



Peer Support in Practice

A Research Report with Recommendations for Practice

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Acknowledgements

Inclusion Barnet would like to thank DRILL and the Big Lottery Fund for making this work possible.

Aman would also like to thank the following people for their input, wisdom and friendship.

- Emma Watson (Nottingham Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust)
- Poppy Repper (Real Lives)
- Gaye Flounders (Turning Point)
- Tracey Lazard (Inclusion London)
- Elsie Lyons (Barnet Voice for Mental Health)
- Dr Rachael Dobson (Birkbeck, University of London)
- Richard Banks (Richard Banks Associates)
- Rebecca Cumming-Sare (Barnet Voice for Mental Health)
- Aneesa Khan (Inclusion Barnet)

Most importantly, we cannot name the people nor the organisations that took part in the research, but we thank you for your generosity in sharing with Aman. Each interview was a pleasure and privilege.



Foreword

Peer support occupies a valued but contested and multi-faceted place in current practice. Encompassing everything from informal peer-to-peer sharing to an increasingly recognised function of more hierarchical, statutory organisations, it is both instinctively welcomed and unconsciously demeaned.

“Nor must peer support ever be seen as simply a cheap option for replacing skilled and experienced mental health staff. Their value comes from working beside such staff,” wrote the authors of 2014’s “Starting Today - Future of Mental Health Services” report from the Mental Health Foundation. Reassuring for the report’s primary audience, no doubt, but somewhat unfortunate in implication around both cost and expertise, given the level of skill and experience good peer support necessarily entails.

Peer support often springs from lived experience that through another prism might be regarded as tragic or at least unfortunate. The way that challenging, often life-changing events are harnessed for good quality peer support gives the practice much of its depth and, perhaps, its mystique. As a both a practitioner and recipient of peer support, I know I have often struggled to articulate the mechanisms of its particular power and potential to assist recovery, and attempts to describe it can, as discussed in this report, quickly descend into platitudes. That is unfortunate because idealisation of peer support as a kind of ineffable love labour potentially devalues it, at least in terms of its professional status, just as surely as underrating its complexity might do.

Therefore, what this research attempts to do is to identify vocabulary which, with some precision, starts to put words to the qualities which underpin good peer support, and further to discuss the organisational processes which might assist their development. As the findings emerged, I knew that they were going to inform and improve our own organisational practices, and I commend this research to readers from all the many kinds of organisations which practice peer support in the hope that you will also find new ways to develop your systems from the findings.

Just as importantly, I feel this report assists us with how we talk about peer support, and therefore how we think about peer support. By describing some of the characteristics of good, intentional peer support, we can perhaps avoid some of the assumptions which inform the passage I quoted earlier, which is itself but one example of many casual descriptors of peer support which could equally have served to illustrate the point. We can understand the complexities and qualities which make peer support effective, and why it is a skilled calling worthy of commensurate recognition and standing. It is my sincere hope that this report can make a real contribution to that conversation.

Caroline Collier

CEO, Inclusion Barnet

Introduction

This handbook is grounded in a qualitative study of peer support workers and their experiences, knowledge and insights of offering peer support. Peer support has a long and rich history, with different methods of delivery developing both formally and informally around the world and within different sectors. In our research, we focused on peer support in mental health; looking in depth at the experiences of people who are employed to use their lived experience to support others who experience mental distress, as part of a structured, formal service.

At Inclusion Barnet, we are a peer-led charity and as peer support practitioners, we know that using our lived experience to support others is a skill that is honed and developed over time, and that good quality peer support services are influenced by the institutional contexts and management practices of the organisations that they exist in. In this report, we draw on the lived experience of peer support practitioners to explore what peer support is, how we can make it work, and some of the elements that contribute to its effectiveness.

When we started this research, we imagined that the resulting handbook would be a simple guide to implementing and improving peer support within organisations. We wanted a ‘no fuss’ approach that would benefit practitioners with limited time and big things to achieve. Our strongest hope however, was to try and produce a handbook that could take the values of peer support and translate those values into practical guides for implementation.

What we learned from over 100 hours of recorded interview data, 279 pages of transcription and 192,400 words from 36 peer support practitioners and the staff they work alongside was that peer support is subjective, nuanced and context-specific. However, there are some common themes and values that run through peer support. We learned that the successful implementation of peer support is as much about thinking and reflecting as it is about doing. This handbook offers no quick fixes, but what it does offer is an exploration of some of the issues that could be considered as well as some basic frameworks that can be used to support the introduction, and ongoing management of peer support workers within organisations.

We start the handbook with a methods section before moving on to a reflective exploration of key themes that emerged from our data in relation to peer support work. We then compile a list of recommendations for employing peer support workers. This handbook will be most useful to people who are starting peer support programmes from scratch, or for organisations within which peer support is in its infancy. We feel very strongly however, that the range of findings are also relevant for experienced mental health peers and for user-led organisations.

Method

Rationale

Currently, many descriptions of peer support can tend to focus on proving the benefits and outcomes of peer support relationships. Often, quotes aimed at capturing the unique nature of peer support can romanticise peer support work through use of subjective descriptions e.g. ‘the gift of hope and companionship’, ‘truth’, ‘honesty’ and ‘trust’.

We understand and value the importance of finding ways to communicate the unique nature of peer-to-peer relationships and their benefits. However, an unintended outcome of using romanticised descriptions of peer support, without specific reference to the working practices and systems of delivery that produce the successes of peer support practice, can be that the individual and institutional skill involved in the delivery of peer support are sometimes rendered invisible. A consequence of this can be that peer support is assumed to be a process that automatically occurs when two people with experiences of mental health issues come together.

Most current evidence on peer support provides decision makers with a strong case for the funding of peer support services, but provides little guidance relating to how to operationalise a good quality service for key decision makers and commissioners wishing to begin, improve or expand services. As Gillard et al. identify, ‘it is not enough to employ people on the basis of their lived experience; shared understandings of how and why peer identity brings about change needs to underpin the role in all organisations’ (Gillard et al. 2014: 691).

As peer support practitioners, our starting point for conducting this research is to conceptualise the use of lived experience to support others as a skill. Moving on from there, we are interested in focusing on systems, processes and cultures that support high quality peer support to take place. Our aim is to begin to explore the working cultures in which peer support flourishes and the systems and management practices that support its success. We are especially interested in beginning to understand if and how peer support practitioners are enabled or constrained by their institutional settings, and the ways in which organisational cultures, structures and management practices affect their work.

Design

Inclusion Barnet is a peer-led charity and we build co-production into every aspect of our work. We employ staff with lived experience of mental health issues and disability at every level of our organisation. Our research team all have lived experience of mental health issues and of providing peer support, and the research design has been informed by this experience. Our research also benefitted from a panel of experts from across sectors all of whom are peers with lived experience both of mental health issues and of providing peer support services. Together, we used our collective experience of peer support to ask research questions that would provide useful insights into peer support practice.

Our principal research question was ‘what organisational contexts, structures and management practices positively support peer support staff to convert their lived experience of mental health issues into successful tools for peer support practice?’.

We conducted a qualitative study with 36 participants from six different organisations: two NHS organisations, two user-led organisations, one community interest company and a local subsidiary of a national health and social care provider. We interviewed 30 staff who identified as peer workers and managers and six managers who identified as non-peers. We conducted semi-structured interviews that lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, though the average interview length tended to be around an hour. We asked recipients open questions about their experiences of delivering peer support and their relationship to their work.

Analysis

A grounded theory approach was used to analyse data. Interviews were transcribed and coded and then organised by recurring themes, keywords and ideas. Those themes were then used to create categories related to the key elements that recurred through the data. Categories were then expanded through use of further data from the research. We used this method for data analysis because we found that key themes and categories emerging from our data set had not yet been established within the research phenomenon in general.

What is Peer Support?

In this next section, we explore the concept of peer support through our conversations with peer support workers. Our research found that peer support cannot, and should not be defined in one single sentence or approach. There is no 'ideal' peer support worker, or universal peer support technique. The interviews showed that peer support most commonly differs depending on:

1. The person that is receiving the support and what their needs are.
2. The service that peers are working within and what that service aims to achieve.
3. The personality of individual peers and their own strengths.

We asked people what peer support meant to them, and some of the answers were:

Peer Support...

