

Peer networks: what they are and how they can help

Introduction

A peer support network is where people get together as equals to provide support to each other because of similar experiences or circumstances in their life.

Wikipedia defines peer support as *initiatives where colleagues, members of self-help organisations and others meet, in person or online, as equals to give each other support on a reciprocal basis.*

While people may get support from other sources, peer support is different because peers are *'in a unique position to provide support by virtue of relevant experience: he or she has "been there, done that" and can relate to others who are now in a similar situation'*¹.

Peer support is considered to be a key component of the [independent living](#)² movement and has been widely used by people living with disability.

Let's make it happen

There are a range of ways in which peer support networks can be of benefit to people living with disability and their family members. Evaluation data has shown tangible benefits are emerging for people who are members of peer support networks, in areas such as fellowship, information, increased confidence and capacity, social connection and leadership, including impact on disability service design, such as the NDIS and community accessibility.

There is also a theory about the effectiveness of peer support which identifies 5 areas of psychosocial benefits that derive from being around, talking to and associating with peers.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer_support

² **Independent living**, as seen by its [advocates](#), is a [philosophy](#), a way of looking at [society](#) and [disability](#), and a worldwide movement of people with disabilities working for [equal opportunities](#), [self-determination](#), and [self-respect](#)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_living

Essentially the theory is that hanging out with peers is a cool, fun thing to do and it also does good things like building individual capacity, providing emotional support, being able to help others and learning from others who have had a similar experience.

This Quick Guide will look at each of the 5 areas in turn based on an article by Mark Salzer³:

1. **Social Support:** peer support groups give social support to people which comes from being part of something, a sense of belonging, a feeling that people care about you and a connection to others. The supportive resources that come from peer support can be emotional, or practical such as gaining information, as well as providing companionship and connection to others.
2. **Knowledge gained through experience:** peer support is unique because it is support through perspectives that people have from living through a particular experience. This makes it specialized knowledge that only people with a lived experience (of disability in this instance) can bring. It cannot be taught or learned, it has to be lived.
3. **Social learning theory:** this is the idea that people can develop new and helpful habits by observing and learning from what other people do (sometimes called role models). If a person sees or hears peers doing something a certain way that seems to be helpful, that person may try the same things.
4. **Social Comparison theory:** this is the idea that we all compare ourselves with others. It explains how, by making such comparisons, people can evaluate their own opinions and abilities. If people hold similar views then this leads to reinforcement and a building in confidence. If the views of others are markedly different then this can lead to someone testing and perhaps modifying their own view to help move towards their goals.
5. **Helping others helps you:** this is the idea that by helping others we get a benefit to ourselves. Peer support has the potential to be mutually beneficial for all parties involved. It may be that a member of the peer support gets help from the group but also likely that at some point they will also be able to assist another member. Doing

³ Salzer, Mark (2002). "Consumer-delivered services as a best practice in mental health care and the development of practice guidelines". *Psychiatric rehabilitation skills*. 6: 355–382

this can be a real confidence booster, because it means the person has valuable experiences to share that can help another person along.

So that's the theory but the reality is much more straight forward: people benefit when they connect with people they feel are 'like' them. Peer support usually comes from a development of relationship and trust between members and a sense of solidarity. It can be informal and can take many forms such as face-to face meetings or online.

Peer support is seen as increasingly important because it acknowledges and uses the power of lived experience. This can reap many benefits both for the individuals and also for the wider community as people become more confident, capable and informed so as to influence their lives outside of the peer group. It doesn't replace 'experts' or professionals but it is seen as a way of achieving positive outcomes.

Where you can find more information

There are lots of online resources about peer support.

Peer Connect has a great video about peer networks based on Families4 Families

<http://www.peerconnect.org.au/>

The Centre of Excellence Peer Support – Mental Health has great resources about Peer Support. This page explains what peer support is

<http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-41-58/2014-12-15-22-59-27>

It also has a Charter of Peer Support:

<http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-41-32/2014-12-15-22-46-46>

Peers for Progress - is a website all about peer support

Dept Human Services – Victoria, Australia
Peer Support Guide

This guide is for people with a disability and their supporters. It tells the story of how people who receive disability supports can share what they know about self-directing their supports. It acknowledges the collective wisdom that people with a disability and their supporters hold, and the benefits of people sharing that wisdom and personal experience with each other.

The guide explains what peer support is and provides ideas about how to do it. The Department of Human Services believes peer support works best if people themselves take

control of it. Through this guide, the department recognises the value of peer support and encourage people to give it a go.

The guide is also for disability support providers who would like to do more to empower people with a disability and their carers to share their knowledge and experience with each other.

<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/documents-and-resources/policies,-guidelines-and-legislation/peer-support-guide>

Peers for Progress - is a website all about peer support

<http://peersforprogress.org/learn-about-peer-support/what-is-peer-support/>

SHARC - is an organisation that advocates peer support for people and families impacted by drug and alcohol misuse.

<http://sharc.org.au/peer-support/>

Mental health sector – information on peer support within the mental health sector

http://www.mhpod.gov.au/assets/sample_topics/combined/Supporting_a_Mental_Health_Peer_Workforce/objective1/index.html

Peer zone

<http://www.peerzone.info/>

Brook Red <http://www.brookred.org.au/peer-support>