

7. connection & communication



This module will focus on cultivating compassion and empathy, listening deeply to understand, and asking powerful questions to increase reflection and connection.

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EXIT the module

1. welcome

welcome to
WHERE WE ARE AT
**connection &
communication**



Welcome to ***Where We Are At***, a training course for Provincial Peer Support Workers. We're glad you're here! This course is made up of 16 modules, all designed to support your training in peer support work.

The purpose of module **7. connection & communication** is to acquaint you with one of the foundational values of peer support.

Any of the modules in this training can stand alone, but you'll notice they are very interconnected. All of the concepts and core values have many layers, and they will look a little different when you see them through the lens of different topics. For example, self-determination, one of the core values that is essential for peer support work, will look a little different when we look at it through the lens of learned helplessness, grief and loss, or goal planning, but the main message will always be the same.

You will get to experience all of those layers and intersections when you move through each module of the training. Feel free to navigate back and forth between modules as you move along since learning never has to be linear. There will be references to other modules intersected throughout.

Thank you for joining us on this educational journey!

2. gratitude



**Before we begin this
new *learning* journey, we ask that you
reflect on the following question:**

What am I grateful for today?

We know that taking time to reflect can give us the clarity and strength to do what can sometimes be difficult emotional work.

Download the [reflection journal](#) below and use it to record your thoughts. Please don't rush. Take all the time you need.

This journal will be used for several questions throughout the module.



M07_reflection-journal.pdf
107.4 KB

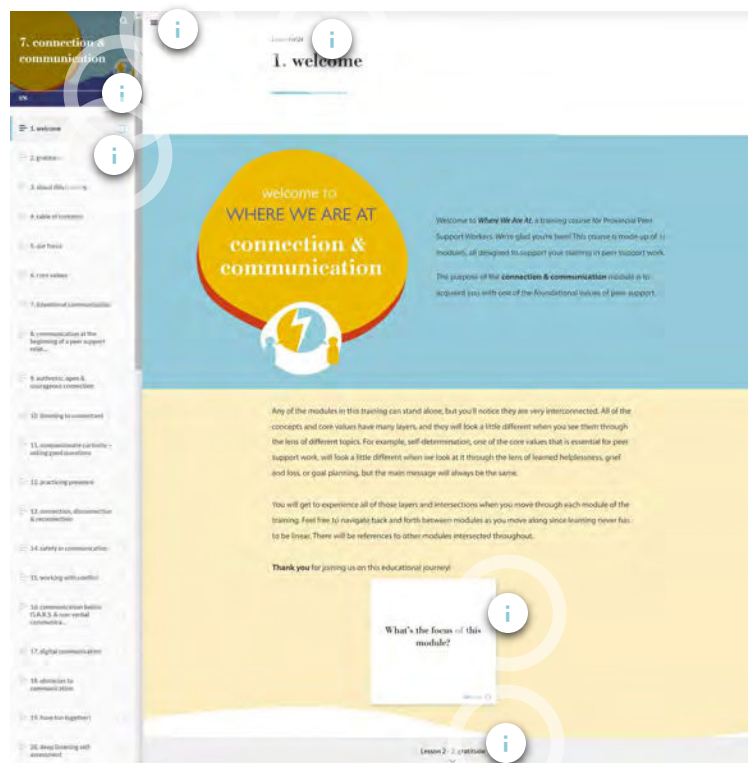


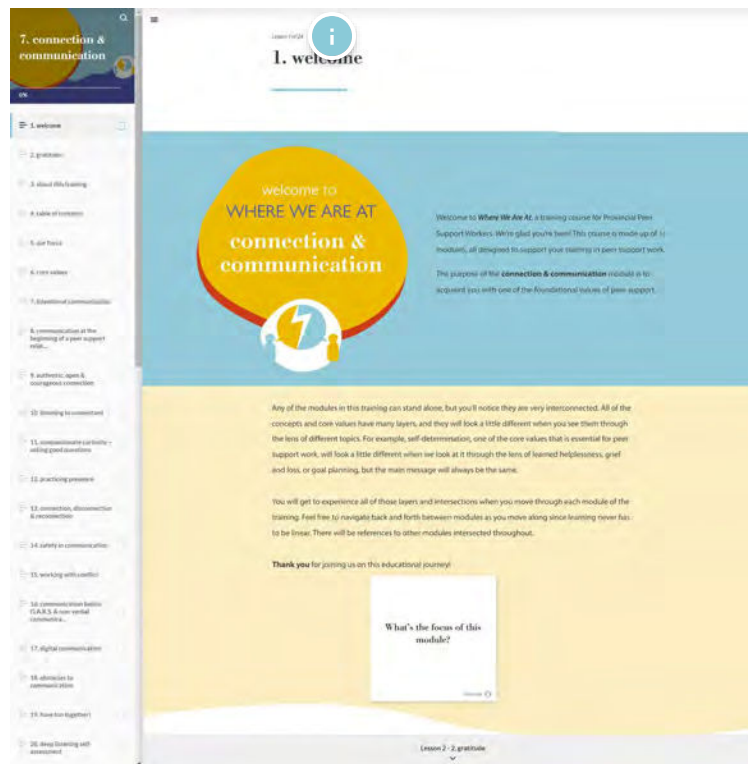
3. about this training

The course content has been guided by consultations that were held with peer support workers. It's with the utmost respect for their experience and wisdom that we share these learnings.

course navigation

You may have questions on how to use this course. We designed an interactive diagram to give you the chance to explore the different functions on the screen. Click the buttons below to learn more.