- *"...is about healing interactions"*
- *"...means not privileging yourself above the people that you work with, because you have been in their position"*
- *"...is about challenging our own conditioning and the conditioning of the people we work with about what they can achieve and do"*
- *"...about living a rich and fulfilling life, but being supported to do that"*
- *"...about getting people to feel more part of a community"*
- *"...means feeling included, it's about having people in my circle that just get it"*
- *"...is not a friendship, but a really strong bond"*
- *"...is about truthful interactions"*

We often found that when respondents were asked to directly describe peer support, they chose a range of descriptors which focused around the values of peer support and what they hoped it might achieve. However, as peers spoke about their approach to their own practice, how they describe their roles and delved into examples of their work, we began to see themes emerging that helped us to group some key concepts. Below we compile some of the most common aspects of their own practice that peers would describe.

- 1. Peer support is about changing your frame of reference from yourself and your feelings, to the person you are working with and their feelings.**

A 'frame of reference' is a complex set of assumptions and attitudes that we use to understand the world. Our frames of reference can often influence how we choose to act in a situation. As humans, our life experiences often unconsciously impact on how we understand a situation and is usually based on our own feelings. One of our participants described peer support as being *"about understanding and being conscious about how you might make other people feel, and knowing what you can do to make people feel comfortable and safe"*.

2. Peer support is about using your own lived experience in a skilful way.

Using lived experience in peer support is not about revealing every part of your story to every person that you are supporting. The interviews revealed that peer support workers took different approaches to sharing their lived experience. Some used it regularly, others revealed fairly little about themselves. Where peers did use examples of their own experience they commonly described sharing only if they felt it had a clear purpose. They would choose what they shared depending on what they hoped to achieve. Where staff were choosing not to talk about themselves, they used their experience to create empathy and to try and relate to how a person might be feeling in any given situation. *“I remember coming to a training session...and really working out...you don’t need to overshare, like working out when’s appropriate to share your experience. Sometimes it may never be appropriate to share any of your experiences. It might just be that quietly inside you know what that person is going through”*

3. Peer support is about genuinely believing that you do not have all the answers for another person.

Peer support is a genuine **partnership**. As one participant described *“I don’t believe that I ever have all the answers for another person. I think that we can explore that together”*.

4. Peer support is about showing yourself.

Peer support workers incorporate their lived experience into their identities and make this known to the people they work with and support. In the interviews peer workers described how sharing the different parts of themselves built trusting peer relationships. They entered into relationships with the intention of allowing the other person to understand something about who they are in order to better support them and create emotional safety. One of our participants remarked: *“I don’t think you can support somebody if you’re not going to give of yourself”*.

5. Peer support is about working toward meaningful lives from the foundation of a trusting relationship.

The interviews showed that one of the key elements of peer support comes from being able to use the safety that is held within peer relationships to understand what quality of life, success and recovery looks like for each person. Peer support workers described using the foundation of a trusting relationship to support a person to work toward the things they had identified as being important to them: *“So, I ask [people] about what they want, but also what is amiss. So what is the pain about? What is the distress about? And with a curious mind. So not a prying mind, but with a curious mind. Throw in a bit of humour, and humanity”*.

6. Peer support is an art, and the related skills grow with experience.

Even the most experienced peer support workers that we interviewed said that they were still learning, both about their own recovery and about the people they support. Peer workers described a process of using their skills and strengths differently with each person;

this requires judgement, creativity and practice. *“I think it’s really different for every person. How you work as a peer support worker, each client you have will require a different set of skills from you, and a different set of experience will influence those skills”.*

“...so you know yourself that no person is the same and if you have a fixed number of tools in your toolbox, that limits your response, or your ability to respond”.

7. The best peer support workers understand that true progress is slow. But every interaction matters.

Many of the peer support workers that we spoke to shared their understanding that true progress is slow, that people have to be ready and that sometimes it is difficult to feel able to make a difference despite every effort. However, peer support is about positive interactions with people, and believing that over time, those interactions make the difference. *“I think I’ve learned that it’s okay that people will work at their own pace, and that might be really, really, really baby steps. I think coming from an OT background, maybe having short times to work with people and looking at assessments and what you’re going to do and then evaluating and, writing a report and giving it to a team and then how does that impact on this person’s life? It was all a process with an end point. So I think I learned that it doesn’t need to be about a process, and it can be about sitting with that person and going completely at their pace. Um, and that, is something that um, I reflect back a lot of staff that are worrying and going ‘we should be doing this, we should be doing that...’ and I’ll say, well actually at the end of the day we’re here to serve that client and support them in a way that serves them.”*

Peer Support: An exploration

One of our aims for this research was to try to use the data to understand ways to describe and verbalise the skill that goes into relationship building in peer support. Within the research interviews, participants explored some of the complexities surrounding peer support and we explore those complexities and ideas throughout this section.

Our research showed that peer support is a process of gradually building skills and knowledge around using personal experience. The thematic analysis revealed seven core components of peer support and we will explore each in turn:

- Peer support as Sensitisation
- Peer support as Generous Listening
- Peer support as Seeking out the Whole Person
- Peer Support as Connection and Vulnerability
- Peer Support as an Equalising force
- Peer Support as Communicating Worthiness
- Peer Support Relationships
- Peer Support as Balance

We then enter into a wider discussion about the themes that emerged from the data.

Peer Support as Sensitisation

In our interviews, peers were often quite complimentary of some of the non-peer mental health staff that they worked with. However, many staff carried nuanced perspectives on the nature of mental health practice in general, and often identified that certain approaches to practice were damaging:

“I’ve worked in mental health for over 30 years, so knowing what, seeing what bad practice looks like and hearing professionals who have very well intended um, ways of working with people but don’t always think through the impact of either their...what they say or some of the messages that they’re giving out”.

“You can have beautiful talk from senior management with beautiful policies and approaches, but the reality on the ground is that they’re so overworked and stressed, that the only thing that they then refer back to is what they’ve had in their training, so it’s back to basics and the recovery notion goes out of the way. Another facet of this is that the psychiatrist, who you expect sets the culture within the team, they are not recovery oriented. They are disorder oriented. They also have difficulty changing because of the number of patients they see. A ward review lasts about 20 minutes and is once in a week for a patient... So, I have patients come back to me saying that they feel like a piece of meat, or like my story wasn’t heard. I’ve seen patients returning distressed from a ward review and saying all kinds of thing”.

“So people will get up and they’ll talk about recovery and they’ll talk about developments and initiatives which are laudable but my experience is that people don’t actually live

recovery on a day-to-day basis. So people will talk about being warm, welcoming, having hope, looking for strengths, but in reality will not enact that in their day-to-day interactions with people”.

We know from our own experience that many staff who work in mental health do so because they want to make a positive difference. We also know that the current reality of the mental health system is that services are required to meet higher targets with less money and resources. Staff are often over-worked and may not have the time or space to be as reflective as they might like. Our research found that managers of peer staff often felt like peers were able to be more sensitive to the emotional needs of the people that they work with.

One of our non-peer participants who previously worked with, and now manages peer support workers remarked: *“peers are sensitised in a way that I’m not”*. Our thematic analysis revealed that part of the skill that peer support workers develop through use of their training, lived experience and work experience is a process of sensitising themselves to other people’s feelings. This is more than empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share feelings with another person. Peers go one step further than empathy. They are able to use their skills to explore together with people how those feelings are affecting their life and how they might be able to manage this.

Our participants talked about this sensitising as taking many forms:

“I think it comes down to the feelings. You know how it feels. How the illness feels, when professionals are one way and not another, how it feels when services are good, and when they’re not. I think it’s the detail of it which I think is important. I ask the details...do you know what I mean? You’re getting into the detail of someone’s experience”.

“I like just to ask people...where are you now. Like I remember sitting with a lady outside, and she was saying ‘I feel really numb, I can’t feel anything, I used to be able to feel hot and cold, and I can’t now’ I was like okay. Um, that, that sounds you know distressing, and she was sort of saying ‘I can’t feel the heat of the sun’, and I said ‘shall we go and sit in the sun and see if you can’ and the act of trying meant she could. It was just like, the experiences are still there, it’s just not automatic anymore, but when they are not automatic, it’s worth seeking them out”.

In the last example, if the peer had not been sensitised to the feelings of the person she was speaking to, she might have missed a significant opportunity. Being sensitised to how people are feeling can take many forms; but ultimately it is about perceiving the weight and depth of meaning in what people are telling us, and taking a creative and curious approach to using this information to find steps forward. One of our participants described noticing the significant moments of opportunity as “change moments” and remarked *“sometimes statements by people are very important, and if there’s a change moment and you miss it, you miss a big opportunity with that person”*.

Peer Support as Generous Listening

“I feel like [peer support] can offer what my clinicians aren’t able to offer, time, a listening ear, a sit down and a cuppa if that’s what [people] need, I suppose, and engagement. Whereas, we are a service that are time pressured, clinic based mainly, so people aren’t able to build a relationship”.

