

Culturally Responsive Peer Recovery

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Peer support services that are culturally responsive can effectively extend the reach of treatment beyond the clinical setting into the everyday environment of individuals seeking a successful, sustained recovery process.

Peer support workers are people who have been successful in the recovery process who support others throughout their recovery. Through collective understanding, respect, and communal empowerment, peer support workers help people stay active in their recovery. Peer support can also reduce the likelihood of relapse for those in recovery. Peer support services that are culturally responsive can effectively extend the reach of treatment beyond the clinical setting into the everyday environment of individuals seeking a successful, sustained recovery process (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2018). Cultural responsiveness is the ability to learn from and relate respectfully with people of your own culture as well as those from other cultures. In recovery, cultural responsiveness is the delivery of services that incorporate and respect the individual's cultural beliefs.

Peer support workers engage in a wide range of activities. Peer support workers advocate for individuals in recovery, share resources and life skills, helping individuals build community and relationships, lead recovery groups and mentor individuals in recovery. The peer support worker may also provide services and/or training, supervise other peer workers, develop recovery resources, manage programs or recovery agencies and advocate for their peers by educating stakeholders and policymakers (SAMSHA, 2018).

Peer support workers must develop additional cultural competencies to provide unbiased services to specific groups who also share common recovery experiences, such as various minority groups. The shared experience of being in recovery from a mental health and/or substance use condition or being a family member is the foundation on which the peer recovery support relationship is built in the behavioral health arena.

Implicit bias is held internally. Occasions that cause it to show up externally in the delivery of peer recovery services is in decision-making, allocation of resources, sharing of resources and life skills, in the selection of appropriate community supports community and relationships, leading recovery groups and mentor individuals in recovery. Individuals receiving peer supports services will spend a significant amount of time throughout the recovery process with their peer support worker. Williams (2018) reported on environmental stress explaining that events requiring your body to respond are stressors and when those stressors are in your surroundings, then that is an environmental stressor. Peer recovery services that are not intentionally culturally responsive and inclusive foster high levels of environmental stressors. There is a relationship with stress and relapse for those in recovery.

The peer support worker's mission is to advocate and support his or her peers, including those from marginalized communities with person-centered recovery supports. In order for peer support workers to provide this service to recipients, they need to be able to develop cultural competencies that minimize environmental stressors—namely discrimination.

The growing landscape of the world includes people who are expressing their uniqueness. The field of recovery is no exception. However, foundations of helping professions, like counseling, social work, and peer recovery, were built on White culture. The need to make White culture explicit is significant when we realize it exists, but the correlation between it and recovery outcomes has rarely been acknowledged or investigated. Torrey (1972) suggests that we have little insight into our own culturally learned values and mores. Furthermore, he believes that those same mores sit within us quietly and unconsciously providing criteria for implicit

biases. Those implicit biases diminish the effectiveness of peer recovery supports and in some instances cause harm to the individuals receiving services.

While the development of cultural competencies is a lifelong process, peer support workers should participate in ongoing professional development that endeavors to strengthen cultural competency and they should incorporate culturally responsive practices when delivering recovery supports.

The first practice is to avoid projecting one's own perceptions onto people but ask individuals how they would like to be seen by others. Andrews (Andrews, Hopkins, & Pearsons, 2013) spoke against ambiguity where people hide behind words, and rather suggested the use of more specific language. The reality is that language changes over time so it is best to ask people how they would like to be referenced. This is done by asking people to give their preferred pronoun and using that pronoun when referencing them. Then, quickly apologize whenever the wrong pronoun is mistakenly used. Also, ask people what name they want to be called. Quickly apologize whenever the wrong name is mistakenly used.

Next, peer support workers must provide unbiased and equal access and assistance as needed to make sure that everyone has access to and understands how to use resources to their advantage. One of the fundamental ethics of peer recovery is the recognition that there are multiple pathways to recovery. To that end, peer support workers should never dismiss the individual's desire or refuse to provide the support needed to connect him or her with community supports that mirror the individual's culture beliefs.

Peer Support Supervisors and other administrative team members often play a key role as a secondary support for individuals in treatment environments. Whenever information, assurance, and assistance is needed, supervisors should endeavor to provide support to peer support workers that allows them to have equal access to funding and other resources to avoid organizational discrimination.

Next, when working with other peer support workers and treatment team members, assume that each person means well in order to avoid unnecessary conflict. As members of a treatment team, give each other the benefit of the doubt knowing that the development of cultural competencies is a lifelong process and that the team is growing as a whole.

In addition, conflict can arise during the provision of peer recovery services throughout the various stages of recovery. Peer support workers

should give the benefit of the doubt while voicing discomforts and concerns. When experiencing discomforts and concerns, peer support workers should speak up. Let the person know that something happened making you uncomfortable and/or concerned. Dismissing such concerns do not aid in the recovery process. Nor does appropriate confrontation diminish a healthy peer-peer rapport.

It is also important to avoid cultural assumptions. Assumptions are rooted in making judgment calls without proper information and can often foster stereotypes. We know that differences exist among racial groups as well as within each group (LaFromboise, 1983). Therefore, while it is important to be familiar with cultural groups, it is also vital to take time to explore the individual's preferences and personal recovery needs.

In conclusion, peer support workers are a vital resource in the lives of countless of individuals in recovery. In order to be effective in their roles, peer recovery workers must continue to develop cultural competencies in effort to provide unbiased services. Although the development of cultural competencies is a lifelong process, the cultural responsive practices highlighted in this article should be incorporated into peer support.

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