Lesson titles

Lesson 1 of 24

Above each lesson title, the lesson count is shown.

CONTINUE

reflection journal

As you discovered in the previous section, included in this training is a reflection journal. The journal is designed for you to use throughout the training. It's full of reflective questions related to the topics being explored that will get you engaging in the world around you with curiosity.

Feel free to use the journal in a way that works for you:

- 1 You can print it off and write in it or just use it to support reflective processing
- 2 You can use the fillable PDF version and complete it online
- 3 You can write in your own journal, using the questions as guides

We encourage you to find a safe, comfortable spot to engage with these questions.

CONTINUE

where we are at

provincial peer support worker training curriculum

The *Where We Are At* educational curriculum includes 16 modules. You'll find a brief description of each below.

1. the foundations

An overview of all the practices and knowledge that will be transferable to all of the modules in this training.

2. peer support & wholeness

Provides an introduction to peer support work and explores differences between the peer support role and other roles within the mental health and substance use systems.

3. categories & containers: unpacking our biases

Helps you understand how and why we judge.

4. self-determination

Looks at self-determination, the theory of self-determination and how peer support workers can support creating an ecology where people trust their own inner wisdom.

5. cultural humility

Explores how to approach your peer support work through the lens of cultural humility and helps you understand how culture (and the destruction of culture) shapes our lives.

6. understanding boundaries & what it means to co-create them

Examines boundary creation within the context of peer support, grounded in the core value of mutuality.

7. connection & communication

Focuses on cultivating compassion and empathy, listening deeply to understand, and asking powerful questions to increase reflection and connection.

8. healing-centred connection: principles in trauma-informed care

Brings together all the learnings from previous modules to support the creation of environments and relationships that are safe and trauma-informed.

9. social determinants of health

Explores the social determinants of health and how social, economic and other factors lead to better or worse health outcomes.

10. supporting someone who is grieving

Examines how to understand grief and loss in order to support someone who is grieving, without trying to “fix” or “save” them.

11. substance use & peer support

7. connection & communication

—

Focuses on cultivating compassion and empathy, listening deeply to understand, and asking powerful questions to increase reflection and connection.

8. healing-centred connection: principles in trauma-informed care

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Brings together all the learnings from previous modules to support the creation of environments and relationships that are safe and trauma-informed.

9. social determinants of health

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Explores the social determinants of health and how social, economic and other factors lead to better or worse health outcomes.

10. supporting someone who is grieving

—

Examines how to understand grief and loss in order to support someone who is grieving, without trying to “fix” or “save” them.

11. substance use & peer support

—

Explores the principles and methodologies around the harm reduction approach to substance use disorders and some of the history around the criminalization of substance use.

4. table of contents

Below you'll find a short overview of the topics you'll find in this module.

As you move through these topics, please remember you can always return to this page to revisit the main ideas being explored in each lesson.



intentional communication

—

Looks at the importance of intention in communication.

communication at the beginning of a peer support relationship

—

Describes ways to approach your early interactions with peers.

authentic, open & courageous connection —

Explains the role of authenticity and courage in good communication.

listening to understand —

Looks at how to be a better empathetic listener.

compassionate curiosity – asking good questions —

Describes the role curiosity and questions play in building peer connections.

practicing presence —

Explains ways to prepare ourselves for interactions with others.

connection, disconnection & reconnection —

Looks at ways we come in and out of relationships.

safety in communication —

Describes ways to avoid disconnection in communications.

working with conflict —

Examines how we perceive conflict, how are brains are wired to survive, how binary thinking leads to conflict, how generosity of assumption affects conflict and how debate differs from dialogue.

communication basics: O.A.R.S & non-verbal communication —

Looks at the meaning of O.A.R.S. and the basics of non-verbal communication.

digital communication —

Explores ways to use digital communication with peers.

obstacles to communication —

Identifies potential obstacles to communication.

have fun together! —

Looks at ways play and fun can be used to build connection.

deep listening self-assessment

—

Gives you a tool to help you assess your skills as a listener.



5. our focus

What's the focus of this module?

1 of 1

In this training module, we will focus on cultivating compassion and empathy, listening deeply to understand, and asking powerful questions to increase reflection and connection. These topics are foundational to good communication.

We'll also look at how to reduce the fear and shame that can come with disconnection and conflict and what to do when they occur. Shifting our mindset to look at those instances as opportunities to connect on a deeper level can be an antidote to shame and deeper disconnection.

Lastly, we'll look at harnessing the electricity of connection. We'll tap into the magic that comes when we approach relationships with possibility, compassion and a desire to understand.

after reviewing this module, you'll be able to...



Observe and assess your listening skills and practice new ways to strengthen your capacity to listen.



Demonstrate the importance of caring, curiosity and mindful presence in communication with others.



Distinguish the differences between compassion and empathy and how they interconnect, and be able to further integrate both into your practice as a peer support worker.

