Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
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BRINGING RECOVERY SUPPORTS TO SCALE
Technical Assistance Center Strategy (BRSS TACS)

Core Competencies for Peer Workers in Behavioral Health Services

OVERVIEW

In 2015, SAMHSA led an effort to identify the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities (leading to Core Competencies) needed by anyone who provides peer support services to people with or in recovery from a mental health or substance use condition. SAMHSA—via its Bringing Recovery Supports to Scale Technical Assistance Center Strategy (BRSS TACS) project—convened diverse stakeholders from the mental health consumer and substance use disorder recovery movements to achieve this goal. SAMHSA in conjunction with subject matter experts conducted research to identify Core Competencies for peer workers in behavioral health. SAMHSA later posted the draft competencies developed with these stakeholders online for comment. This additional input helped refine the Core Competencies and this document represents the final product of that process.

As our understanding of peer support grows and the contexts in which peer recovery support services are provided evolve, the Core Competencies must evolve over time. Therefore, updates to these competencies may occur periodically in the future.

Core Competencies are intended to apply to all forms of peer support provided to people living with or in recovery from mental health and/or substance use conditions and delivered by or to adults, young adults, family members and youth. The competencies may also apply to other forms of peer support provided by other roles known as peer specialists, recovery coaches, parent support providers or youth specialists. These are not a complete set of competencies for every context in which peer workers provide services and support. They can serve as the foundation upon which additional competencies for specific settings that practice peer support and/or for specific groups could be developed in the future. For example, it may be helpful to identify additional competencies beyond those identified here that may be required to provide peer support services in specific settings such as clinical, school, or correctional settings. Similarly, there may be a need to identify additional Core Competencies needed to provide peer support services to specific groups, such as families, veterans, people in medication-assisted recovery from an SUD, senior citizens, or members of specific communities (e.g., rural, ethnic).

BACKGROUND

What is a peer worker?

The role of the peer support worker has been defined as "offering and receiving help, based on shared understanding, respect and mutual empowerment between people in similar situations." Peer support has been described as "a system of giving and receiving help" based on key principles that include "shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful."[1] Peer support workers engage in a wide range of activities, including advocacy, linkage to resources, sharing of experience, community and relationship building, group facilitation, skill building, mentoring, goal setting, and more. They may also plan and develop groups, services or activities, supervise other peer workers, provide training, gather information on resources, administer programs or agencies, educate the public and policymakers, and work to raise awareness.[2]

1 Mead, S., Hilton, D. & Curtis, L. (2001). Peer support: A theoretical perspective. Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 25(2), 134-141.

2 Jacobson, N. et.al. (2012). What do peer support workers do? A job description. BMC Health Services Research. 12:205

As mentioned previously, the development of additional Core Competencies may be needed to guide the provision of peer support services to specific groups who also share common experiences such as family members. The shared experience of being in recovery from a mental or substance use disorder or being a family member of a person with a behavioral health condition is the foundation on which the peer recovery support relationship is built in the behavioral health arena.

What is recovery?

SAMHSA developed the following working definition of recovery by engaging key stakeholders in the mental health consumer and substance use disorder recovery communities:

> *Recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential.*[3]

Throughout the competencies, the term "recovery" refers to this definition. This definition does not describe recovery as an end state, but rather as a process. Complete symptom remission is neither a prerequisite of recovery nor a necessary outcome of the process. According the SAMHSA Working Definition of Recovery, recovery can have many pathways that may include "professional clinical treatment; use of medications; support from families and in schools; faith-based approaches; peer support; and other approaches." SAMHSA has identified four major dimensions that support a life in recovery:

1. Health—Learning to overcome, manage or more successfully live with the symptoms and making healthy choices that support one's physical and emotional wellbeing;
2. Home—A stable and safe place to live;
3. Purpose—Meaningful daily activities, such as a job, school, volunteer work, or creative endeavors; and, increased ability to lead a self-directed life; and meaningful engagement in society; and
4. Community—Relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope

Peer workers help people in all of these domains.

What are Core Competencies?

Core Competencies are the capacity to easily perform a role or function. They are often described as clusters of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes a person needs to have in order to successfully perform a role or job or as the ability to integrate the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Training, mentoring, and supervision can help people develop the competencies needed to perform a role or job.[4] [5] This will be the first integrated guidance on competencies for peer workers with mental health and substance use lived experience.

Why do we need to identify Core Competencies for peer workers?

Peer workers and peer recovery support services have become increasingly central to people's efforts to live with or recover from mental health and substance use disorders. Community-based organizations led by people who have lived experience of mental health conditions and/or who are in recovery from substance use disorders are playing a growing role in helping people find recovery in the community. Both the mental health consumer and the substance use disorder recovery communities have recognized the need for Core Competencies and both communities actively participated in the development of these peer recovery support worker competencies.

