

MOODS

Serving People with Unipolar and Bi-polar Illness, Their Families and Friends, since 1981

November 2018

The Power of Peer Support

By Tory Masters

Peer Specialist services are provided by well-trained and certified individuals who identify as having a personal, lived experience with a mental health or substance abuse condition. Available in all 50 states and Medicaid reimbursable in 35, peer support is considered a best practice by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). Already well established in the public mental health system including hospitals, clinics, drop-in centers, prisons and VA centers, they are now moving rapidly into the private sector. Over a decade of research shows that peers ease mental health worker shortages, unequivocally improve recovery outcomes and reduce re-hospitalizations. In one study, 71% of the people Peer Bridgers worked with in 2009 were able to stay out of the hospital. For further statistics go to:

<http://www.nyaprs.org/e-news-bulletins/index.cfm?do=headlines&mn=2&yr=2011&article=77D2D51A082A461FC195477449A38681>

Peer Support Specialists use unique life experiences, training and skills to support recovery. They work alongside and complement professionals such as therapists, social workers and psychiatrists. They work in a variety of roles including case management, wellness mentoring, “bridgers” to

the community, crisis managers and as peer group facilitators.

Support delivered by peer specialists has been demonstrated to -

Motivate and inspire individuals to take responsibility for their recovery process, treatment plans and goals. Positive recovery outcomes increase.

greatly reducing recurrent psychiatric hospitalizations and emergency interventions.

Why does peer support work so well?”

Peer Specialists bring compassion and gratitude to the recovery process.

“They are a terribly important new addition to the workforce”, says Bob Glover, Director of the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors. “When peers are involved, outcomes are dramatically better across the board”.

“Peer support is absolutely part of a national strategy to get more boots on the ground quickly”, says Sita Diehl, who heads state policy for the National Alliance on Mental Illness. “Because of their life experience and their relatively low cost, they can provide more face time for people with serious mental illness”.

Improve individuals’ relationships with their health care providers.

Increase individuals’ ability to manage their symptoms in order to reduce crisis interventions and re-hospitalizations.

Foster hope and belief in recovery by role modeling the path to recovery and wellness.

Help an individual out of isolation and into the healing reengagement of social and community support.

Lower health care costs by

There is something different about caring for another person because you see yourself in that person. Peer Specialists once felt the same pain, loneliness and despair the sufferer is experiencing. Because of this connection, peer specialists bring a deeper understanding, patience and empathy to the recovery process, however long it takes. There is healing in this.

Peer specialists have moved from hopelessness to hope.

When sufferers believe that there

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is nothing that they can do to improve the quality of their lives, they become resigned to their fate - not out of laziness or apathy - but out of despair. A peer sits before a sufferer as a living example of what's possible with renewed determination.

Peer Specialists have learned that isolation and the negative self-talk that plagues sufferers can be more disabling than the condition itself.

Peers are aware that even when they have the symptoms of the condition under control, the residual fears, low self-esteem and negative thinking can still make it difficult for them to rejoin the community and set goals for moving forward. Peer Specialists no longer see themselves as "mentally ill" but as a unique human being with a challenging but treatable condition.

As a result, they are in a unique position to educate sufferers about the value of community support and how they are unwittingly "staying stuck" due to false beliefs and self-stigmatizing thinking. They also share strategies they learned to combat negative thinking.

Peer specialists' personal stories of illness and recovery are powerful persuaders for someone who is in doubt or denial.

As non-clinicians, peers can share their stories in order to further inspire trust, hope and belief in the recovery process.

Peer Specialists inspire sufferers to take responsibility for their illness.

Sufferers cannot effectively recover if they see themselves as victims and feel there is no use in actively participating in their own self-healing. Peers motivate sufferers to want to partner successfully and responsibly with their clinical and therapeutic support teams.

Peer Specialists have learned recovery strategies to monitor their own mental health and more successfully manage their lives.

Peer specialists are in a unique position to educate and motivate sufferers toward whole health self-management. They have learned to recognize triggers and early warning signs, counteract the negative impact of stress, and create plans for self-care. They understand that integrating medical and therapeutic approaches with community supports and holistic strategies are the keys to a meaningful recovery.

Tory Masters is Vice-Chair of the MDSG Board and was a long-time facilitator.

"The more we learn about unusual minds, the more likely we are as individuals and as a society to understand and empathize with people who think differently and the less likely we are to stigmatize or reject them." Kandel., Eric R. [The Disordered Mind: What Unusual Brains Tell Us About Ourselves.](#) Farrar. 2018.

Information of Interest

Wall Street Journal: "Can Typos Give Insight Into Your Mental Health?"

www.healthyplace.com: "Practicing Gratitude While Struggling with Depression"

Brain & Behavior Research Foundation: "A Revealing Genetic Comparison of Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder"

HealthyPlace.com: 5 Reasons to Love Yourself When You Have a Mental Illness"

"Researchers at the University of Glasgow believe they have found evidence that the Scottish poet Robert Burns had bipolar disorder." [BBC History Magazine.](#)

Mood Disorders Support Group
New York

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