One of the most important aspects of peer roles is that it often allows peers the advantage of having a role which prioritises spending time with people. A central theme which emerged from the data was the importance of being able to listen well as part of the job.

“It’s about being able to listen to people. It’s more difficult than people realise, being able to listen. I know the way I was before, I found it much harder to listen to people...when we were in training they really reiterated about listening and how important that is. In addition, I thought about myself when I was at [organisation] how important that was to me at the time, being listened to. But the most important thing is to be open minded. So listening yes, that’s very important, and made sense when they were telling us about that in the training. So I, sort of do, sort of, offer someone a cup of tea and ask how are you? And they say, [groan] well y’know...and I say well okay, right, I’ll get the tea, let’s sit down and have a chat. And that’s what I do now, I give time to these people and listen to them. It’s taught me a lot also about myself. Um, which has been really cool, in quite a profound way”

“I do think it’s about a willingness to have a conversation, and listen as though you’re interested in someone, which I am. And I think the fact that that’s my motivation for doing the job, helps me to form those relationships.”

Peer Support as Seeking Out the Whole Person

The peer support described by interviewees stands in strong opposition to what was identified by some participants as a ‘disorder based’ approach to mental health. Often, disorder based approaches see mental health issues in isolation from the trauma and inequality that produce or exacerbate them. Disorder based approaches often ignore the relational nature of recovery. As we saw from the quotes in the section above, they can also tend to ignore how important it is to treat people with kindness and respect.

Peer workers described an approach which sought to understand and know the whole person, rather than reducing them to a single experience, situation or label. Peer workers understood that people who are struggling with their mental health should not be defined by those struggles. They would often describe their exchanges as being powered by an interest in the other person, a searching curiosity, a willingness to be surprised as well as a willingness to hold ambiguity. There was often a relationship between listening well, not making assumptions, asking important questions and the quality of the interaction which led to seeking out the whole person.

“People are constantly surprising me with extra interests that they have. I mean, everybody has them. It’s just about finding them out again. But it’s brilliant when you sort of remind someone of something they love and they run with it”

“You’ve got to, it makes you... you try and put yourself in somebody else’s shoes, and until I worked in doing what I’m doing now, it was just, in the life I lived before, you were very polarised in your attitudes towards people... it was the good guys or the bad guys. With the people that we support, some of them are very complex and um, you take less and less on face value and understanding how their issues and problems and vulnerabilities impact their lives and impact their ability to relate to you. And I’m forever trying to put myself in their shoes, to understand where they’re coming from. Definitely, it makes you a lot more reflective, and um, a lot more reflective really and analytical. I think that’s the word I was looking for you know, you tend to try to analyse things, analyse why someone got shirty with you for something. The easiest thing is for you to take umbrage at it, the not so easy thing to do is to understand where they’ve come from, why they’ve made that comment or why that attitude has arisen, and the easy thing is just to ignore it and walk away, but the difficult thing is to understand it and to empathise. I know it’s a well over-used word in what we do, but it’s massive isn’t it. I, you, you really get, if you try to understand, it’s appreciated I think, it’s appreciated and welcomed if you really make an effort to put yourself in someone else’s shoes.”

“I had someone who said I want to be a famous actor, and um, ya, a psychiatrist might sign it off as a fantasy, but this person might be happy to take part in amateur dramatics and maybe work in a theatre”.

Peer Support as Connection through Vulnerability

A strong theme which ran through the data was the importance of sharing in the process of peer support.

“I’ve always believed that people need to feel in control and need to be able to talk about themselves when they’re at work because I don’t think you can support somebody if you’re not going to give of yourself... So I believe that we should at that point be able to say who we are and what we are about... I think in order for people to feel safe they need to be able to understand a little bit about the person that they’re being introduced to”.

Many of our participants noted the difference that sharing details about themselves would make to the people that they were working with and supporting: *“Question: When you’re in a 121 with someone you’re working with, what difference do you feel self-disclosure makes?”*

“People relax. Like it physically makes them relax. It’s kinda weird. I know I shouldn’t say it’s weird, but like, just the whole demeanour of people. Their shoulders go down, their face isn’t as tense, their hands stop fidgeting. Like you can see the physical difference in their demeanour towards you. Or some people laugh, it’s really funny [both laugh]. But it is this massive, like breath of fresh air, like, oh fuck okay! And then they kinda start seeing you more as an equal, and you chat to them, you don’t interview them anymore. That’s the difference, like you’re not, it’s not like, obviously the boundaries are very much there but they’re not keeping them anymore, you are”.

“I think it makes people more comfortable talking. Cos you’re disclosing things about yourself, and I mean I always think well it’s happened, there’s no point denying it. But some people don’t like disclosing anything, I think they can relax and say more, or at least feel better when they’re saying it because they know they’re talking to somebody who understands and I think probably they will say more to you”.

Some peers went into further detail about the nature of sharing their experiences, and the benefits it can have for the people that they work with beyond creating safety in the relationship:

“Um, it makes someone possibly feel less lonely, um, less like they’re the only one. It certainly helped me when people have said that they’ve been through something or, sometimes you feel a bit like, if you’re the only person, or if nobody ever said that they’d been through something, sometimes you can feel a bit like maybe I’ve just created this, or maybe I’ve made this into something that it isn’t. And for somebody to go, oh I know about that, you go, oh! So it is a real thing, so it does happen?!”

Comparing how our peer interviewees and non-peer interviewees spoke about sharing lived experience revealed a disparity in comfort levels around vulnerability. In their interviews, peers spoke about their roles as sometimes being exposing *“It can be quite exposing because you’re being your whole self, showing your values and what you believe in”*, while from non-peer workers who disclosed having experienced distress we had contrasting answers: *“Seeing the difference my peer support workers make, is really inspiring. Knowing their journey and how they’ve then completely taken advantage of it, and gone ‘I’m going to turn this completely around’...it’s kind of like a really weird concept to try and get your head around. That people can take a situation where they felt so awful, and had the most awful things happen to them, and felt the most awful things they can possibly feel, to then turn that around and use that as their stability, and use that as what makes them money and keeps them well...And I suppose I, me, I find it difficult to open up about me. I find it hard to, it’s it’s, I’ve never really thought about why?”*

Peer Support as an Equalising Force

The lived experience element of peer support encourages equality in relationships. This is born out of the fact that, as peers, the focus on lived experience means that helpful peer support workers consistently work towards not seeing themselves as ‘better than’ the people that they work with, because they have been in similar situations.

Peers would often describe their own experiences with mental health practitioners and would build their practice in opposition:

“This sounds a bit negative but it’s probably more helpful to talk about the things that aren’t helpful. Like if you are sent around a CPN, and you’ve got all these questions, and they can’t answer it. Because they haven’t lived through it and they don’t know, because, what I found very strongly interacting with professionals when I was ill myself is that they unconsciously distanced themselves from you – it’s completely subtextual, but it’s like...well this happens to people like you not people like me”

As one participant described: *“I would say for our clients, the main thing about us being peer workers is that we’re fellow travellers. Rather than being the tools of an institution, the instruments of this institution, we’re fellow travellers”.*

“I think the other thing that’s really good about [peer support], is that it also encourages equality and responsibility... but [pause] in my experience in a lot of mental health settings...I think there is so much, there’s still so much stigma and so much us and them, and so much fantastic amount of just, patronising and devaluing people’s experiences and points of view when they’re struggling with their mental health. I think that peer support adds an element of equality because I also don’t think that that helps people to get better. In that I think being patronised, being spoon fed, being told what to do, I don’t think is helpful. Whereas having a relationship which is encouraging, but also acknowledges that you’ve got to do stuff to get better, that person can’t do it for you is also very therapeutically valuable. Because they’re not doing something for this person, this person is choosing to be there, and choosing to engage with this and choosing to move forwards in whatever way that they want to. And so I think that peer support [pause] really sort of places that at the centre [pause] I guess, and that’s very, very important.”

“And there’s situations with some of the clients I’ve got where I would think mmm okay, today that does sound a bit worrying. So then I’d open up a conversation about how we deal with that together, how we move forward because that sounds, I’m a bit worried. In a professional role, I wouldn’t say, ‘yeah I feel like that’.”

Peer Support as Communicating Worthiness: Why every interaction counts

Many of the peer support workers that we spoke to shared their understanding that true progress is slow, that people have to be ready and that sometimes it is difficult to feel able to make a difference despite every effort. However, peer support is about positive interactions with people, and believing that over time, those interactions make the difference:

“But we don’t always get people who want to work on themselves, they just want to be looked after for another eight weeks. That’s difficult...you just try chipping away really. It may be that you’ll say something, you don’t get immediate feedback but it’s registered. So we try”.