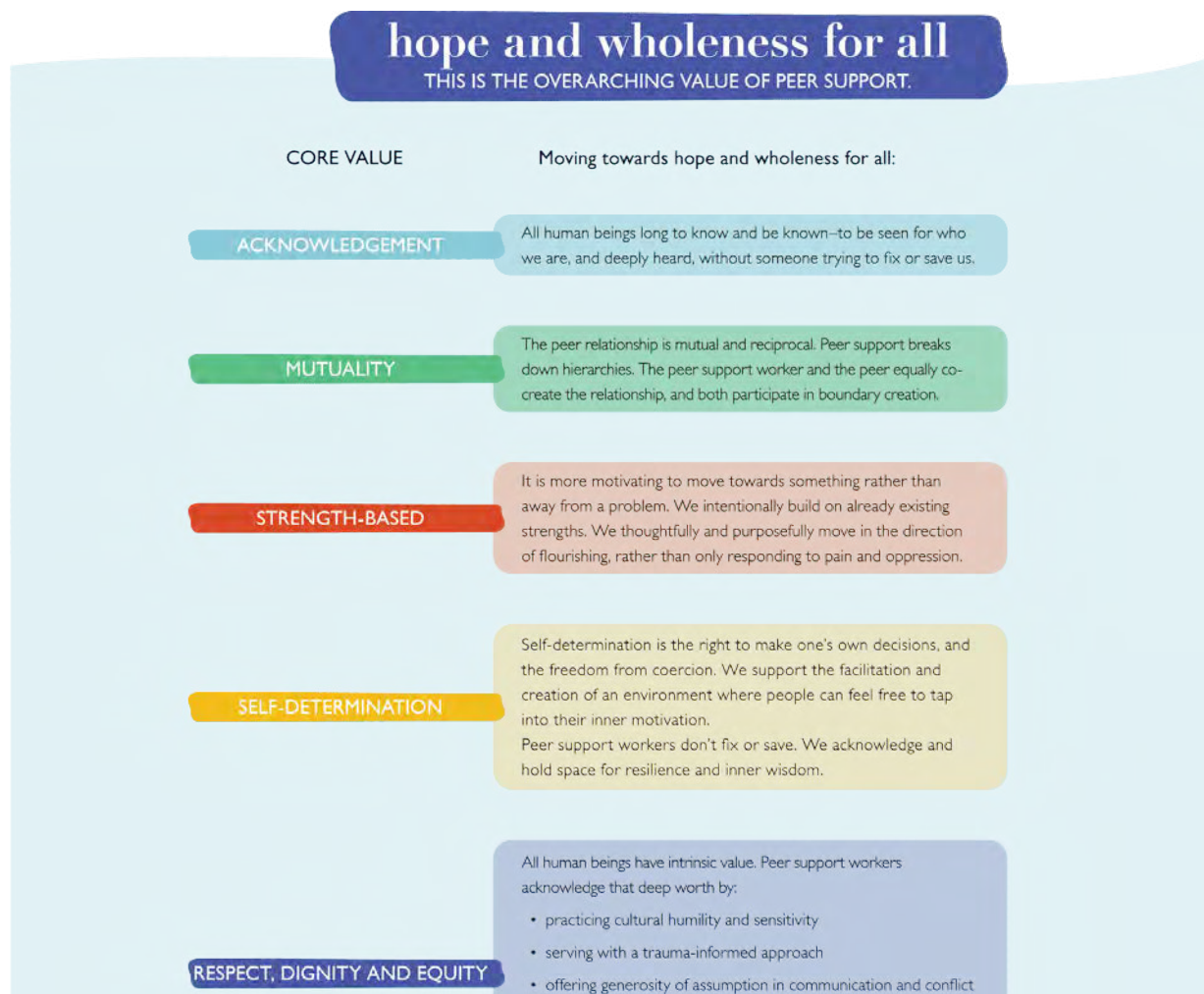


Create and develop a way to share your personal story of struggle and hope in a way that creates connection with the people you support.



6. core values

The following core values are essential for peer support work. At the end of this module, you'll be asked to decide which ones are key to this topic.



- mindfully addressing personal biases

Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

Peer Support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.

CURIOSITY

We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.

This curiosity isn't fueled by personal gain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support.

We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

***Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms:** Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story, and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

7. intentional communication



We enter relationships with so many assumptions and ideas about communication. In addition to our worldview, assumptions and biases, we've also been conditioned to approach communication in different ways depending on our exposure to communication styles. Our upbringing, along with the cultures and subcultures we have belonged to, can also impact our approach to communication. Additionally, it's so easy to come into a relationship with unexpressed expectations and unclear boundaries that turn into miscommunication, conflict, or grow into disconnection and resentment. All of these factors impact our ability to genuinely connect with each other.

This module is focused on connection and, specifically, how our communication impacts that connection. We'll be tying in many of the other modules in this training, as there are many intersections between the different concepts.

this module is NOT about non-verbal communication, though we will touch on it.

Although we'll touch on it, we won't be focusing on the mechanics of communication, such as non-verbal communication, body language, paraphrasing and others. Awareness of these communication techniques can certainly support connection, but they're not the key to connection.

