

# Mental Illness Peer Support

WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE A PEER SUPPORT  
SPECIALIST

# WHAT IS REQUIRED TO BE A M.I. PEER?

- To be a Certified Peer Specialist:
- You must be in recovery from and diagnosed with mental illness
- You must be open minded and willing to share your recovery story publicly
- You must be at least 18 years old.
- You must be a High School Graduate or have obtained GED
- You must have effective communication skills, both written and oral.
- You must have a clear understanding of recovery from mental illness.

# What does “recovery”, from mental illness look like?

“Recovery”, from mental illness, is a concept that Peers use frequently. This is where the system shifts from stabilization to “recovery”. Peers use this term in an attempt to help individuals to see beyond stabilization. The purpose for this is so that the mental health system encourages individuals to maximize their potential.

# Why do Peer Specialist have this view?

Peer Specialist have had lived experience and “recovery” experience from a mental illness. Sometimes they may have experience with substance abuse as well. This lived experience enables a Peer to assist an individual in making clear decisions on how and in what ways they will “recover”.

# What does a Peer do?

The role, of a Peer, is very simple. The greatest asset a Peer has is his/her own lived experience. Sharing a persons personal journey, in “recovery”, is the greatest tool that a Peer has. This is what defines a Peer and what makes a Peer valuable.

# What is the job of a Peer?

A Peer's job description varies according to the company that he/she is currently working. An estimated idea of the job duties are:

- Individual Sessions
- Facilitate Groups
- Assist Clinicians
- Advocate for the individuals we serve
- Transport individuals

# What does a Peer do in the individual sessions?

A Peer and an individual meet one time a week and some of the protocol followed in sessions and things accomplished are:

- Goal setting
- Sharing experience
- Assessing an individuals needs
- Connecting the individual to community resources
- Conducting interviews and/or using assessment tools

# What does a Peer do when facilitating groups?

A Peer may facilitate groups that are designed, by the Department of Mental Health, their company or some other source. While facilitating a group, a Peer is responsible for keeping the focus on the topic. Another duty is to introduce subjects that reflect on a individuals ability to “recover.” A peer will share, with the group, their own experience working through the subject matter.

# How does a Peer assist Clinicians?

Remember, a Peer's greatest assets in their own lived experience. A Peer shares their story to allow a clinician to gain insight as to how they can best serve their clients. A Peer may share what it is like to be in jail, what it feels like to be misunderstood, or what it is like living with a mental illness. Sharing this information is a way of bringing a voice to the individual.

# What purpose does it serve for a Peer to advocate?

A large portion, of individuals, when asked, “what is your diagnosis” cannot answer this question. Individuals find it very intimidating to speak openly, with doctors and Clinicians. So, they do not ask the right questions. The role of the Peer is to not only serve as a buffer but to teach an individual to advocate for themselves. This is done in individual sessions.

# Where does a Peer go when they are transporting Individuals?

Transporting individuals is strictly determined by the employer. Some examples of where a Peer would take a individual is:

- Doctor's appointments
- Grocery stores to teach them how to shop
- Bowling alley so that they learn how to socialize
- Court
- To obtain a driver's license

# Why do I put “recovery” in parentheses?

You may be wondering why "recovery" is in parentheses.

“Recovery” means something different to every individual. To some it may mean absence of all symptoms. To others it may mean finding a job, obtaining housing, taking their medication, etc. Peers do not define how and to what degree an individual “recovers”. Everyone has a different level of determination and strength. Therefore the individual person defines, for themselves, what “recovery” looks like.

# Are Peer services mandated?

A peer's services are always voluntary. The individual gets to decide whether or not they will utilize the services of a Peer. A Peer leaves them that option because most of an individual's life is mandated because of their condition. Most individuals will choose to work with a Peer.

# Rewards for using a Peer

- Individuals gain confidence and hope that they can recover as well
- Individuals feel at ease with Peers
- Individuals learn that the “system” is there to help
- Stigma of Clinicians and individuals is changed
- The gap between Clinicians and individuals is better
- Individuals build trust
- Individuals reach their goals
- Individuals see that “recovery” is possible
- AND IT IS ALL ABOUT THESE INDIVIDUALS!!!

# In Conclusion

Having a Peer, on staff, is a positive move. The lived experience, of a Peer, coupled with the training a Peer receives is an incredible contribution to the mental health system. Again, it is “all about the individual”. Making an individual comfortable and having them reach their goals is a foundation and explains why people choose this field. Good luck on your endeavor to choose the Peer that works best for you!