“I remember when I was ill, I was terrified. Terrified of not being enough. I see now that my terror, and it was sheer terror, came across as me being really passive. I had been so used to being treated like an object, it was hard to feel like I had any power. In my culture girls often don’t get given choices. I did what I was told and didn’t challenge because that was how I was conditioned. Then, one day, someone asked me what I wanted, and looked at me like they meant it, and like they cared what I thought and how I felt. Something woke up inside me that day”.

“My journey with coming to terms with my own difficulties has been a lot about not being hard on myself for having a hard time – I’ve also felt like I’ve not deserved to make myself feel better. So just working with people and looking at what can make this time more

bearable for them. Gently reminding people they matter, there have been better times and teasing out what they're feeling".

Peer Support Relationships

We are conscious that it is important not to overly romanticise peer relationships. Our research participants emphasised that just like any relationship, the quality of peer support relationships varied based a number of factors.

"I think I was completely idealistic about it to begin with because I'd had a really positive experience of it [peer support] that had actually been quite pivotal in my recovery. I think over time, I've kind of realised that for some people it is that great, for some people it doesn't work out and for some people it's okay".

"It's funny because when people are upset and they go for someone to talk to, they don't tend to pick me, they'll go for their key worker. But if we're out and about then we'll get chatting, I don't get down about it. I just accept what comes along you know, there's all sorts of reasons that some people prefer some people than others. I've had some very good [relationships] with people who really listen to what I've got to say and who are open with me about what's going on in their lives".

Another important theme relating to relationships and trust that came up, was the importance of protecting the choices that the people who are using services are making about their own self disclosures. Peers would often describe situations where an individual using a service may have disclosed something to a non-peer member of staff who, instead of exploring that issue with the person themselves, may have told the peer support staff to do so. In these situations, it is important to protect the choices that people make for themselves.

"I've had situations when people have come up to me, not while I've been working here, but previously. I've had situations where people have like come up to me, and it's because a client has asked them [about something related to their experience]: what they did instead of just like having that conversation, they came to me...they could have had like a certain relationship with [the person] at that point, and by coming to me, and then getting me to talk about my experience, they might have broken that trust with that person and it could hinder them in some way. Whereas for me, if they have come to me and had that conversation with me, then I would have just had the conversation...and also, the fact of your experience is really precious, what's happened to you is really, really precious. And it's your choice whether you want to share it with somebody, and you may share different things with different people at different times. But you're making that decision, at that time, to share that information because it's going to be beneficial for that person, it's going to help them. And I feel it's a bit of a violation when people take what you've told them, and then go right, go and talk to that person about it, because it kind of undermines your whole experience".

Peer Support as Balance

A strong theme that came out of the data was that we could see peer support as a synthesis of opposites between boundaries and love.

“And in terms of the relationships that you’re able to form with people, what makes those relationships different from other relationships in your life, and in their life?”

Excellent question that. Excellent question. Um, [pause] I think, because you, when you start working with somebody, I’m convinced that what it should be, it should be done in, you should start off in a boundaried way. It’s different because it’s boundaried, and it’s got to be boundaried for both parties. There is some cross-over without any doubt, for example, the day that we went to [the beach] we were like a couple of old mates that day. Uh, but yeah I think it’s the boundaried approach that makes it different...You can be relaxed and easy-going, and still be professional”

“I know that it’s work. I know that there are certain things that you can do, and certain things that you can’t do...but I’ve known [person they work with] that long now, it’s been three years...and now we’re like sisters...cuz we get, we get on that well. We are really, we have a right laugh together, and it’s really really good. But I know at the end that it’s work”

Discussion: Peer Support and Creating Mutual Experiences

The words ‘trust’ and ‘honesty’ are commonly used in descriptions of peer support relationships. One of our aims for this work was to explore what those words mean in the context of relationships between peers. The findings from the analysis highlight that the elements that go into the peer support role are countless; they are dependent upon the skills of the peer, their life experience and the needs of the person they are working with.

In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, love, belonging and esteem are our three essential psychological needs. We know that mental health difficulties isolate people. This is why when people are not well, every interaction matters. Mental health staff might be the only people that we see that day, week or month. The way that other people treat us can come to define how we expect to be treated, this is what often defines our own sense of worth. Powerlessness is a common feeling in people who experience mental health issues. In fact, it can be one of the most pervasive and damaging. **The way that we treat people matters** because it affects people’s expectations of how it is acceptable to be treated. Often in times of distress, the feeling of powerlessness is amplified by the interactions that we have with others, especially in times of intense vulnerability. The way that mental health staff work with people contributes to people’s feelings of worthiness. Belonging, love and esteem builds worthiness.

“I remember when I was an inpatient, it was so horrible that my recovery journey was a lot about getting over how I was treated in hospital as it was about the reasons that I went to hospital in the first place. The way that I was treated, spoken to, and demeaned in interactions with mental health professionals was soul destroying, and those interactions

destroyed a lot of me. As a peer I am just so aware of how every word, every expression, every element of my interactions matter – even when it seems like they don't, they do”.

“It’s not about whether you’ve a got mental illness or a diagnosis, it’s more about the fact that we’re all humans and we’ve all been through shit times and good times and we need to connect with those feelings and understand [pause] that we’re all kind of you know, in it together. And you know, fundamentally within my work and my personal life, first and foremost I think peer support is about giving people a choice and options...So, for example there may be a situation, where, when I was working in the crisis house, there were many situations where workers would make decisions for people. Even stupid little decisions like ‘okay, at 2 o’clock that’s when I’m gonna do a 121 with that person’ and I’ll be like, ‘maybe they don’t wanna do it at 2 o’clock, why not go and ask them, d’ya know that I mean like? Just ask them. Even little minor things that seem so insignificant, when you’re not feeling great, they’re important. So always, it is making sure that whatever gets discussed, you discuss it with that person and you ask their opinions and views and give them an opportunity to decide what they want. And obviously there’s sometimes, they’re not able to. But even in times when they’re not able to make those choices, just explaining why these decisions are being made alleviates a lot of the kind of tensions and battles of wills...and just explaining shit to people is, just important”.

Lived Experience – An Exploration

The focus on lived experience is what makes peer support unique. One of the things that gives peer support its identity is how peers use their experience as a source of knowledge and expertise in their work.

When we asked peers how using their lived experience affected their practice, they said:

- *“It’s that reflective consciousness”*
- *“It was always about looking at why, what was to the benefit of that person?”*
- *“Being in a place where you have a genuine interest in other people’s stories”*
- *“I don’t necessarily sit there and talk about my stuff with every single person I meet. But every single person I meet, I think about it. It’s present in the back of my head, every time I’m dealing with a case. I’m thinking how can I relate to this in order to figure out what might be beneficial”*
- *“I’ve always connected with people who would look beyond everything and see me for me...it made me feel healthier being around people who understand me as a person”*
- *“The important thing about sharing experiences is that it’s validating. When my experiences have been validated, I find it healing”*
- *“I don’t go into depth, but I touch on things...so people know I know what it’s like”*

Themes relating to using lived experience in peer support

1. The focus on using lived experience in peer support is not just about indiscriminately sharing stories.

Experienced peers said that they would choose when they shared their experience, and that sharing would have to have a purpose. Peers identified that using lived experience in their work took many forms. Using lived experience in peer support is not about revealing every part of your story to every person that you are supporting. The interviews revealed that peer support workers took different approaches to sharing their lived experience. Some used it regularly, others revealed fairly little about themselves, and many peers said that the way they used their experience would depend on the situation. Where peers did use examples of their own experience they commonly described sharing only if they felt it had a clear purpose. They would choose what they shared depending on what they hoped to achieve. Where staff were choosing not to talk about themselves, they used their experience to create empathy and to relate to how a person might be feeling in any given situation.

“...but it probably is very unsafe to share if you share indiscriminately about your lived experience. I think there’s something about that peer support workers have training on how to use their lived experience. What feels comfortable for them, and what feels comfortable for the listener to hear, and we spend a lot of time in peer support training exploring that. Not the right and wrong way of sharing, but what in what context feels safe, emotionally safe”.

“I remember coming to a training session...and really working out...you don’t need to overshare, like working out when’s appropriate to share your experience. Sometimes it may never be appropriate to share any of your experiences. It might just be that quietly inside you know what that person is going through”.