CONTINUE

intent

There's a common misnomer that says communication is 93% non-verbal. This statistic is almost akin to an urban legend, and it's amazing how deeply it's permeated our culture. The statistic comes from one 1967 study conducted by Mehrabian and Wiener that centred around the intention the hearers identified when they were read single words (such as "dear," "honey," "thanks," "really," "don't" and "terrible") in a neutral tone of voice and showed photos of different facial expressions. The results of this study have been misinterpreted by the masses over the decades. In a *Psychology Today* article called "The Body Language Myth," author Tania Luna refers to the 1967 study and shares some comments made by researcher Mehrabian years later:

As study co-author Albert Mehrabian later wrote, "When there are inconsistencies between attitudes communicated verbally and posturally, the postural component should dominate in determining the total attitude that is inferred." In other words, when someone's words seem to match their nonverbal

signals, we'll likely fully pay attention to the words. It's only then we suspect that someone's words don't match their nonverbal signals that we "listen" to nonverbal communication. (2020)

The study did say that congruence between our words and body posturing is important, and that intent shows up in both the words we choose and the tone and delivery of those words. It did not say that 93% of communication is non-verbal.



If you are scowling when you speak encouraging words with someone, what intention comes through? What about crossing your arms, putting your hands in your pockets or crossing your legs? Again, it depends on your intention. Crossing your arms could indicate a closed attitude, but it could also mean you're cold, lack arm support or are trying to concentrate. If your intention is to genuinely engage with a person, whether you cross your arms or not isn't going to matter.

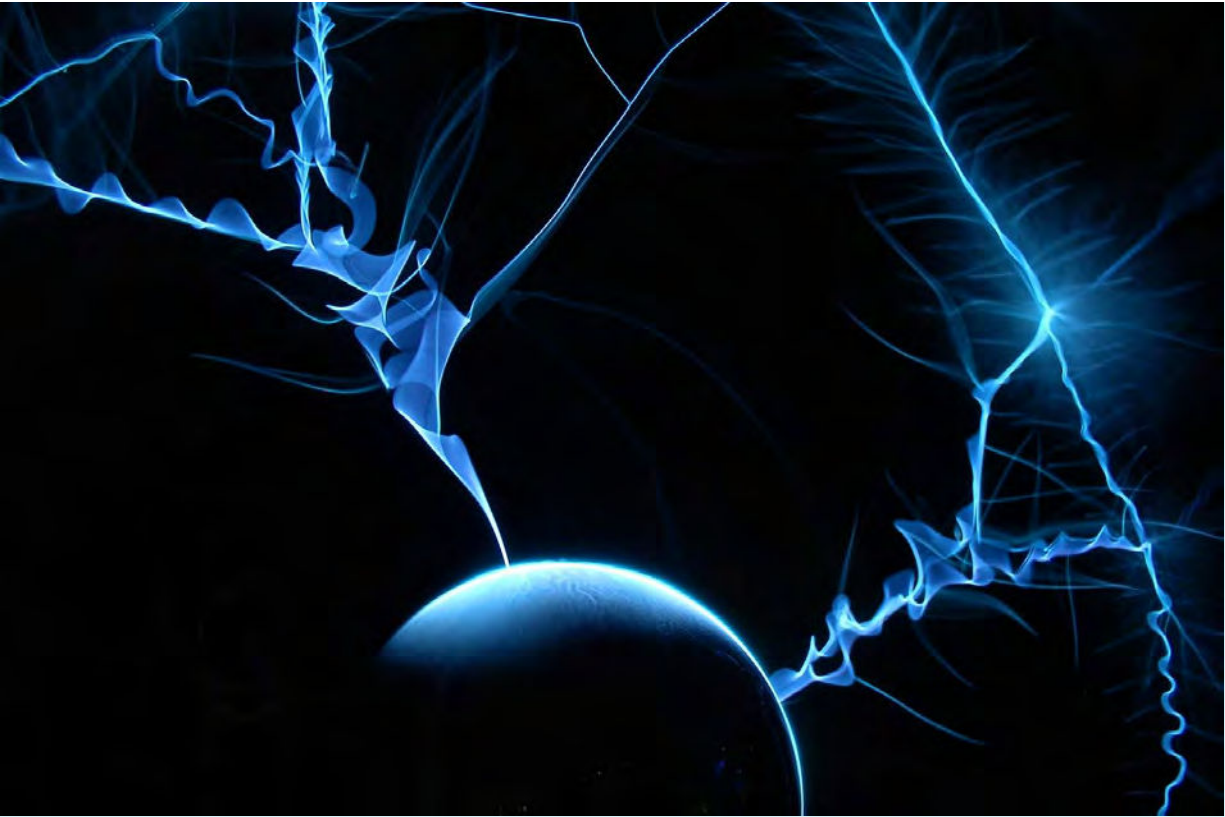
In Western culture, we have an often unspoken set of "communication rules." For example, using direct eye contact when talking to someone is generally considered to be respectful. But different cultures have different

customs around non-verbal communication. In some cultures, non-verbal forms of communication like giving direct eye contact are considered disrespectful. If our intention is connection – if we are trying to connect with people from other cultures with the spirit of humility – then we can seek to learn from them and pivot our approach, instead of getting stuck on a set of “communication rules.”

CONTINUE

intentional connection

One of the goals of this module is to focus on the deeper level of INTENT. We believe if we address communication at the level of intent, many of the other aspects of communication will be much easier to work out. After all, deep connection is more than just effective communication. You can do all the non-verbal “to-dos” correctly and still not make a connection with someone. This is because connection is more comparable to the flow of energy than it is to ticking off the “to-do” list of communication tasks.



