



Enhancing Personal Capacity for Wellness

Health and Wellness for Peer Supporters and Family Supporters: Strategies for Well-Being, Self-Care, and Relapse Prevention

Created by SAMHSA's Program to Achieve Wellness

A supplement to the Enhancing Personal Capacity for Wellness training series for individuals working in a peer supporter or family supporter capacity at organizations that provide mental health and substance abuse services.

Self-Awareness

“How you are is as important as what you do.” - Jeree Pawl, 1995

This self-reflection guide is designed for individuals who provide peer support or family support within mental health and substance abuse services. This self-reflection guide offers a process that allows you to consider your strengths and resources, the ways you respond to stress when engaged in peer support or family support, and different strategies to help restore the balance when feeling distressed or overwhelmed. Effective support relies on relationship and connection. When feeling distressed, it can be hard to make supportive connections in your relationships with others. Through reflection on your own or with others you trust, you can prepare for the day, review the joys and challenges that surface when supporting others, and think about next steps in your work. The purpose of this guide is to enhance self-awareness by using reflection. Reflection can help you sustain empathy for others and increase opportunities to tend to your self-care needs. Using this guide for reflection can occur individually or in groups meeting for mutual support and problem solving. The purpose is to spark curiosity as a tool for navigating challenges in peer support and family support relationships.

Start With Strengths

Personal strengths and talents that I am aware of today are:

Resources I have that can support me today are:

Responding to Stress

Some things that typically add to my stress are:

My typical responses when I feel distressed or overwhelmed are:

What often helps when I feel distressed or overwhelmed is:

Below are some ideas for strategies that can help in the moment when feeling distressed or overwhelmed.

- I can redirect my thoughts.
- I can focus on_____.
- I can use deep breathing.
- I can talk to _____ about my feelings.
- I can watch or do something funny.
- I can think about my _____.
- I can move my body; stretch, rock, leave the room, or go for a walk.
- I can eat a snack.
- I can do things to intentionally focus on the present, or use mindfulness practices.
- I can imagine being someplace else or imagine doing something else.
- I can use peer support or family support or offer support to others.
- _____.
(Insert Strategy)
- _____.
(Insert Strategy)

Reflection, Understanding and Growth

Most often, time spent doing peer support or family support work is an experience that offers opportunity for connection, builds on strengths and is a very valuable tool. Like all relationships, sometimes challenges happen in relationships at work – including relationships with your supervisor, coworkers, and the individuals you serve. Reflection can help you to recognize challenges that occur in your relationships in peer support and family support. As challenges arise, you can use reflection alone or with others you trust to identify the problem and explore effective ways to respond to others.

Like anyone who connects with others through work relationships, there are many potential reasons for why you may respond the way that you do when challenges occur when supporting others. In peer support and family support, your experiences with life, systems, and services help to effectively offer strength, and hope as resources that can support others. These same experiences may also be part of the challenges we face. Sometimes the way a person responds to others might be surprising confusing, distressing, or overwhelming. There are many potential sources of these responses (NCDVTMH, 2014; Saakvitne, et al. 2000; Cave, 2015) For example, responses can sometimes be:

- a reaction to another person's painful experiences that include isolation, maltreatment, abuse and violence
- a reaction to another person's coping and survival strategies
- a reaction to another person's way of communicating or expressing their pain or distress
- related to different beliefs about emotional distress, explanations for mental health challenges, and what you believes will be helpful
- related to the interaction of your own history and style with that of another person's style
- a reaction to how another person responds to you

These are just some possible sources. Considering these and other possibilities, reflection can be a useful tool to restore or maintain perspective and empathy when struggling with difficult conversations in peer support and family support. Reflection can help you pay attention to the Eight Dimensions of Wellness (emotional, physical, occupational, spiritual, intellectual, social, financial, and environmental) and your overall sense of well-being.

Peer support and family support place a high value on being relationship-focused, respectful, and empathetic in the work. Both in paid or non-paid positions, supporters strive for interactions focused on choice, equality, and mutuality. This section guides reflection to consider whether or not the challenges you currently face are related to a temporary shift away from these values. For example, when we start to take on responsibility for someone else's recovery, rather than be supportive of their journey, the result can sometimes be a sense of feeling overwhelmed as they make choices for themselves that we may disagree with.

Reflect on a current challenge. Start by describing what happened, and then use this example throughout the guide to continue to reflect on that same interaction in smaller pieces.

Reflecting on a Challenge

Naming the Challenge: What happened?

Exploring Preparation and Intention

Reflect on mindset, reason for meeting as a supporter and clarity about role and expectations.

Was I focused and clear about my purpose today in offering peer or family support?

Was strengthening the relationship with the person my priority?