“[sharing lived experience] doesn’t mean here that everyone goes ‘yes I’ve been through this and that happened to me’, it just means that over time, you might build a rapport with somebody and it might be useful one day to say ‘I went through a similar thing, and this is how it helped me, and this is what I did about it at the time”.

“Um, so, I don’t, I’m not forever saying oh yeah, don’t worry about that, I was depressed, or I’ve had my problems and what I did...and I don’t use myself as a shining example with anybody. But I suppose it’s...when you’ve been in a situation with your own, that, mental health if you like, you find it very difficult to see things in perspective, to see things objectively, and when you start to come out of it and you start on your recovery journey, you do, you get very reflective about it and you try to understand why you felt, and all the recovery journey and the help that people give you it’s trying to understand why you’ve gone down that road and how best to mitigate it and promote recovery so, I think from your own recovery journey, you learn lessons that you can pass on indirectly. I think that’s how I use it”.

2. Prioritising lived experience places emphasis on whole people: understanding all the elements of people’s lives and the kind of support that works for them.

Peers often spoke about being conscious of tailoring the support that they provide to the needs of the people that they work with. They also described how getting to know people as deeply as the role allowed was central in their ability to do their jobs well.

“...but when you talk to her about what she wants to do, she comes alive, and she’s really happy and she’s smiling, and she wants to go swimming and she wants to do crafts but also she needs help around the house but also she needs someone who’s really careful and considerate”.

“I’ll ask about where people wanna be in the future, what do they want to achieve from their support, what do people expect... what kinds of environments and situations make them feel unsafe, early warning signs, triggers, good days, bad days, wellness tools, what are their passions and goals and aspirations. So you know, you’re really tapping into people’s inner core”.

“They’re all different, it’s very individual...And I feel like I’m just looking for opportunities to get in and to be able to talk to people...a lot of people have input into the guests here, the key worker, the recover workers, everybody. Um, so I’m one cog, I’m aware of that, but I try and do it, I do have that different edge where I do try and understand a bit more”.

“Yeah so originally it was really important for [the person I was working with] to have somebody, she didn’t want a Caucasian worker. That was really important to her, but then when we met, it was like well actually, we’re a similar age and we’re both single mums. We’ve both got boys the same age, at the time both of our boys were 18 months. So...it’s

peer support in that we've got a very similar experience and we're on the same time-line with everything. And she'll 'go oh my god, is this his age?' And I'll go, 'yeah, I'm really sorry, it is, we're at the same stage in our house as well. But now she's...there's been a couple of times when another pal has provided support when I've been off, and she's of a similar ethnic background and has a similar family and similar family situations and that has actually been really helpful for her'.

3. Using lived experience to support personal practice does not have to be about people using their experience of mental health issues.

Some participants spoke about how lived experience can be used more widely than just by people who have experienced mental distress. Some peers described either using their own experience more generally, or encouraging their colleagues to use their experience to build empathy, equality and creativity in exchanges with people.

"...but also to think about how everybody can work with the values of peer support as well. So not just kind of saying a peer supporter is someone who has lived experience and uses that, but that everybody can harness their lived experience in their work and everybody needs to be thinking about their own mental health in their work".

"I didn't have a diagnosis..., I have learned now to use my experiences, and bring them in kind of in a kind of peer support style. So I have something quite difficult happen a couple of years ago, and actually I came out of it going 'wow I've got a really good experience of what it's like to be in touch with services', why I disengaged from services which was around physical stuff, why I did that, and understanding my clients and why they might disengage from mental health services".

4. Using lived experience in peer support entails a continuous process of personal reflection to build an understanding of one's own experiences and assumptions, and to challenge these in order to continue to grow.

Peers often described the importance of reflection, self-assessment, and challenging their assumptions and reactions to things. Many peers understood the importance of challenging themselves and their own reactions.

"I'm always thinking about my own reactions to things"

"...but a lot of [our training] is about understanding what you're bringing which I think is really important. [pause] and people get it on different levels. Some people totally love it and totally get it, and that's great. And some people will get it to a certain extent, but still enough for it to really be effective and stop them from reacting in the moment".

Themes relating to the benefits of using lived experience in peer support

1. Having lived experience helps peer support workers to understand how the people they work with might be feeling. They have an understanding of how particular experiences impact on people's lives.

“...you’re building relationships with them and getting to know them, more long term. Um, and it’s people that you know, have had a number of experiences. Whether its previous experiences of working as a peer or whatever, you’re constantly working with those experiences longer-term”

“I do genuinely think that in mental health, and for people struggling with their mental health there’s a real, huge value in lived experience and knowing that the person you’re speaking to has some understanding of that. Partly because of the stigmatisation, but it’s, for example, a very common thing if you’re struggling with your mental health, obviously this is a massive generalisation. But if you’re struggling to get up in the morning – now, most people would be like well, if you haven’t suffered from mental health difficulties then, it really is so difficult to understand how you can’t just move your legs, get up, and have breakfast. There can be a massive assumption about laziness, of you know, this is your fault. And until you have experienced that paralysis and fear of things which should be...which other people find completely normal and completely un-challenging, then I think it, and my own experience of mental health professionals without that lived experience is that there’s a real lacking in understanding that exists. So to know what it feels like to not be able to do things that everyone else think is super easy, is very valuable”

“About um, so I suffered emotional abuse at the hands of my parents... I’m very careful when I bring that in, I say, this has been my experience, what has been yours. Make a clear definition, also this is also critical ‘these are my observations, what are your observations?’ so it gives a framework to how I share. So, this has been my observation in my family, and my parents, um, how has it been for you? What are your observations? And, those observations might differ, and that’s okay too”

2. Working with peers brings people hope for what they might be capable of doing in the future

“And there’s a huge amount of, I think one of the big impacts of the peer support workers who do self-disclose is a reducing of stigma, and I don’t know, what’s the appropriate word, but self-stigmatisation. So there’s a kind of an assumption of ‘well I have mental health difficulties therefore I’m worth nothing, or I’m stupid, or I’m mental’ or whatever. Um, and I think seeing then people who they respect, and see as helpful and as responsible and who they just admire, then helps them to realise that actually, just because they’ve got mental health difficulties doesn’t mean that they can’t be any of those things. Um, and that’s hugely important”.

“So I have used my experience to show you can work and earn a salary, and gain meaningful work.”

“I guess what we know is that peer support peers work best with transition and crisis, I think there’s some evidence which shows that when people are going through those bigger changes in their lives. I think to be able to engage with services and work and build up some of that trust and that hope and sort of have an understanding of what opportunities are available to them, that peers are really good at embedding those things really, so within [one service], people transitioning into that service have often had long periods of time in

hospital and I think it really helps to work with somebody who has similar mental health experiences. I think just to sort of, for us it really embeds what our values are, and I think it enables the people who use our services to see that they are important, that staff do believe in them and there is hope for the future”.

3. Peers are often able to develop stronger relationships with the people they work with because they can use their lived experience to validate the experiences of the people that they work with.

“...it’s really useful for somebody to go in [with a person they are working with] and because they’ve got mental health problems, they’ll be worried about whether their child will be taken off them and things like that, for me to be able to go in and share with them that sometimes I feel like throwing my child out of the window, and it’s okay to feel like that. It’s not an abnormal feeling, that’s not because you’ve had depression or psychosis, it’s actually just because you’re a parent, and that’s what kids do, they push you to the edge”

““...and we had a fabulous day. The benefit that the client got out of it was immeasurable, it really was a pleasure to see. It was one of those days that when you finish, you think, job well done today, you know. But that’s something you can only really do and get the best out of when you’ve had the chance to know people”

4. The fact that peers are skilled in using their lived experience to help others means that they not only bring their lived experience of mental health, but also bring a wide range of skills from many parts of their life to help others.

“Question: And how have you developed that kind of understanding of it [your peer practice]? What’s been important in that journey?”

I think everything. Everything in my life has been, like, right, even from before, like even knowing what peer support was, or knowing it was even a thing”.

“As a peer, using my lived experience means thinking about my whole entire life. I’ve always been a bit like that, thinking about how different aspects of my life are relevant to other aspects. But I think my own experiences of things like my relationships, what brings me joy, what I find hard, all that other stuff, is all really important experience that I draw on when I’m talking to people. My life is, and has always been about so much more than my mental health, and I use all of my experience when I’m thinking with the people I work with”.

“But what we practically do...most of what we do, it depends on our skills. I’m not very good at remembering the organisations out there, but I’m better at emotional support, so for my clients. In a way, I’d say we have 13 different services [one for every member of staff]. I’ve been keen from the beginning to encourage people to use their particular skills, so if somebody is brilliant at working out benefits and helping people get what benefits they can get, then they might focus a bit more on that with their clients. I’m personally rubbish at that sort of thing so my clients get better emotional support”.