Brené Brown explains this idea in her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*:

"I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship." (2020)

So, words are important. Tone is important. Even more important than words and tone are the intentions underlying the words we use – especially the intentions we have to connect with others.

intention and autistic people

Reading the intention of others can be a challenge for anyone, but that's especially the case when neurotypical people try to understand the communication of neurodivergent people.

In her article "Why Is Conversation So Hard for People with Autism," author Lisa Jo Rudy states that autistic people don't use language in exactly the same way as neurotypical people. She says this is a difference with both word selection and behaviour, including body language, intonation and eye contact. She goes on to explain that since autistic children very often have delayed speech, many need to work with speech and behavioral therapists to learn how to use language appropriately. Some key points she makes include:

- Autistic people process language differently and may ask you to clarify your meaning. Treat these questions as part of the flow of conversation.
- They may see sarcasm and humor as distracting from the key statements and facts of the conversation. They may also see the neurotypical reliance on abstract ideas and figures of speech such as 'like water under the bridge' as confusing so consider eliminating these when you can.
- They may speak with a different rhythm.
- They may repeat themselves more often.

All this to say that the tone, words and even body language of autistic people can be easily be misinterpreted by someone who is not.

“I am not even allowed to get to the point where someone can figure out intention because they have so thoroughly misjudged me so quickly.”

Peer Support Worker

Special care and attention must be given to communication between neurotypical and autistic people to make sure true intentions are being understood.

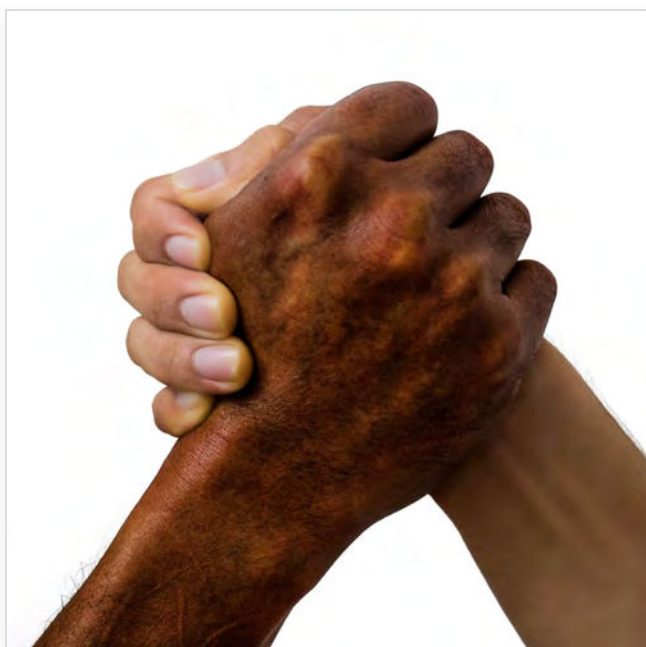
questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



What are your thoughts about non-verbal communication?

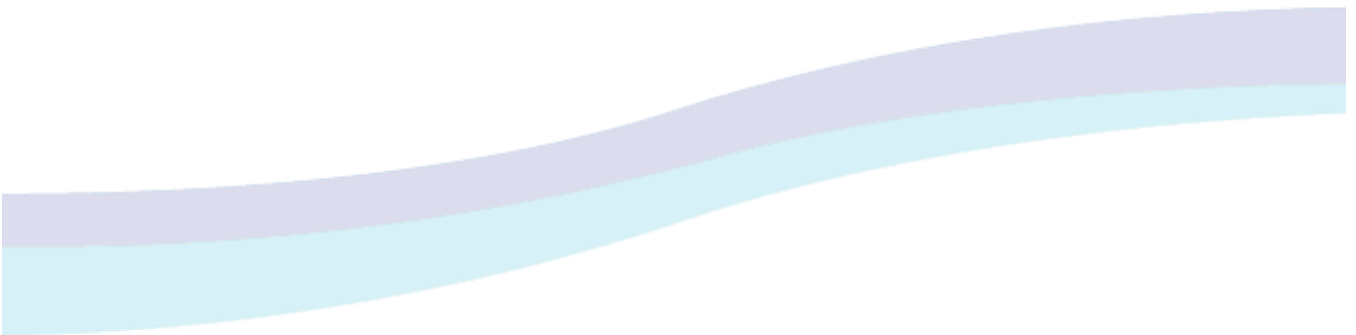
1 of 3



From your perspective, what do you feel are important aspects of communication?



How do you feel after reading the debunking of the 93% non-verbal communication theory?



8. communication at the beginning of a peer support relationship



From the core values:

Mutuality: The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.

If connection is about energy exchange, then a big piece of that exchange comes through mutuality. Mutuality is an essential value in peer support. We can't know others – and be known by others – without it. Mutuality breaks

down hierarchies. With it, the peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship and participate in boundary creation. The relationship is one of sharing and reciprocity.

Throughout this training, we have shared how one of the challenges of the healthcare system is the lack of mutuality: the people served are set up to only be receivers of care and attention and are seldom offered opportunities to give. All the more important, then, at the beginning of a peer relationship, to establish with clear intention the need for mutuality. And the tool with which to do this is communication.

Let's look at some ways we can use communication to create mutuality when working with people in peer support programs.

