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Empathy: the key to peer support



by Allison Dunning, Manager, Peer Support Canada

When people with similar experiences come together with the specific intention of helping each other, there's a term for that. The term is peer support. According to [Peer Support Canada](#), peer support is basically the emotional and practical support between two people who share a common experience. That experience could be anything from a shared illness, like a mental illness or cancer, to a shared identity, like being a transperson, a racialized person, or a mother or father.

Peer support depends on a human quality. That quality is empathy. Some believe we're born with it, but even if we aren't, just about everyone can learn it.

You may be wondering how peer support is different from friendship. In some ways, it's not that different. But there are different kinds. Sometimes it is informal, like between two friends who are talking about the pandemic, and how to deal with the loneliness it caused. That might be what you think when you hear the term.

But did you know that, in the field of mental health, there's another kind of peer support that is more formal? It is called Formalized Peer Support and it happens between a trained peer supporter and their peer, who needs and wants support. So, for instance, imagine you've just been admitted to an inpatient mental health unit. A Formalized Peer Supporter might be employed by the hospital to help you. They would be a hospital staff member who themselves has been hospitalized before and has been trained to support others. The support they give would come in the form of empathy, compassion and resources to help you recover.

How empathy is used in peer support

Empathy is an important aspect of healthcare practice—including mental healthcare. In fact, healthcare professionals, including nurses and psychologists, were the founding theorists and practitioners of empathy. When you think of it, a doctor's "bedside manner" may simply be how empathy shows up in their practice. Arguably, showing empathy is key to good healthcare in general, and perhaps even more important in mental healthcare.

But when it comes to peer support, empathy is more than just a key component. It is actually the fundamental principle. That's because the basis of the working relationship between a peer and a peer supporter is grounded in shared experience—so empathy is central to the interaction. All the listening, supporting, validating, responding, summarizing and sharing of resources and coping strategies is done with empathy at its core. Peer supporters choose what they say and how they respond based on the [values of peer support](#), which include empathy.

Empathy in peer support involves listening to another person talk about their experiences and deliberately asking yourself "When I have experienced similar experiences or feelings, what has been helpful for me to hear?" and "What *would* have been helpful?" It's about taking in the feelings someone is sharing, trying to understand what their experience is like, and offering support based on one's own feelings or experiences.

Formalized Peer Support requires training and lots of practice. To find out more about how to become a trained peer supporter, you can [check out this resource](#).

But empathy is available to you right now. To find out how to be more empathic in your own relationships, see [the other Mental Health Week articles on empathy and listening on this site](#).

Sources:

<https://peersupportcanada.ca/>

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_avoid_the_empathy_trap

https://peersupportcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Peer_Support_Core_Values-ENG.pdf

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