Discussion: Lived Experience and Relationship Building

“I’ve been with professionals and I’m thinking ‘I can’t relate to you because you’ve always had a white picket fence life’ and it’s impossible for me to sit here and go, I don’t even want that, let alone has it ever been any part of my past”.

As well as some of the more quantifiable benefits of peer support, respondents described something a little less tangible. A lot of what people described contextualised the benefits of peer support by contrasting them with their experiences of receiving support from more traditional mental health services and staff. Peers described an indefinable connection, difference in emotional safety or unspoken commonality which helps to build trust. We explore some comments below:

“There’s something I can’t describe, there’s something about talking to somebody who you know has had a previous experience and it’s hard to put into words. But it’s there nevertheless. It’s like talking to you, I don’t have to go into loads of detail because I assume that you understand. Um, yeah, like when I said I had a bad patch, you sort of understand what I meant, but if you said that to someone else they might think ‘skiving, having a day off’ or whatever. So you kinda know, there’s that unwritten understanding between you that’s just there, and I can’t explain why it is. It’s like anything isn’t it, someone from the same background or someone born on the same estate you have something that other people don’t have with you, and I think that’s one of the big things that drives it. I think it’s hard to explain, I really do find it hard to explain”

“...but just every-day human skills I think. And to have the understanding, because you then get the comfort and the warmth back from people. And you just know it works, yeah, just people skills, that’s it. I think that’s the most important because if you haven’t got that, then you’re just acting a part out. And I’ve seen too much of that in this, not from the group that I work with, but I’ve seen a lot of that from other agencies. The human touch”

Recommendations for Practice

Introduction

Of the peer support workers that we spoke to, those who were happiest, most able to articulate the complexity of peer support, and were positive about the quality of their work, described belonging to effective teams with good managers. They felt valued, supported and that work was a healthy place for them. Some key learning that emerged from the interviews:

- i. In many places, a professionalised peer role is a completely new entity. Many of us generally understand the role of traditional mental health professionals such as Support Workers or Social Workers. There are many aspects of these roles that have been refined over decades. It takes intentional planning and strategic thinking to incorporate peer support into the everyday business of the organisation. Making peer support work operationally is the responsibility of an entire team, not just the peer support worker themselves.
- ii. While peer support has some unique elements, the principles of managing and implementing peer support are no different from any other well managed project.
- iii. Peer support is about culture change, this can be challenging in teams. Time needs to be given to the process of introducing peer support to help people question their reactions to peer support.
- iv. Where the development, implementation and management of peer support involved experienced peers, those programmes worked better. However, it is possible for non-peers to manage successful peer support programmes as long as their values align with the principles of peer support.

We start our recommendations for practice with a brief overview of what positive working cultures look like, we then go on to look at some specific elements of implementing peer support that might be useful for organisations to reflect on.

Introducing Peer Support into the Workplace: A Contextual Understanding

An extremely important thing that we learned throughout this work, is that peer support is still in its infancy. There are some geographic areas where there is a large community of practice surrounding peer support. Some areas have centralised peer support training available numerous times a year, advocates of peer support who talk to organisations about how they might implement peer support within their organisations, supported peer support placements and more. In those areas peer support has flourished and the quality of practice and peer skills is notable.

In contrast, there are many areas in which peer support is new, or not widely implemented. In those areas however, there may be established user-led organisations with in-depth knowledge of implementing and running peer support. Many individuals within those

organisations have years of knowledge. Reach out to them and learn from them if you are struggling to think about peer support within your organisation.

Peer Support in the Workplace: Company Culture

Where peer workers described thriving in their roles, they also described a positive working culture where everybody felt valued. Below we briefly outline what our research showed positive working cultures, conducive to making peer support work, look like.

- I. Senior level staff who have the power to make strategy level decisions understand why they want to introduce peer support into their organisations.
- II. The peer support strategy is part of a wider set of values that the organisation holds and managers know how to recruit staff, train and supervise staff who mirror those values, are managed by those values, and manage by those values.
- III. Senior staff involve manager level staff in decisions that directly affect them and their team. They work together on understanding where peer support fits in with their services and work together on ideas for implementation.
- IV. Manager level staff feel empowered, supported and listened to. They feel like they are involved in decision making that directly affects them and have a say in how changes to their team are rolled out. Manager level staff buy-in to the values and working practices of the organisation and are able to model good practice with their teams.
- V. Managers communicate enthusiasm and positivity for the integration and delivery of peer support. They communicate how peer support fits with the values of the team and what they are trying to achieve through the work of peer support.
- VI. Team leaders and team members are enthusiastic about peer support. They understand what peer support workers do and how that fits with their work.
- VII. Managers understand how peer support works in practice: they share the responsibility with peer support workers for the success of the role. They are able to supervise their peer staff and make suggestions for practice, training and wellness.
- VIII. Peer support workers are clear about what their roles are. They are supported by the team, and work to support the team in return. Teams share the values of co-production and peer support – they are happy to be gently challenged by peers on their practice, and understand that this is part of the peer role.

Introducing Peer Support into the Workplace - Leadership Structures

Leadership in peer support matters. Those organisations who do best at embedding it described having the following structures.

- i. Those responsible for introducing peer support within their organisations have a clear vision for what they want to achieve, and are able to communicate that with others.**

Where we spoke with senior leaders who were able to articulate clearly what they wanted peer support to achieve within their organisations in general terms, their leadership was clearly visible through shared visions among all staff. Those teams were more positive about working within the organisation and about their staff and co-workers. Everyone was working towards a shared vision. *“I think the other thing that I feel really strongly about is that I think it [peer support] really embeds the right values within the staff team and that there is an understanding that within the staff team that they um, that the people who use our services are important. That they can progress and work within our services, and it really breaks down the us and them culture, and it makes sure that you’re attracting, appointing and keeping people with the right values”.*

- ii. Creating Manager-Level Buy-In, not just ‘dumping’ peer support on managers.**

Service managers will be responsible for the day-to-day leadership of peer support. They will also be responsible for making sure peers are utilised within the service. Where interviewees described positive experiences of peer support, managers had values which were well aligned to peer support approaches and had made a choice to lead the introduction of peer support, rather than being told that this was something they must be involved in. Where this is not possible, communicate the reasons for introducing peer support within the service and what you hope to achieve. Having managers who understand the values and reasons for introducing peer support into the service is important.

- iii. Start a conversation about the practicalities.**

It is important to consider how peer support fits with the service operationally and whether there will be any issues with implementation. Often teams that had anticipated possible challenges to the implementation of peer support within their services, and intentionally managed those difficulties, had more successfully embedded peer support within their service, or had happier peer support workers. Peer support workers who expressed the most dissatisfaction in their work often had managers who had neglected to proactively anticipate and manage those difficulties. Most organisations that were part of the research employed peer support workers as something ‘different’ within their service. Taking some time before hand to anticipate the potential issues that introducing peers might cause within teams, and proactively considering how to embed peers within the work of the whole team can save time down the line.

The research data shows that spending time learning about the values and principles that surround peer support, having a vision for what you hope peer support will achieve within the organisation and actively planning and managing the introduction of peer support can really help to make it a success. Introducing peer support this way means that the successful introduction of peer support is shared, and does not rest entirely on the peer support workers who join in their new roles. Having a broad, shared vision of what peer support can achieve can very much help to get the basics of peer support right. If you feel that your team is not equipped for this task, bringing in experts to help develop peer support within your organisation can most definitely save time and money in the long run.

Introducing Peer Support into the Workplace - Recruitment

As with any role, recruiting the right people is a key factor in the success of peer roles. Participants shared their experiences about what helps, both from the perspective of the person being employed and the organisation:

- i. Involve the team managers who will be managing peers within their teams in writing job descriptions, person specifications and interviews.

Building on the strategic vision for peer support from above, use the opportunity to draft or review job descriptions and person specifications to spark conversations about how peer support might look in practice in new teams.

- ii. Think about the personal qualities, wider skills and experience that you would want a peer to have. Do not assume lived experience is enough.

What kind of qualities will your peer need to thrive in your service? Are you a busy team that requires a self-starter? Are you a crisis service that requires someone to be thoughtful and gentle?

- iii. What will you be asking peer support staff to do in their day to day work? What skills and experience will they need to be able to do this?