CONTINUE

- **people served need to understand what peer support is and how it's different from other, more clinical programs**

why is this important? —

Because otherwise they won't see you as any different than a clinician, and your role is very different. Your whole role is based on mutuality and having been through a similar struggle yourself.

- **your introduction to peer support needs to include sharing a little about you, your struggles and your transformative experiences**

why is this important? —

This creates more of an opportunity for understanding, connection and mutuality. You don't have to go into a long narrative or share details of traumatic events. Share what you are comfortable sharing and highlight key transformative moments.

This will inspire hope.

- **expectations need to be expressed and talked about – for both the peer support worker and the program participant(s)**

why is this important? —

Everyone comes into a program, or a relationship, with expectations. Managing expectations by talking about them puts everyone on the same page, leaves less room for assumptions and makes boundary co-creation much easier. Also, different peer programs will have different guidelines, so it's important to be clear on what the program offers, as well as any limitations it may have.

- **boundaries need to be co-created, as this will support good connection and communication**

why is this important? —

Boundary co-creation is very interconnected with communication. Poorly defined boundaries can create conflict and resentment. It's best to talk about this early in the relationship so you can avoid potential relationship problems.

For more information on boundary creation, please review module **6. understanding boundaries & what it means to co-create them.**

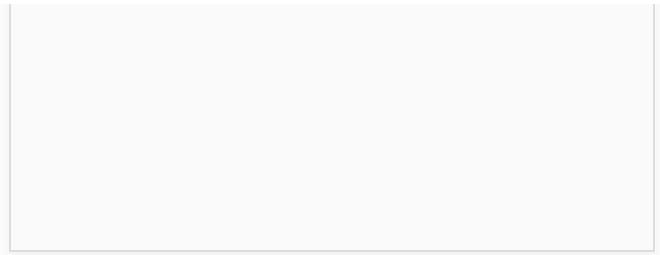
CONTINUE

questions for reflection

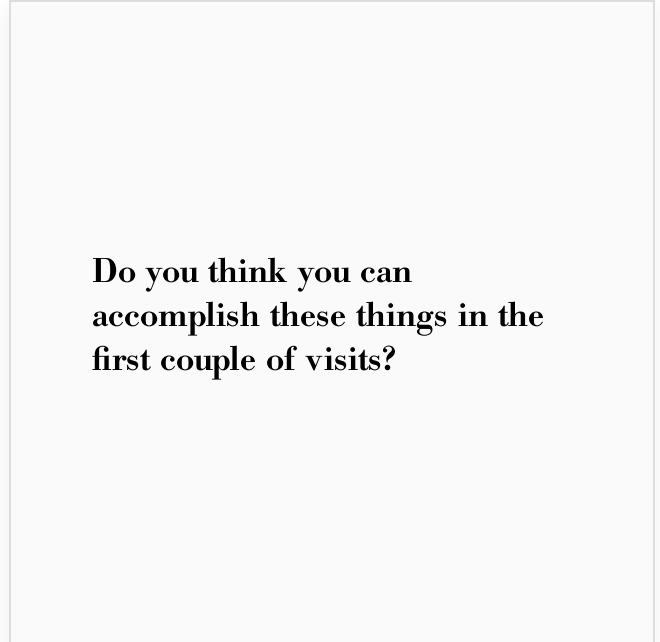
Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



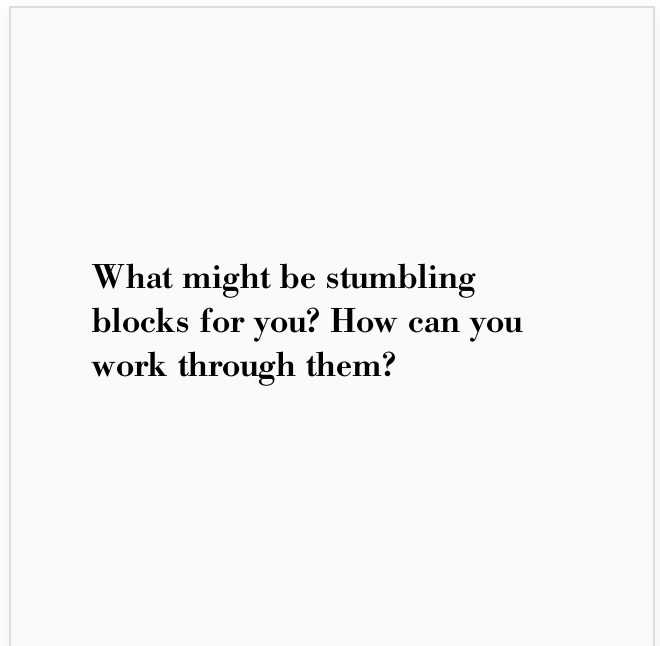
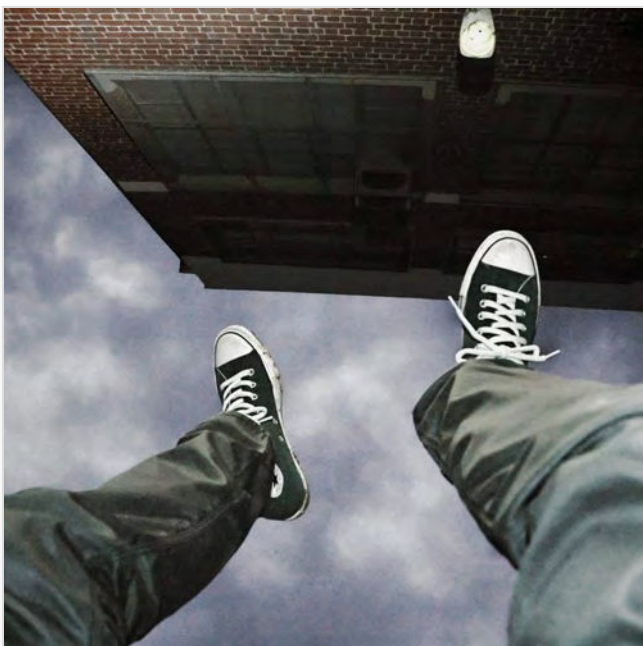
What are your thoughts about the four statements above?