Negotiating Mutuality

Mutuality in peer support and family support means being aware that your connection and relationship to each other is as equals sharing power. Recognize that in this moment you are sharing an experience with one another and you have equal value. With open, direct, and honest communication to talk through decisions together, you negotiate mutuality. This includes:

- Where you will meet,
- How you will meet,
- What each of you hope to do while you are together, and
- What each you need to feel safe, comfortable, and connected.

This kind of relationship negotiation, focused on “choice as equals,” is often new for people. At times, each of you can become involved in challenging interactions because expectations change or are unclear or you act in a way not in line with your values. For example, you may slip into making decisions for someone, rather than with them and be frustrated when they don’t agree or follow through. Or at other times, because you are eager to help, you may not clearly convey our boundaries. Acting in your mutual interest can support personal growth for all involved.

Exploring Mutuality

How did I talk about mutuality?

Did each of you define and share what is needed to feel safe or did I assume safety was present? Describe how this happened and how you know what the other person needs.

Did you each discuss what is needed for comfort? If yes, how was that done?

Did you each say what we expect to do in our time together? If yes, how was that done?

Was I clear with others about the limits of what I can offer? Describe how and how you know that others understand your limits.

Conversations During Peer Support

In peer support and family support the focus is on relationship connection, respect, mutuality, understanding other's views, and what people want to create in their lives. Meaningful connection and ongoing relationship building can be both joyful and challenging. You share your personal experiences; and in the give and take of conversations, you sometimes have responses to what you hear and share. In addition to mutuality, some things to reflect on about the conversations include choosing what to share, avoiding rescuing, and being transparent about expectations and plans.

Exploring the Conversation

Did I connect with others? How do I know it was an effective connection?

Were there barriers to connection? If so, what were the barriers?

Did I spend more time listening than talking? If so, what can I do to balance give and take in conversations?

Was I respectful about other's expressed wishes and choices? If so, how do I know?

Was I non-judgmental? How do I know that I remained non-judgmental throughout the entire conversation?

Did I share relevant personal experience after I learned about others' concerns? If so, how?

Did I support others' right to their decisions even if I disagreed with them? If so, how?

Did I support others in choosing the type and amount of support they wanted? If so, how?

Did I protect the person's confidentiality? Do I feel comfortable with this decision? If so, how?

Did our conversation feel mutually respectful to others? How do I know?

My Own Support

In exploring your own unique support needs it may help to remember, “You can’t drink from an empty cup.” Reflecting on how you felt or thoughts you had about the interactions you have in your work can lead to deeper consideration of other people’s perspectives and reconsideration of your own perspectives and actions. Each of you can benefit from expanding the tools and resources available to you to for increasing self-awareness and supporting overall well-being.

Exploring My Own Supports

Did the conversation feel mutually respectful to me? If so, how?

How was I aware of my own biases and “hot-button” issues?

**Did I bring my experience, hopes, and concerns about this conversation to someone I trust?
If not, who can I turn to now for support?**

What, if anything, do I need to do differently in the future?

Do I have the resources I need? If not, what are some possibilities?

Do I have the support I need? If not, how can I change this?

Trying New Ideas

Alone or with others you trust: Brainstorm ideas about what you can do to restore a sense of personal balance and well-being, support recovery, repair relationships, or move forward with renewed focus on relationships and connections at work. List the ideas below and then identify what you need to accomplish them. Ideas may include new self-care practices, new peer support or family support opportunities, and ways to strengthen your skills.

What I will do	What I will need
<p>Example 1: Use mindfulness practices, like breathing exercises, before each meeting for peer support or family support to help focus on the present.</p> <p>Example 2: Instead of saying "call me at home anytime," I will be clearer about what I really mean.</p>	<p>Example 1: A variety of exercises and someone to teach me.</p> <p>Example 2: To decide on when and how I want be available and to consistently and clearly communicate my boundaries.</p>

References

- Bringing Recovery Supports To Scale Technical Assistance Center Strategy (BRSS TACS). (2015). Core competencies for peer workers in behavioral health. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tacs/core-competencies.pdf
- Cave, C. & Penney, D. (2015). Trauma-informed peer support self-reflection guide. [Hard copy].
- Core Curriculum on Trauma-Informed Domestic Violence Services. (2014). National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma and Mental Health. [Hard copy].
- International Association of Peer Supporters (iNAPS). (2012). National ethical guidelines and practice standards national practice guidelines for peer supporters. Retrieved from <https://na4ps.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/nationalguidelines1.pdf>
- Miller, N. (2010) Self-care check-in. [Hard copy].
- Mead, S. (n.d.). Defining peer support. Retrieved from <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WG3ulnF6vthAwFZpJxE9rKx6lJzYSX7VX4HprV5EkfY/edit>
- Saakvitne, K.W., Gamble, S.G., Pearlman, L.A., & Lev, B.T. (2000). *Risking connection: A training curriculum for working with survivors of childhood abuse*. Lutherville, MD: Sidran Press.