Will you be asking peers to go out and about, will they need to be confident on public transport? Will your peers be talking to people one-to-one or will your peers have to be confident in groups? Will they need to be good at filling out paperwork? Will your peers be challenging team practice? How might they do this? It is worth thinking about all the wider aspects of skills, expertise and temperament that somebody you employ for a role will need.

- iv. Think carefully about how you advertise the role

Putting some thought into communicating the values you want to recruit to and the qualities you want your peer support workers to bring will make your drive for recruitment much more useful. "I think part of the challenge...is to think about how we can create new profiles for jobs that rely on the other qualities that people bring. So where this happens really well, you get many, many more applications". It might be worth thinking about the language that you use in the advertisement; is 'peer' a word that is recognised in your geographic area or community.

- v. If you are not accustomed to advertising for peer roles, thinking about where you advertise might be a key to success.

How might you usually advertise, and is this likely to be seen by peers? Might you be able to advertise the role through user-led groups? Spending some time thinking about the avenues that you use to advertise peer roles could be key to a successful recruitment drive.

Interviewing

Of the organisations that we spoke to, there were very few commonalities in interview process. Each organisation had chosen theirs to match their own aims. Some organisations liked to interview groups of peers together to see how they interact with other people; others kept their interview process the same as it would be for any member of staff that they might interview. One consistent theme emerged from the interviews:

- i. The nature of peer support delivery means that recruiting people who are able to translate their values into their practice is vital.

Being able to judge whether or not interviewees can genuinely action their values in their practice comes with judgement. Paying attention to the language that people use, and the situations they describe can be helpful during interviews.

“I think values are demonstrated in a number of ways, so two people might describe the same scenario, but what I’m looking for is someone who, in describing a scenario is doing it from a human perspective. So they weren’t sitting there saying that they had all the answers, or that they went off and researched things for the individual, what I would be looking for is someone to say: ‘I’d be much more interested in the person. So what’s brought you here today? What are the things that are important to you? And developing that relationship is about a mutual and reciprocal view. We’re looking for kind of working with that individual on their strengths and not their weaknesses. So I think language and the way that people describe things is really important because you get a real sense of what that person is about.”

“I think recognising the massive variety of skill and experience that people bring. I’ve been talking a lot about ‘oh you know, this is what somebody has to be like’, but the reality of peer support is, that people come in extraordinarily different shapes and sizes and who all bring something very different. So it’s not about dismissing people who, when you first meet them, you might think, I can’t see them being in this role. I can’t see them being able to do it. People often really, really surprise me and other people at what they’re able to bring. Um, and so I think that kind of flexibility and open mindedness is very, very important.”

Introducing Peer Support into the Workplace – Preparing Teams.

Our research found that one of the most important factors in determining whether or not peer support works is how ‘prepared’ the team are, and how much willingness they have to genuinely integrate peer support into the every-day of the work. We found that:

- i. One of the key activities in the successful introduction of peer support into the organisation is in how you introduce it to the team before peer support workers start.

The interviews showed that if managers are able to confidently speak with their teams about what peer support is, and enthusiastically support its integration into the team, peer workers are more likely to be successful and supported in their role. Managers’ reactions are likely to model how teams feel about peer support. This is why it is important for senior staff and managers to have sat down and had these conversations.

- ii. Build a shared sense of responsibility within a team for peer support to work.

In the organisations that we undertook research in, peer workers were often employed part-time at the lower pay grades within teams. They often didn’t have the power to convince teams of their usefulness or convert them to peer support approaches. Some of the teams that we spoke to expected peers to make the role work on their own. They placed the responsibility for making the role work, deciding what the every-day of the role looks like, convincing their colleagues peer support is a good idea and integrating the role with the service to peer staff alone. This placed unnecessary and unhelpful pressure on peer workers and reduced the likelihood that they felt valued in their roles. Before peers are introduced into the role, work with the team and build ownership over the role between everybody.

- iii. Have conversations within teams about what peers should and should not do.

Some of the staff that we interviewed expressed concerns about peers and their training. We talk about this in our training section. Some of the difficulties within teams arose when team members were unclear of the role that peers play and the kind of work that is appropriate to give peers – this seemed to be especially true of clinical teams. Offering teams time and space to share their concerns about peer support honestly is a helpful approach and role models the openness inherent in peer support. Making sure that senior members driving peer support within your organisation, who are responsible for strategy are there too and ready to talk about how everyone can make this work together can be a helpful way to share the responsibility with service managers.

Peer Support: Training

It is not within the remit of this work to enter into great detail what peer support training should include but we can talk about what we learned from the data and suggest some useful things to look out for or include when thinking about training.

Interestingly, many of the peers that we interviewed who had received comprehensive training did not necessarily remark that their training had been useful. However, the peer workers who had received training were far more able to talk eloquently about peer support, and said that they felt more confident going into the role and felt that they achieved more success in their roles. In addition, many of the peers that we interviewed said that they benefitted more from ongoing learning sessions with other peers where they are able to reflect on their own practice and learn from how their colleagues do things. Of the organisations we spoke with, peer workers were happiest and felt most confident in their own growth and development when learning was built into the culture of their teams.

Components which should be included in peer support training, informed by the experiences of the interviewees are listed below:

1. Peer Support Training should be delivered by peers who are experienced in delivering peer support.

We interviewed some teams who had done non-peer specific training in anticipation for their roles and found it had not prepared them for their work. Those teams who had received training specifically prepared for peer support were much better prepared for the job.

2. Exploring the day-to-day of the role and working together to think about what it looks like in practice.

Peers often found that being placed in a role where nobody had any idea about what they should do, and being left alone to figure it out could be an isolating experience. Using training as a way to explore together what can be done, and **also how it can be operationalised** is important.

3. An introduction to what peer support practice is and what it is not.

It is likely that peers will already have an understanding of how the support they want to provide should either be different from, or mirror the support they received. However, exploring why peer support is important, how it should be different from traditional medical practice and what good peer support looks like can be an important exercise.

4. An exploration of peers own experiences and thinking about how to use them effectively and safely to do the work.

Peers who had explored their relationship to their own experiences were stronger and more confident in knowing how to use their lived experience to help others. Exploring questions like: What is their relationship to their own experiences? What are they happy to share with others? Where are their own boundaries around what they feel happy to share and what

they don't? ...can help peers to feel more prepared and less likely to be surprised or startled by things about their experience they might not have anticipated. *"Peer support workers have training on how to use their lived experience. What feels comfortable for them, and what feels comfortable for the listener to hear, and we spend a lot of time in peer support training exploring that. Not the right and wrong way of sharing, but what in what context feels safe, emotionally safe"*.

5. An introduction to listening tools and low-level therapy tools.

Peers often benefitted from having some listening tools and therapy interventions in their armoury. We aren't talking in depth tools, but simple practical tools to be able to use in a conversation: listening for pauses, reflecting back what people have said, conversational interventions etc.

6. An introduction to recovery and recovery focused relationships.

Each person brings their own experience to the role, it might be that you have staff who have a very good understanding of recovery. For those that don't, talking about the basics of recovery is important. This will give people a frame to use their lived experience through. For those who do have an in-depth knowledge of recovery, it is still useful to think about recovery in practice, and using this opportunity to think, not just about the principles of recovery, but what translating recovery into practice with other people looks like.

7. Helpful interventions and questions.

Conversations might go down roads which are unhelpful for the people we are working with, or for peers themselves. Having tools that will help change the course of conversations, or gently help peers think about how to change the course of the conversation can be helpful, such as key phrases or examples of things they can do or say.

8. Strengths based practice and problem solving with people.

Thinking with peers about how they might help people find anchors, things they used to love, helping to draw out what people's skills and strengths are can be important skills to learn and think about. Peers may well already be able to do this, but taking some time to think about how they do this can be useful.

9. Exploring boundaries.

This was an important subject. Exploring with peers the systems within the organisation around boundaries, but also entering into a conversation about where they are uncomfortable or disagree with certain boundaries. It is important to enter into conversations with peers around how they feel about the boundaries that are set and explore their relationship to those boundaries.

10. Wellness planning.

It is important to say that wellness planning in peer support is not viewed as an important activity because peers are more vulnerable. We all have triggers, we all have bad days and we all struggle. Wellness planning is about knowing yourself better as a practitioner: it is

about knowing what your struggles are and honestly exploring how others might help you to stay well and feel supported. It is an active approach to combatting our own weaknesses. Many teams with peer support workers that we spoke to adopted wellness planning with everyone.

11. Some peers talked about how they benefitted from working or hearing from peers with diverse experiences and diagnoses from their own.