1 of 3



2 of 3



CONTINUE



telling your story

Telling your story as a peer support worker is always about building connection, creating trust and establishing a shoulder-to-shoulder approach in the relationship.

We choose to use the words “story” and “storytelling” because we believe in the rich history of storytelling that our ancestors have passed to us. Storytelling has a rich and essential heritage in many cultures. Storytelling is an opportunity to share personal history, culture, learning opportunities and knowledge with others. Stories transcend time. Telling, re-telling and finding new meaning in our stories

allows us to redefine our past, fully embody our present, and equip us to chart a course for our future path. In no way, shape or form is the term “storytelling” synonymous with fiction. Sharing your story is one of the most beautiful and powerful things you can offer another person. There is a whole school of thought that says storytelling can actually change our society in a significant and very positive way. Check out organizations such as Narrative Arts (<https://narrativearts.org/>) and StoryCorps (storycorps.org). They exist for the very purpose of supporting societal change through the telling of personal stories. (Reprinted from Peer Support Services in BC: An Overview (Cusick 2020))

In his research paper “Strategic Storytelling: An Exploration of the Professional Practices of Mental Health Peer Providers” (Sage Pub Vol 29, Issue 9, 2019), Michael A. Mancini states,

The data from this study suggest that peers represent more than supportive adjuncts to nonpeer clinical treatment providers. They are distinct, legitimate professionals who utilize a range of complex clinical and narrative skills to help others. Making oneself vulnerable by revealing a personal story that involves shame, victimization, or dangerous behaviors to help another is an act of courage. Peers could have chosen to move on to other vocations or professions after achieving recovery. Instead, they have decided to remain engaged with their past experiences to extend the opportunity of survivorship and recovery to others (Frank, 2005). For this alone, they deserve nothing less than the full respect and dignity afforded to all professionals who commit themselves to helping others. (Mancini 2019)

Download the attached PDF to explore guidelines for telling your story.



Telling Your Story.pdf

76.7 KB



CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



What are some other reasons why it's important to share our story in peer support?

1 of 3



Does this feel challenging for you? If so, why?

2 of 3





What can you do to become more comfortable with sharing personal details about your experience?

3 of 3



9. authentic, open & courageous connection



The fact you're here reading this means you're open, authentic and courageous. Your strength and resiliency have brought you through hard times. Please celebrate that.

It can be very hard to work within a system where peer support workers are expected to share their personal lives and clinical staff remain tight-lipped about theirs. Some peer support workers have even encountered clinical staff who have used the peer's personal story without first asking permission. This dynamic can feel like tokenism, especially when other clinicians don't understand the fundamental philosophy of peer support.

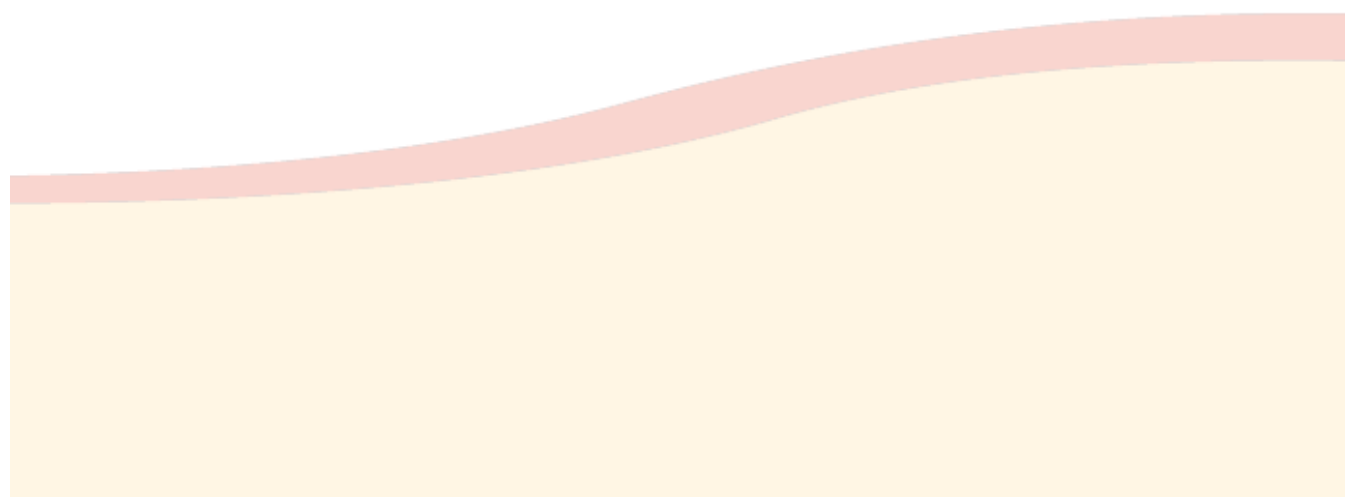
Peer support workers who are embedded in clinical teams receive mixed messages about self-disclosure. Some have been told not to self-disclose; others are told to share more than they're comfortable sharing. This incongruence is confusing. It happens because clinicians have a totally different paradigm than peer support workers. Obviously, over-sharing is never okay, and having ethical, clear, professional boundaries is non-negotiable. Connecting with other peer support workers will help you navigate some of these challenging waters. This is one of the reasons why creating a peer support community of practice is important.

