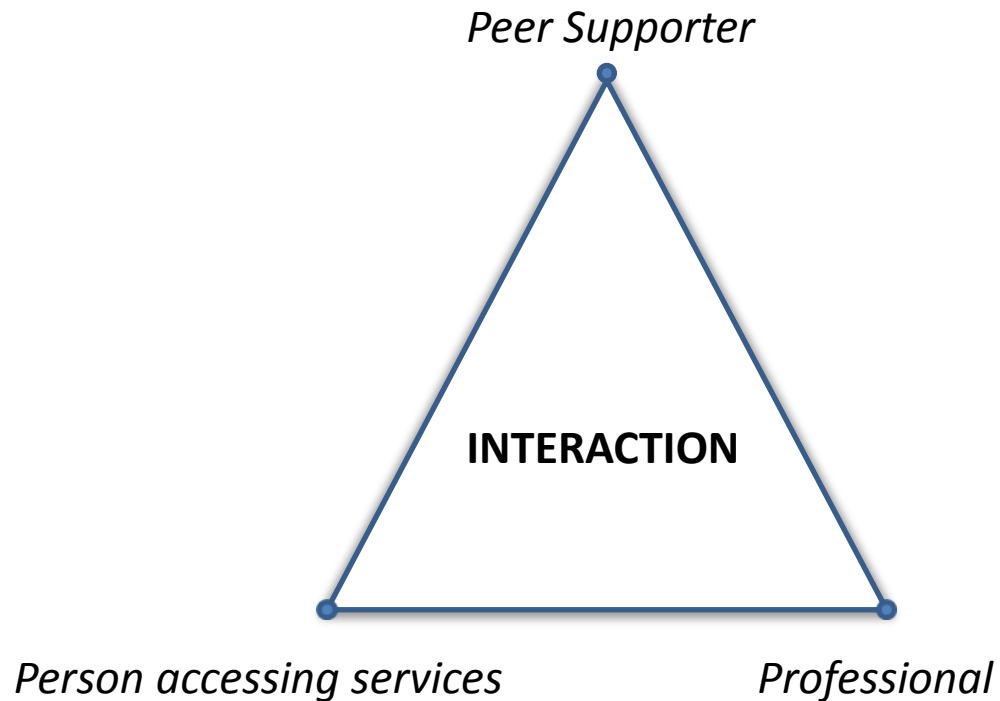
# Why the need for peer support?

There is generally an understanding that traditional service pathways and ways of working provided by our mental health system could be vastly improved by using people with lived experience more. Our input is not to replace existing practice but rather to supplement it.

What we offer is vital:

- The peer-to-peer interaction can be more 'real' and therefore more equal.
- It is a partnership way of working based on both sides having relevant lived experiences.
- The rapport built between peers is less detached and artificial than you might find with clinical staff.
- The boundaries are looser and far less enforced.
- The interactions are based on sharing and identifying.
- We can engender trust and empathy more easily.
- Our ability to relate makes us effective communicators.

Peer supporters can complete a 'triangle of interaction' that is sorely needed in mental health. They can act as the bridge between people accessing services and professionals that binds the therapeutic process making it more effective and accountable.





# How can peer supporters be used or deployed?

There are a number of different ways you can use this type of worker in a variety of settings and environments. It depends on which task you would like them to perform.

- Peer Specialist: a generic expert covering all areas of mental health from the peer perspective – but particularly within the recovery approach.
- Peer Support Worker: operates on same level as a specialist but with an emphasis on a supporting role.
- Peer Representative: concerned with governance and responsible for ensuring the rights, views, and preferences of people who access services are considered and acted upon.
- Peer Trainer: involved in a training role and concerned with the development of others in the field (e.g. REC)
- Peer networks / groups: there are many activities that are peer focused - including support, social and leisure groups.
- Informal peer support: valuable peer interactions happen everyday on the ward, in services, and in the community.

# Peer Supporters and personal recovery

- We are seen as a *pivotal* part of the recovery approach to mental health because of the level of engagement and empathy we can engender during interactions with the different stakeholders in this field. We are there to listen, understand, relate, and advise
- We promote the development of self-management techniques, coping strategies, thinking tools, and wellness mediators in the people we work with so they can learn to live with their conditions, move on, and regain quality of life.
- We use 'safe' adult conversation to convey this personal approach to recovery using our own experiences to validate the process. We prove wellness is achievable and this is a powerful incentive to others.

See IMROC programme – Centre for Mental Health & Recovery Innovations USA

# Peer supporters can be 'Recovery Coaches'

In many ways, peers who are further along on their journeys of recovery have the insight and knowledge to coach others. We can offer support as a:

- *Motivator* – to encourage, show faith, to boost and coach
- *Ally and confident* – listens, cares, trusted.
- *Truth teller* – honest, valid feedback.
- *Problem solver* – help overcome obstacles.
- *Lifestyle consultant* – assist in developing healthy behaviours
- *Role model and mentor* – living proof of routes to wellness.

# The peer approach to innovation

There are many new and exciting ways peer workers can be involved in the field of mental health – areas of innovation where their unique perspective can be invaluable and potentially ground-breaking:

- Peer-led interventions such as the Wellness Workshop - an interactive session on recovery for people in crisis.
- Peer mentoring for psychiatrists – guidance on best practice using lived experience.
- Peer lectures and presentations on recovery for mental health students in higher education.
- Peers co-delivering psycho-social interventions such the Psychosis Support Group.
- Peer- led training and development courses.
- Peers co-delivering recovery courses in the community e.g. REC
- Peer led learning tutorials on specific areas such as communication.
- Peer involvement in research projects – consultation, collaboration, or even leading on certain studies.
- Any area where we can be a much needed 'key consultant' on any activity involving people with mental health problems.