Some peers talked being experts in their own experience, but that they sometimes struggled to understand certain aspects of different mental health conditions. Peers in organisations with a diverse workforce who shared their experiences with one another as a form of ongoing training or supervision felt more confident to engage with a wider range of people who might use peer support services.

12. Working in an organisation, and the tensions of peer support with practice.

Peer support stands in opposition to a lot of professional practice. This can make it harder than the average job. Exploring this with peer support workers so they know what to expect, and also to recognise why things might be hard, for reasons that may have nothing to do with them.

Peer Support: Managing Peer Workers

In many ways, managing peer support workers is no different from managing any staff in any organisation. However, it is important to understand that with peer support being a 'counter-culture' of practice, where staff aim to differ their practice from standard mental health practice, we found that delivering peer support was not always as straightforward as other types of work. In this case, the ways in which peer staff are treated, managed and supervised affected the overall quality of the peer support that people were able to deliver.

As we have explored, one of the keys to managing peer staff is to understand the principles of peer support. As a manager, using those principles to work with your peer staff to explore what those principles look like in practice is important.

This can take time, and as a manager of peer support, it can be important to consider how to make time for this. As a commissioner or senior manager, making time for your managers to build their understanding around peer support is important. As a manager, if you feel able to, if your senior strategy staff haven't factored time for you to get to grips with peer support, then this is something you may want to request time for.

Understanding Why Peer Support Might Be Challenging

"I think that if my role was just embedding peer support then I would be really disillusioned. I mean I do find it difficult, but I would find it too difficult to do. I think peer support can only be introduced into the [organisation] as part of a wider culture change, or else there's just no point...because I think, I find it difficult to work within the [organisation], and work in a peer way. Um, so, I think um, I think a big part of my role is getting involved with projects around changing the culture, so like the culture on the ward being quite restrictive and how we can change that. And how we can learn from approaches like peer support to think about a different approach to understanding risk and how we hold that. And then, like, things like working in trauma informed ways, which really align themselves with peer support. That kind of help staff to understand that there are different ways to understanding distress than in a medical way, and kind of a more human approach".

Peer support can be thought of as challenge and disruption. Our research showed that, as managers of peer support workers, it is important to understand how power (assumptions about what practice should be, the fear or reluctance in teams, staff prejudices about people with mental health issues) operates within teams to make things more challenging. Understanding the context that the peer support workers work in and what might be hard about that is important in trying integrate working cultures.

We had a number of staff who spoke about their difficulties with integration into non-peer staff teams, gaining trust with other members of staff and being treated with suspicion.

"It was a disaster [when we first started]. Um, the team was not prepared. They had little or no understanding of our roles. They were at times suspicious of us, 'are they well enough and what will they do?'"

An important part of managing peer staff is trying to support them with this as shown below:

“I think peer support workers generally bring issues to me about the culture that we work in and how they are trying to work in a way that is different to that, that holds a value base, and how difficult that is in [this organisational] culture. I think that challenge sums up probably 90% of the supervision that I do with peer support workers.”

Emotional Depletion

Interviewees described how the nature of peer support is emotionally intense and can be tiring. *“I think it’s, it can be hard by its very nature, I mean, like if someone is really struggling and you can’t get through to them that can be really hard sometimes not to take that personally and that’s where the debriefings and supervisions really help. But people are hurting and that stays with you”.*

While in some situations, this can lead to emotional exhaustion, the interviews showed that peer relationships are also energising and fulfilling. Interviewees shared that:

- Feeling valued is energising
- Feeling like you are making a contribution is energising
- Knowing you are part of a team, and not alone, is energising.

Managers can counter the emotional depletion that some peer workers experience by valuing the contributions they make, respecting the nature of peer support and being there to help with any challenges. It is important to understand what makes any staff member feel valued and communicate their contribution in a way they value and can hear. This is not specific to peer support, but is an important element of managing peers.

“I think [to work for us] people need to be really passionate about other people. So we have a set of values about how we want everybody to work, and how we work as a company, and I think people will bring some of them with them as their personal ethos as well. We often have really contentious, passionate people, so they do get really stressed out, but it’s because they take the work very seriously. So because we’re a supportive employment and environment, it means that we can manage the stress part and they can do a really fantastic job with the clients”.

Wellness Planning for All Staff

Many of our interviewees in peer teams talked about how wellness planning played a role in helping them to stay well at work. There were also examples of how peers had introduced wellness planning into their non-peer teams. Wellness planning helps teams to understand what their staff and colleagues struggle with, and provides examples of how they might support them. Of the happy teams we spoke to, wellness planning was also identified as a relationship building tool within teams.

“...And doing a wellness plan, so I did a wellness plan here with my manager, there’s parts of that, that I share with other workers, [talks about first signs] ...and it’s like the very first sign

before things start getting really bad that I'm having a bit of a rough day and maybe I need to tweak a little bit something to stop it from spiralling. Like something so simple, but something that I've shared with other members of staff and they now know how to handle that. So I don't want people fussing around and saying 'oh are you okay??' and stuff, but maybe just ask, 'oh do you want to come for a cigarette, and you know, have a bit of time?' Cuz that's like really really important in terms of how I keep myself well and stuff. In that wellness plan, and parts of it, sharing it with other people that I work with so that they know how to support me if things do go wrong or if I'm not doing so great, and I think that's the most important thing really, is having that"

Supervision

Regular and structured supervision was almost unanimously agreed to be important for all peers. Many peers noted that in other jobs, their supervision had been tokenistic. Those peers who found supervision helpful had managers who took it seriously and understood its value. Even peers who may not have been happy in every aspect of their role, if they identified that supervision was helpful, they felt more valued and more able to problem solve. While it was clear that staff used supervision according to their needs, and managers ran supervision according to their values, some of the core themes related to supervision are included below.

Peers used supervision for different reasons. Some examples:

1. Using supervision to talk about how work is making people feel. What they are happy with, what feels hard.
2. Using supervision to talk about wellbeing – to talk about what is hard, how to mitigate and solve problems.
3. Talking about new ideas and getting manager feedback. This often includes getting help on how to make it work, how to fit it with the rest of the work of the team.

"As a worker, I find supervision really helpful. I have two supervisors I find one more helpful than the other. One is more of a battle. I myself have had mental health problems, and so I find it helpful in terms of discussing any signs I might be having. I use supervision to keep myself healthy, I have had to give up jobs in the past because my mental health has suffered and so I try and use supervisions now to avoid that happening"

"In supervision, we'll talk about what I'm aiming to do, and I'll think about it a lot before hand. I'll think about what I'm trying to achieve, but it's coming from me, not them pushing me to do things which is great... and it's very open...So that's good".

"It's pretty much about how you think you've done. What you perceive your role to be, what sort of things you're looking to do in the future and how the team is working together? At the end of the day you just discuss it and come up with ideas, they don't, they're not set in stone either. So if you don't do something you said you were going to do, that's fine – it's because you did something else. Also it's not um, hierarchical, it's not like that. It's open and positive, and more useful. I've been in appraisals before and it's not like that here, it's really refreshing actually."

Managers with happy staff teams used supervision to:

- Make staff feel valued – using methods such as feedback on staff contribution and what staff are doing well.
- Give staff space to talk about how they felt at work
- Know what else is going on within their team and how it might be affecting them
- Offer a mutual relationship, sharing some things about themselves.

“In terms of providing supervision. It’s a tricky one because you’re trying to do two contradictory things at once, it’s an opportunity for me to keep an eye on what people are doing, but at the same time it’s me saying ‘are you alright’, do you need any help, how’s life generally? Give me some hints if you’re struggling”.

We spoke with some peer workers who may not have felt comfortable or able to talk to their managers openly about their experiences at work. In light of this, an important skill for any manager is to try and understand what supportive practice means to each individual member of staff. As some of our respondents noted, while having lived experience of mental health was not a pre-requisite for managing peer staff or peer support programmes, it can be helpful in understanding how to support peers:

“I do think that there’s a massive aspect of kind of [long pause] see it shows how valuable I think it [lived experience] is, in that, I do think it would be difficult for somebody to manage peer support who didn’t have lived experience themselves. I do think that there’s an element of that. Maybe that is just my prejudice, I don’t know. I think in terms of me, a lot of what I do is, quite coachy, quite councilly with the volunteers. So it’s not so much about saying, you know, do this, do that. It’s about saying, it’s about listening to them and then either helping them to work through and think of a solution, or giving them validation, or about [pause] knowing when they’re actually in a way...it...that they need more than just my help or support. Although having said that, thinking about myself as a manager not in peer support I don’t know that that’s massively different, [laughs] so I don’t know”.

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