

Peer support programs



What are peer support programs?

Peer support programs are a way for individuals with shared experiences to help each other. They are based on the idea that people who have faced similar traumatic events can understand and support each other without too much effort or explanation. Peer support programs are used in many settings, including workplaces.

A typical peer support program includes regular group meetings or one-on-one sessions, where participants share their experiences and provide mutual support. Peer supporters are trained individuals who facilitate this process. They aren't therapists and don't give advice. Instead, they help others identify solutions to improve their well-being.

Trauma in work

Workers in many jobs experience traumatic events that can affect their mental health. Public sector workers commonly face these challenges while carrying out their work in the community. Examples include:

- Responding to emergency situations
- Dealing with the death of clients or colleagues
- Regularly seeing injuries or abuse
- Witnessing difficult situations or hearing difficult stories
- Being exposed to violence or images of violence

These kinds of traumatic experiences are known as critical incidents. Critical incidents can have a severe impact on a person's well-being, making it difficult for them to perform their daily tasks.

To keep work healthy and safe, it's important to address both the physical and psychological demands of work. Workers need time and space to process critical incidents and to recover physically and mentally.

Peer support can help. Speaking to someone who understands the work and workplace can reassure those who have experienced work-related trauma. Trained peer supporters can offer a listening ear and provide valuable information about available resources, such as employee assistance programs (EAP), benefits and community resources.

Benefits of peer support programs

Well-managed peer-support programs:

- Create a supportive environment of trust, safety and acceptance
- Build a sense of community and belonging
- Increase hope, self-esteem and empowerment
- Improve coping skills
- Reduce hospitalizations
- Alleviate symptoms
- Strengthen social supports
- Boost quality of life

Getting it right

The success of a peer support program depends on its design. It should be welcoming and accessible to workers, addressing stigma and focusing on hope and recovery instead of blame. To be effective, the program must have the support and input of both the employer and the workers. Both parties need to agree on the key elements of the program.

Peer support programs must also maintain workers' confidentiality, from initial contact to interactions with peer supporters. Workers should always have control over who can see what information. Otherwise, they won't use the program.

Peer supporters must be selected carefully and trained appropriately. Keep the following in mind:

- Peer supporters should be chosen by the workers.
- Peer supporters should have strong interpersonal skills.
- Peer supporters should receive comprehensive training.
- Peer supporters should reflect the diverse experiences of the workers they support, as people are more likely to approach someone they can relate to. This means acknowledging how different aspects of life intersect with each other and affect each worker's experience, including past experiences with violence, harassment, racism and discrimination.

When designing a peer support program, employers should gather feedback from the workers who are expected to use it. Any peer support program should also be reviewed by the workplace's occupational health and safety committee or health and safety representative.

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