

Key 3: Making Referrals to Peer Support

What makes a peer specialist the right fit for the person served? It might seem that matching a person to a peer specialist based on a shared diagnosis would result in an immediate connection. However, a shared diagnosis is not indicative of a better outcome, nor is it the basis for a good referral.

Peer specialists often have shared histories with the people they serve, including; mental illness diagnoses, addictions, physical health challenges, homelessness, institutionalization and military service. At times, what connects peers has less to do with a specific diagnosis, addiction experience, or life background, and more to do with how those situations were experienced and the feelings associated with them.

The following are the shared feelings and experiences that can connect peers:

- Feeling lost, different, or not as good as
- Disconnected from family, friends and partners
- Frustration in not knowing where to call, what to do, or what is happening to you
- Feeling hopeless
- Lack of trust with traditional providers, systems, society
- Being stigmatized; both within ourselves (personal stigma) and by others/society
- Discrimination
- Isolation
- Not having others to relate to
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Disconnected from your community
- Wanting options beyond what traditional services can provide, i.e. recovery through art, mindfulness, community involvement
- Grief over interrupted and unrealized dreams and goals

Here is one story from a person who benefited from working with a peer specialist:

“On the face of it, my peer specialist and I had nothing in common. We didn’t have the same diagnosis. He identified as a male. I identified as a female. He was generations older than I was. I value a sense of humor and energy in my relationships. He was quiet, soft-spoken and didn’t understand my sarcasm. Although he was not like me in many ways, that relationship saved my life and put me on a path to recovery. We had both suffered greatly because of our mental health challenges and that made me feel connected. I saw that although he had struggled and still struggled, he was able to maintain a full time job, own a home, and have a family. Through a relationship of trust and mutuality, he supported me

to work towards the things I wanted in my life. In the end, I realized we had much more in common than not.”

Individuals referred for peer support should be open to work with a peer specialist and interested in working on overcoming challenges in their lives. The clinician or referring entity should inform the person served of what peer support is and how that support could be helpful to them. *A record of a recommendation for peer support services and an agreement to the services must be reflected in documentation.*

Peer specialists are often trained in WRAP®, Wellness Recovery Action Plan. WRAP® is an evidence-based tool to help people manage challenges so they can manage their life. At the foundation of WRAP® are five key concepts: hope, personal responsibility, education, self-advocacy and support. The developer of WRAP® found that when these five concepts were present, a person was more likely to recover.

These five concepts may be helpful in identifying individuals who would benefit from working with a peer specialist. The following qualities/situations include:

Hope – Person served lacks hope

- Feeling stuck and not moving forward in life
- Not feeling like their situation will improve or dire predictions for the future
- No belief they can meet their goals and/or have a happy and productive life
- Many obstacles to recovery which seem like an immovable barrier

Personal Responsibility – Person served is not taking personal responsibility

- Not taking responsibility for their own wellness and life (i.e. not keeping appointments, not knowing what medications they are on, etc.).
- Difficulty expressing what they want and need
- Not taking care of themselves in terms of hygiene, health check-ups, etc.
- Blaming others for their difficulties

Education – Person served would benefit from education to make informed decisions around treatment, lifestyle, relationships, living space, and leisure activities

- Would benefit from working with someone who has had similar experiences
- Would benefit from learning about resources in their local area
- Would benefit from self-management skills (i.e. medication management).

Self-Advocacy – Person served lacks self-advocacy skills

- Needs skills to express themselves clearly and assert themselves calmly
- Person served lacks confidence in themselves or their abilities
- Would benefit from a supporter to accompany them when practicing self-advocacy skills (i.e. accompany them to medical appointments).

Support – Person served does not have a healthy support system

- Person served does not have natural supports, (i.e. family, friends, etc.).
- Person served has supports who are not healthy
- Person served is not connected to their community
- Peer Specialists can support their peers to have hope, take personal responsibility, educate themselves, learn self-advocacy skills, and build a support system.