Potential Uses of Core Competencies

Core Competencies have the potential to guide delivery and promote best practices in peer support. They can be used to inform peer training programs, assist in developing standards for certification, and inform job descriptions. Supervisors will be able to use competencies to appraise peer workers' job performance and peers will be able to assess their own work performance and set goals for continued development of these competencies.

3 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Working Definition of Recovery. PEP12-RECDEF, Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012.

4 Henandez, R.S., O'Connor, S.J. (2010). Strategic Human Resources Management in Health Services Organizations. Third Edition. Delmar Cengage Learning. P. 83.

5 Sperry, L. (2010). Core Competencies in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Becoming a Highly Competent and Effective Therapist. Routledge. P. 5.

Core Competencies are not intended to create a barrier for people wishing to enter the peer workforce. Rather they are intended to provide guidance for the development of initial and on-going training designed to support peer workers' entry into this important work and continued skill development.

Core Competencies, Principles and Values

Core Competencies for peer workers reflect certain foundational principles identified by members of the mental health consumer and substance use disorder recovery communities. These are:

RECOVERY-ORIENTED: Peer workers hold out hope to those they serve, partnering with them to envision and achieve a meaningful and purposeful life. Peer workers help those they serve identify and build on strengths and empower them to choose for themselves, recognizing that there are multiple pathways to recovery.

PERSON-CENTERED: Peer recovery support services are always directed by the person participating in services. Peer recovery support is personalized to align with the specific hopes, goals, and preferences of the individual served and to respond to specific needs the individuals has identified to the peer worker.

VOLUNTARY: Peer workers are partners or consultants to those they serve. They do not dictate the types of services provided or the elements of recovery plans that will guide their work with peers. Participation in peer recovery support services is always contingent on peer choice.

RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED: The relationship between the peer worker and the peer is the foundation on which peer recovery support services and support are provided. The relationship between the peer worker and peer is respectful, trusting, empathetic, collaborative, and mutual.

TRAUMA-INFORMED: Peer recovery support utilizes a strengths-based framework that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety and creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

Core Competencies for Peer Workers in Behavioral Health Services

Category I: Engages peers in collaborative and caring relationships

This category of competencies emphasized peer workers' ability to initiate and develop on-going relationships with people who have behavioral health condition and/or family members. These competencies include interpersonal skills, knowledge about recovery from behavioral health conditions and attitudes consistent with a recovery orientation.

1. Initiates contact with peers
2. Listens to peers with careful attention to the content and emotion being communicated
3. Reaches out to engage peers across the whole continuum of the recovery process
4. Demonstrates genuine acceptance and respect
5. Demonstrates understanding of peers' experiences and feelings

Category II: Provides support

The competencies in this category are critical for the peer worker to be able to provide the mutual support people living with behavioral health conditions may want.

1. Validates peers' experiences and feelings
2. Encourages the exploration and pursuit of community roles
3. Conveys hope to peers about their own recovery
4. Celebrates peers' efforts and accomplishments
5. Provides concrete assistance to help peers accomplish tasks and goals

Category III: Shares lived experiences of recovery

These competencies are unique to peer support, as most roles in behavioral health services do not emphasize or even prohibit the sharing of lived experiences. Peer workers need to be skillful in telling their recovery stories and using their lived experiences as a way of inspiring and supporting a person living with behavioral health conditions. Family peer support worker likewise share their personal experiences of self-care and supporting a family-member who is living with behavioral health conditions.

1. Relates their own recovery stories, and with permission, the recovery stories of others' to inspire hope
2. Discusses ongoing personal efforts to enhance health, wellness, and recovery
3. Recognizes when to share experiences and when to listen
4. Describes personal recovery practices and helps peers discover recovery practices that work for them

Category IV: Personalizes peer support

These competencies help peer workers to tailor or individualize the support services provided to and with a peer. By personalizing peer support, the peer worker operationalizes the notion that there are multiple pathways to recovery.

1. Understands his/her own personal values and culture and how these may contribute to biases, judgments and beliefs
2. Appreciates and respects the cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices of peers and their families
3. Recognizes and responds to the complexities and uniqueness of each peer's process of recovery
4. Tailors services and support to meet the preferences and unique needs of peers and their families

Category V: Supports recovery planning

These competencies enable peer workers to support other peers to take charge of their lives. Recovery often leads people to want to make changes in their lives. Recovery planning assists people to set and accomplish goals related to home, work, community and health.