# What skills do peer supporters need?

The use of verbal, interpersonal communication skills features highly in the work of peers as they interact with each other. The quality and depth of interface between them is vitally important.

- Talking things through, conveying experiences, sharing knowledge, listening and learning are a big part of the role.
- It is the use of your own developed personal insight into your own mental health to support and guide others.
- We can nurture and propagate new insight in others.
- We can stand up for the rights and preferences of the people we represent i.e. people who access services.
- We can help challenge any unhelpful values and beliefs present in other stakeholders in a natural, holistic way.
- We can challenge stigma and fight discrimination whenever we encounter it.
- In the formal sense, as workers we are trying to professionalise lived experience and this is not easy.
- In many ways your lived experience / story **is** your training - if you analyse this sufficiently you will have a base of learning to start from- the rest is picked up on the job!
- We really need accredited training - including a recognised qualification - in order to attract people who would choose this line of work as a career option.

# Your recovery story – the first task!

A good place to start for any budding formal Peer Worker is the creation of a good quality narrative that describes your ‘journey’ from illness to wellness in a positive way. It can be the base piece of work you can use to inform your new peer role.

- It can capture the essence of what you have been through, how it felt, what things are important to you, and what you learned along the way.
- It can be used in many ways to motivate and enlighten others because it is valid, qualified opinion based on your real lived experience.
- You can present it at events and conferences.
- You can use the evidence and analysis within it to help educate people interested in recovery.
- You can share it with other peers to compare experiences, knowledge, and learning points.
- It can be used to develop your portfolio.
- Every story is different because every person’s experience is different – and this is what makes them so useful – their ‘individuality’
- Most importantly they **prove** recovery is possible which inspires others to believe this is achievable – a game changer in many ways.

# Recruitment guidelines

Whether it is formal or informal in nature, we should be encouraging anyone who expresses an interest in offering themselves as a peer supporter to get involved. However there are some things to consider which warrant some attention.

- It really helps if someone has at least a basic understanding of what recovery from mental illness is – not necessarily a clinical outcome but one based on, and defined by, the person themselves. It is highly subjective and individual.
- Some people may not ‘be in the right place yet’ to take on a formal peer role and this needs to be acknowledged.
- They may be still in crisis or experiencing serious distress which should take priority over involvement.
- They may display inappropriate behaviour or attitude to others that becomes counter-productive.
- They may have a lack of fundamental skills, such as humility, people skills, or the required objectivity to be effective in the role.
- They may be harbouring extreme or polarised beliefs, or carrying deep resentment that make them potentially harmful in the role.
- They may have an illicit substance problem or alcohol dependency

*However* – people have the capacity to work on these things and if they can demonstrate a change on these things then they should be reconsidered for a peer role.

# What are the challenges inherent to the role?

When working as a peer supporter there are some important things which need some added attention if you want to be successful in the role.

- Always be mindful of your own condition and how your work is affecting this. Monitor your stress levels and make good use of supervision or debrief sessions if you are struggling. Protect your private life!
- It is perfectly acceptable to ask for *reasonable adjustments* in the workplace to account for things like reduced cognitive capacity or mental faculty.
- Important to realise we are not trained clinical staff or qualified mental health workers – so we shouldn't attempt to intervene in a way that we are not trained for – leave that for the professionals.
- In the formal role, boundaries are looser and more fluid as you get closer to the people you are helping – but they still exist and some professional distance is still required.
- Be aware of the 'emotional safety' of those you converse with.
- Confidentiality. In this role you are likely to have access to sensitive and private information – we have a duty to abide by the rules of disclosure like any other worker.
- It is really important for peer workers to actively support and help each other in the workplace. Vital fellowship and a sense of team can go a long way.



# Some general insights..

Here are some more general learning points I have picked up along the way in my continuing role as a Peer Specialist.

- A Peer Supporter must have the scope and freedom to just ‘float’ around any service having the kind of natural peer to peer conversations that they are there to have.
- For this reason, any paperwork or admin tasks must be kept to a minimum so they can concentrate on providing these crucial, therapeutic interactions.
- Any role given to a peer worker should aim to make use of their individual strengths whilst at the same time not test their weaknesses.
- Any formal peer role must be paid because it is a proper job and asking anyone to do it for free devalues them and what they can offer.
- It must have it’s own separate and unique job description – one tailored to the role and include a detailed training and development pathway.
- For any experienced involvement workers, such as volunteers or activists, a peer supporter work role is probably the most appropriate career progression step – although the transition can be difficult to adjust to.
- Working in a peer role is tremendously therapeutic – you help yourself by helping others – and for many this completes their recovery journeys.

# A future 'vision'...

Peer supporters, in all their guises and variances, have the potential to bring fundamental and positive change to our mental health system. A potentially groundbreaking way of working that is not yet fully realised in our country.

If we embraced their innate ability to connect and relate to others; their ability to engage and provide crucial hope; to approach support in a natural and holistic way; and to be the catalyst that drives forward mutual and collective development – then we may have a system that really delivers on recovery from mental illness.

Peers are so very effective at solving many of the problems inherent to the field of mental health. They can de-escalate animated situations, calm distress, problem solve, share information, motivate and inspire, network and signpost, and many more.

What we need is everyone to get behind it and work towards building a 'peer network' across the country so that anyone experiencing mental health problems can have access to some form of peer activity that promotes and facilitates the wellbeing of everyone who needs it.

The peer movement could be the bedrock of a future vision for recovery based practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.