

Ways to focus on a person's/family's strengths and gifts and passions as a starting point for planning

Introduction

This Quick Guide gives a starting point for how peer networks can assist a person to focus on gifts and passions as a starting point to develop a plan that's right for them.

Peer support networks bring people together and offer a place where people living with disability can explore their life options based on their own unique strengths, gifts and passions. Having a safe and supportive place to talk about building a life vision focused on a person's unique talents and interests is essential and a peer support group can offer an ideal environment for this sharing. An essential part of the NDIS (and other disability services) is pre-planning and planning.

A peer support group can offer its members ways to assist them to build a plan of what they want for, and in, their lives; to think about setting and achieving goals.

Let's make it happen

The outcomes of the Productivity Commission Report (2011), which led to the NDIS, require a reframing of disability within our community away from 'challenges' and impairments to strengths, talents and passions. Peer support groups can play a vital role in helping our community to view disability in a new way – with a focus on talents, skills and interests rather than a lack of ability in specific aspects of a person's life.

By talking about what members are passionate about, rather than on what challenges they face due to their disability, peer groups can help reframe the life options and opportunities for its members.

As such, a peer network discussion could focus on:

- What 'floats the boat' of members, rather than how they 'cope' with disability;
- What people are good at, rather than what they have difficulty doing;
- What could the NDIS bring into people's lives, rather than what they could 'lose' from change; and,
- What works well in members' lives, rather than only what isn't working.
- How to convert talents, skills and interests, into valued social roles that lead to social and economic and social contribution

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Whatever the situation in members' lives, there are ways of approaching change and life development within a positive framework, and language can be a powerful driver in ensuring peer group members strive to live their best life.

While the NDIS (via Local Area Coordinators and Planners if members are eligible for an NDIS package) can offer support to people living with disability with developing their plans, peer support groups can offer different support, particularly during the pre-planning phase.

Discussions can be undertaken within peer support networks with questions relating to what aspects of life are working well (and what is not working well) and whether there are aspects of the lives of your peer support group members that they feel are lacking. Unfortunately, evidence shows that there are definitely aspects of life opportunities that people living with disability are 'shut out' of, and a peer group is a great place to discuss this issue and support each other to break down barriers and pursue a new life vision.

To pursue a life full of choice and control, peer group members need the confidence to dream, the knowledge of what they like and are good at, insight into what they are most interested in, and the importance of valued social roles.

A way to help peer group members to think about what they want in their lives is to explore the *Valued Roles* literature and tools.

Valued Roles

Most people in society experience numerous positive roles in their life e.g. employee, club member, volunteer, home owner, friend, student, sports person etc. Our roles are an inherent part of our identity. They assist us to develop, learn new things, meet people and develop relationships, earn an income, have control, contribute to society and belong. Roles are powerful as they help define our identity and sense of self.

However, people with a disability are not often given the same opportunities to develop positive roles, often being cast into negative roles such as dependent, continual client, burden, object of ridicule, sick etc. Such negative roles are nearly always devalued by society. If people do not have positive roles they feel can feel loss, disconnected, lonely, isolated and can experience poverty and isolation. Nobody notices if they're missing!

Recognising the importance of positive roles and assisting people to secure and develop valued roles is one of the most important keys to experiencing the good things in life! 'Being busy doesn't mean that a person living with disability has valued roles – they may just have a range of activities that keep them occupied – and this impacts upon their life satisfaction.

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"Roles identify the ways that people belong to each other, participate in exchanges with each other, and expect reciprocal responsibility from each other. They identify the contexts in which people learn skills and perform skillfully and the areas of life where people can experience satisfaction and earn status"

(O'Brien, J (2006) p.5

<http://www.inclusion.com/socialroleinventory.pdf>

Holding socially valued roles generate contacts for people living with disability, and can also generate opportunities which can result in life choices. If you are studying, volunteering and/or working in a field you love, you are likely to meet people with like-minded interests; imagine where these can lead in the future? Using a valued roles tool in a peer group setting can enable peer support members to talk about life roles in the past, present and future as well as what is most important to each member. There are short and easy lists of valued role domains that can be discussed, including:

- Student
- Volunteer
- Worker
- Hobbyist/Amateur
- Care giver
- Home Owner
- Home Maintainer
- Friend
- Family member
- Religious participant
- Neighbour
- Other member in Organisations (eg Lions club, Scouts)

Each peer group member can identify if they have held roles in these domains previously, currently or hope to in the future. They can then circle those that they believe are MOST important. If there are role areas that are important AND not held currently, there is a new role to pursue. If there are role areas that are important AND held currently, it is also important to explore the security of the role, how satisfied the member is in that role, and explore new directions for that role – could there be a possibility to extend, deepen or expand the role?