1. Assists and supports peers to set goals and to dream of future possibilities
2. Proposes strategies to help a peer accomplish tasks or goals
3. Supports peers to use decision-making strategies when choosing services and supports
4. Helps peers to function as a member of their treatment/recovery support team
5. Researches and identifies credible information and options from various resources

Category VI: Links to resources, services, and supports

These competencies assist peer workers to help other peers acquire the resources, services, and supports they need to enhance their recovery. Peer workers apply these competencies to assist other peers to link to resources or services both within behavioral health settings and in the community. It is critical that peer workers have knowledge of resources within their communities as well as on-line resources.

1. Develops and maintains up-to-date information about community resources and services
2. Assists peers to investigate, select, and use needed and desired resources and services
3. Helps peers to find and use health services and supports
4. Accompanies peers to community activities and appointments when requested
5. Participates in community activities with peers when requested

Category VII: Provides information about skills related to health, wellness, and recovery

These competencies describe how peer workers coach, model or provide information about skills that enhance recovery. These competencies recognize that peer workers have knowledge, skills and experiences to offer others in recovery and that the recovery process often involves learning and growth.

1. Educates peers about health, wellness, recovery and recovery supports
2. Participates with peers in discovery or co-learning to enhance recovery experiences
3. Coaches peers about how to access treatment and services and navigate systems of care
4. Coaches peers in desired skills and strategies
5. Educates family members and other supportive individuals about recovery and recovery supports
6. Uses approaches that match the preferences and needs of peers

Category VIII: Helps peers to manage crises

These competencies assist peer workers to identify potential risks and to use procedures that reduce risks to peers and others. Peer workers may have to manage situations, in which there is intense distress and work to ensure the safety and well-being of themselves and other peers.

1. Recognizes signs of distress and threats to safety among peers and in their environments
2. Provides reassurance to peers in distress
3. Strives to create safe spaces when meeting with peers
4. Takes action to address distress or a crisis by using knowledge of local resources, treatment, services and support preferences of peers
5. Assists peers in developing advance directives and other crisis prevention tools

Category IX: Values communication

These competencies provide guidance on how peer workers interact verbally and in writing with colleagues and others. These competencies suggest language and processes used to communicate and reflect the value of respect.

1. Uses respectful, person-centered, recovery-oriented language in written and verbal interactions with peers, family members, community members, and others
2. Uses active listening skills
3. Clarifies their understanding of information when in doubt of the meaning
4. Conveys their point of view when working with colleagues
5. Documents information as required by program policies and procedures
6. Follows laws and rules concerning confidentiality and respects others' rights for privacy

Category X: Supports collaboration and teamwork

These competencies provide direction on how peer workers can develop and maintain effective relationships with colleagues and others to enhance the peer support provided. These competencies involve not only interpersonal skills but also organizational skills.

1. Works together with other colleagues to enhance the provision of services and supports
2. Assertively engages providers from mental health services, addiction services, and physical medicine to meet the needs of peers
3. Coordinates efforts with health care providers to enhance the health and wellness of peers
4. Coordinates efforts with peers' family members and other natural supports
5. Partners with community members and organizations to strengthen opportunities for peers
6. Strives to resolve conflicts in relationships with peers and others in their support network

Category XI: Promotes leadership and advocacy

These competencies describe actions that peer workers use to provide leadership within behavioral health programs to advance a recovery-oriented mission of the services. They also guide peer workers on how to advocate for the legal and human rights of other peers.

1. Uses knowledge of relevant rights and laws (ADA, HIPAA, Olmstead, etc.) to ensure that peer's rights are respected
2. Advocates for the needs and desires of peers in treatment team meetings, community services, living situations, and with family
3. Uses knowledge of legal resources and advocacy organization to build an advocacy plan
4. Participates in efforts to eliminate prejudice and discrimination of people who have behavioral health conditions and their families
5. Educates colleagues about the process of recovery and the use of recovery support services
6. Actively participates in efforts to improve the organization
7. Maintains a positive reputation in peer/professional communities

Category XII: Promotes growth and development

These competencies describe how peer workers become more reflective and competent in their practice. The competencies recommend specific actions that may serve to increase peer workers' success and satisfaction in their current roles and contribute to career advancement.

1. Recognizes the limits of their knowledge and seeks assistance from others when needed
2. Uses supervision (mentoring, reflection) effectively by monitoring self and relationships, preparing for meetings and engaging in problem-solving strategies with the supervisor (mentor, peer)
3. Reflects and examines own personal motivations, judgments, and feelings that may be activated by the peer work, recognizing signs of distress, and knowing when to seek support
4. Seeks opportunities to increase knowledge and skills of peer support

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