

The Role of the Peer Specialist



2023 September



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September 2023

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“Peer support” encompasses a range of activities and interactions between people who share similar experiences of having lived experience with mental health, substance use, or both. The term lived experience is defined as “personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people.” In the context of this document, lived experience specifically refers to those directly affected by the social, health, public health, or other issues associated with a mental health and/or substance use challenge and who have experience with strategies that aim to address associated challenges.

This mutuality—often called “peerness”—between a peer support worker and a person in or seeking recovery promotes connection and inspires hope. Peer support offers a level of acceptance, understanding, and validation not found in many other professional relationships (Mead & McNeil, 2006). By sharing their own lived experience and practical guidance, peer support workers help people to develop their own goals, create strategies for self-empowerment, and take concrete steps toward building fulfilling, self-determined lives for themselves. Peer support workers may be referred to by different names depending upon the setting in which they practice. Common titles include certified peer specialists, peer recovery support specialists, mental health peer specialist, and recovery support peer specialists.

State systems have taken a variety of approaches to certifying peer support specialists in their respective healthcare systems. These approaches vary according to the lived experience of the peer support specialist being certified (i.e., whether in the area of substance use recovery, mental health recovery, or both). Lived experience in recovery is the key tool utilized by peer support specialists to perform their job across a variety of service settings.

The majority of states offer a single, integrated peer professional certification in the state healthcare system for individuals with lived experience in substance use and/or mental health recovery. Other states offer separate certifications based on the peer support specialist’s type of behavioral health lived experience: substance use or mental health recovery. Specifics of certification requirements for each state can be found on the Peer Recovery Center of Excellence State Certification Website.

While certification practices and processes may vary between the states. There are many common core competencies and a clearly defined role for peer specialists. As of a January 2023 review, approximately 50% of peer specialist certifications have specific core competency documents. Many states offer core knowledge expectations, focus areas for skill development, or scopes of practice. A significant number of states use the IC&RC domains rather than core competencies. Below are core competencies that are shared across peer specialist certifications and a list of various aspects of the peer specialist role.

WHAT DO CORE COMPETENCY DOCUMENTS SPECIFY?

78% peer support specialists have the skills needed to be an effective advocate

39% peer support specialists have an understanding of the skills needed to provide effective peer support services

53% peer support specialists have an in-depth understanding of recovery

39% peer support specialists are able to share their recovery story in a way that supports others

SAMHSA has also identified the following twelve core competencies for peer workers in behavioral health services:

- Engages peers in collaborative and caring relationships
- Provides support
- Shares lived experiences of recovery
- Personalizes peer support
- Supports recovery planning
- Links to resources, services, and supports
- Provides information about skills related to health, wellness, and recovery
- Helps peers to manage crises
- Values communication
- Supports collaboration and teamwork
- Promotes leadership and advocacy
- Promotes growth and development

Additionally, there are many tasks within the role of a peer support specialist that they may take on. Some examples are listed below, adapted from the N.A.P.S. National Practice Guidelines for Peer Specialists and Supervisors.

Peer support specialists...

support choice

Peer support specialists do not force or coerce others to participate in peer support services or any other service. Peer support specialists advocate for choice when they observe coercion in any mental health or substance use service setting.

share hope

Peer support specialists tell strategic stories of their personal recovery in relation to current struggles faced by those who are being supported.

withhold judgment about others

Peer support specialists respect an individual's right to choose pathways to recovery individuals believe will work best for them. Peer support specialists do not evaluate or assess others.

listen with emotional sensitivity

Peer support specialists practice effective listening skills that are non-judgmental. Peer support specialists understand that even though others may share similar life experiences, the range of responses may vary considerably.

are curious and embrace diversity

Peer support specialists treat each person they encounter with dignity and see them as worthy of all basic human rights. Peer support specialists embrace the full range of cultural experiences, strengths, and approaches to recovery for those they support and themselves.

educate and advocate

Peer support specialists recognize injustices that people face in all contexts, act as advocates, and facilitate change where appropriate. Peer support specialists use language that is supportive, encouraging, inspiring, motivating and respectful.

Peer support specialists...

address difficult issues with caring and compassion

Peer support specialists engage when desired by those they support, in candid, honest discussions about stigma, abuse, oppression, crisis, or safety. Peer support specialists strive to build peer relationships based on integrity, honesty, respect, and trust.

encourage peers to give and receive

Peer support specialists learn from those they support and those supported learn from peer support specialists. Peer support specialists respect and honor a relationship with peers that evokes power-sharing and mutuality, wherever possible.

embody equality

Peer support specialists behave in ways that reflect respect and mutuality with those they support. Peer support specialists do not express or exercise power over those they support. Peer support specialists do not diagnose or offer medical services but do offer a complementary service.

see what's strong, not what's wrong

Peer support specialists operate from a strength-based perspective and acknowledge the strengths, informed choices and decisions of peers as a foundation of recovery. Peer support specialists don't fix or do for others what they can do for themselves.

set clear expectations and use plain language

Peer support specialists clearly explain what can or cannot be expected of the peer support relationship. Peer support specialist roles are distinct from the other behavioral health service professionals.

focus on the person, not the problem

Peer support specialists encourage those they support to make their own decisions. Peer support specialists encourage resilience. Peer support specialists encourage personal growth in others.

Resources Utilized

Comparative Analysis of State Requirements for Peer Support Specialist Training and Certification in the United States. (2023, January). <https://peerrecoverynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-FEB-07-prcoe-comp-analysis.pdf>

Core Competencies for Peer Workers in Behavioral Health Services. (2015, December). https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tacs/core-competencies_508_12_13_18.pdf

National Association of Peer Supporters (2019). National Practice Guidelines for Peer Specialists and Supervisors. Washington, DC: N.A.P.S.

Peers 101. (2022, February). <https://peerrecoverynow.org/wp-content/uploads/Peers-101.pdf>

State Certification Database. (n.d.). <https://peerrecoverynow.org/resource-library/state-certification-database/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Model Standards for Peer Support Certification. Publication No. PEP23-10-01-001. Rockville, MD: Office of Recovery, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023.