Given the benefits derived from living a full and meaningful life, we should consider what barriers are in place to peer group members living with disability accessing valued roles? People's attitudes and the impact of these attitudes potentially creating 'wounds' for a person and could be a significant challenges to success e.g. lack of confidence. In other words, the fact that systems are not in place to support people with disability into valued roles within an inclusive community is the disabling factor – not the disability! Dealing with

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the lack of opportunities is the challenge, but peer support networks can play a role in bringing about this change in both attitudes and opportunities in the future.

In peer groups, a range of mainstream easy and fun tools can be used to explore what people are interested in, and what they believe they are good at (or could be good at). For example, members can explore different personality tools and 'employment' interest areas assessment tools just like many students explore when nearly the time they make career decisions and plans. People can also brainstorm all the valued roles in regard to a particular interest. For example, what are all the roles in regard to photography? Ideas generated might include photographer, photography club member, student, framer, designer, exhibitor, developer, printer, curator, desk top publisher, teacher, blogger, card maker and the list goes on!

Overall, running a peer support network is all about people coming together and sharing. Great outcomes are possible when the peer group offers its members opportunities to talk about their dreams, visualize a positive and productive life full of life choices and provides its members with the safe and supportive environment essential for the open discussion about these deeply personal thoughts.

Where you can find more information

There are lots of online resources about ways to explore talents and interests as well as ways to use them within a life planning process. The **NDIS** website offers a range of planning tools, and accessing their Planning Workbook is a helpful starting point which can be accessed via: <https://www.everyaustraliancounts.com.au/wp-content/uploads/NDIS-Planning-Workbook.pdf>.

Roles are a very big part of life and can be instrumental in bringing opportunity, experience and personal growth into our lives. **Resourcing Inclusive Communities** provides an excellent discussion on valued roles and their importance along with other great resources at <https://www.ric.org.au/learn-about/community-connections/valued-roles/>. This site also provides some excellent discussion around the reframing essential in the sector, such as: <https://www.family-advocacy.com/assets/Uploads/Downloadables/11127-The-power-of-imagination.pdf>.

A detailed book which explains the importance of valued roles is Wolfensberger, W. (1998). A brief introduction to Social Role Valorization: A high-order concept for addressing the plight of societally devalued people, and for structuring human services (3rd ed.). Syracuse NY. It can be purchased at <http://www.belongingmatters.org/books/Thinking-About-Valued-Roles> contains stories from people with a disability and families about valued roles can be purchased at <http://www.belongingmatters.org/p/prd1/3886219011/product/periodical-22---valued-roles>

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You can attend a “Towards a Better Life” workshop! Contact John Armstrong Email: jarm@socialrolevalorization.com or Jane Sherwin Email: sherwinconsulting@gmail.com

Visit the following web sites: <http://www.socialrolevalorization.com>; <http://www.viaa.org.au>

For information about valued roles and a good life, and what this might mean for how disability support agencies help people, take a look at the *Model Of Citizenship Support*¹.

You can find details on the Purple Orange website:

<https://www.purpleorange.org.au/news-links/purple-orange-news/model-citizenship-support-2nd-edition1/>

An excellent resource ‘**Valued Roles for All**’ has been developed by the Department for Communities and Social Inclusion in SA and provided freely online via: http://www.agedcommunity.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/BPP_Handbook-for-web.pdf.

Educational resources explaining The Role Checklist and its use are also available online if required:

<http://www.cade.uic.edu/moho/resources/files/assessments/RoleChecklistWithInstructions.pdf>.

Parent2Parent offers a great planning tool specifically focused on exploring life choices for children living with disability and this can be helpful for chats about what is of most interest to group members: <https://p2pql.org.au/our-services/path-planning/>.

Finally, evidence surrounding the experience of people living with disability in Australia is provided within the **Department of Social Services ‘Shut Out’** report: <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/publications-articles/policy-research/shut-out-the-experience-of-people-with-disabilities-and-their-families-in-australia>.

Co authored by



¹ R. Williams (2013) *Model of Citizenship Support (2nd Edition)*. Unley, Australia: JFA Purple Orange