Historically, clinicians have been taught not to disclose anything personal when working with service users. But the tides are turning in this area. Though it's still somewhat controversial, some clinicians are becoming more open to disclosing personal struggle when it's said in a therapeutic way that will benefit or inspire hope in the person they are supporting.

Sharing your personal experience can feel very scary, especially when we're in the midst of the healing process with a peer. Yet the uniqueness of peer support is that both participants in the relationship have lived experience. Just because you're in the role of peer support worker doesn't mean you have to be an expert or have everything "together." All of us are on a journey towards greater wholeness: we all struggle, and you're no exception.

Consider the core value of mutuality. We can't be in a place of mutuality if one person is sharing personal experiences and the other isn't. That simply isn't mutual. In the same vein, we don't have mutuality if one person is always on the receiving end of a relationship, and the other is always giving. And we don't have mutuality if one person is the learner and the other is always the teacher.

Mutuality must show up in your peer support work, otherwise, it's not peer support.



**The philosophy of peer support is all
about authenticity.**

**Authenticity means we are open.
To be open means that we choose to
let our guard down.
And that is an act of courage.**



Poet David Whyte shared the following powerful meditation called "Vulnerability" on a podcast episode of *On Being with Krista Tippett*. His words are very much applicable to peer support work.

Vulnerability is not a weakness, a passing indisposition, or something we can arrange to do without. Vulnerability is not a choice, vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding undercurrent of our natural state. To run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature. The attempt to be invulnerable is the vain attempt to become something we are not and most especially, to close off our understanding of the grief of others. More seriously, in refusing our vulnerability we refuse the help needed at every turn of our existence and immobilize the essential, tidal and conversational foundations of our identity...

The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance. Our choice is to inhabit vulnerability as generous citizens of loss, robustly and fully, or conversely, as misers and complainers, reluctant and fearful, always at the gates of existence, but never bravely and completely attempting to enter, never wanting to risk ourselves, never walking fully through the door. (2016)

What David Whyte seems to be saying in his writing is that vulnerability is at the essence of being human. It allows us to see the suffering of others and choose compassion. When we run from vulnerability, we're running from our true nature. In avoiding vulnerability, we choose to close ourselves off from ourselves and others, and we become unable to see their pain and suffering. This means we are left with a choice. We can be brave, courageous and compassionate by embracing our vulnerability. Or we can guard ourselves and run from vulnerability, which means we avoid taking any risks that are needed when we choose connection.

When we choose connection, we choose to be open and vulnerable. We are also choosing belonging, trust, laughter, fun, delight, purpose and love. To choose connection is an act of courage. Courage doesn't mean that we don't experience fear. It means that we feel the fear and we choose to do it anyway.

In the book *I Thought it was Just Me*, Brené Brown defines courage this way:

Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is cor – the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." Over time, this definition has changed, and today, we typically associate courage with heroic and brave deeds. But in my opinion, this definition fails to recognize the inner strength and level of commitment required for us to actually speak honestly and openly about who we are and about our experiences – good and bad. Speaking from our hearts is what I think of as "ordinary courage." (2007)

One of the most beautiful things about sharing our stories with others is that, when we bring the darkness of our past experiences into the light, it diffuses shame. We realize that we are not defined by our suffering, though we are forever changed by it. We realize we are not alone. We allow others to bear witness to our resiliency. We begin to see ourselves as interconnected with others and we create room for healing, growth and belonging. And all the while we are paving the way for others to do the same.



CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



How would you define courage?

1 of 3



Were there any situations in your life when you felt courageous?

2 of 3





**Have you ever felt moved by
someone else's act of courage?**

**What was the story, and what
resonated?**

3 of 3



10. listening to understand



We live in the information age. Social media gives everyone a platform and it's easy to find a place to use your voice and say something. But in all the speaking, it seems that our culture is struggling to listen.

Listening seems simple. Most people think they are good listeners, yet so many of us feel unheard. Listening is more of a skill than we tend to acknowledge. One of the keys to empathetic listening is that we listen to understand, rather than to reply.

If both people in a conversation are only concerned about what they want to say, and neither are making understanding the other person a priority, then both are left feeling unheard and unseen. Deep connection can only happen when we focus on listening. When we are listened to, validated and heard, we feel a connection.

“

“One of the biggest obstacles to effective listening is our own need to be heard. We often enter conversations with our own agendas and perspectives, and we can become defensive or dismissive when someone disagrees with us. To truly listen, we need to set aside our own ego and focus on the other person’s experience.”

Michael P. Nichol, “The Lost Art of Listening”

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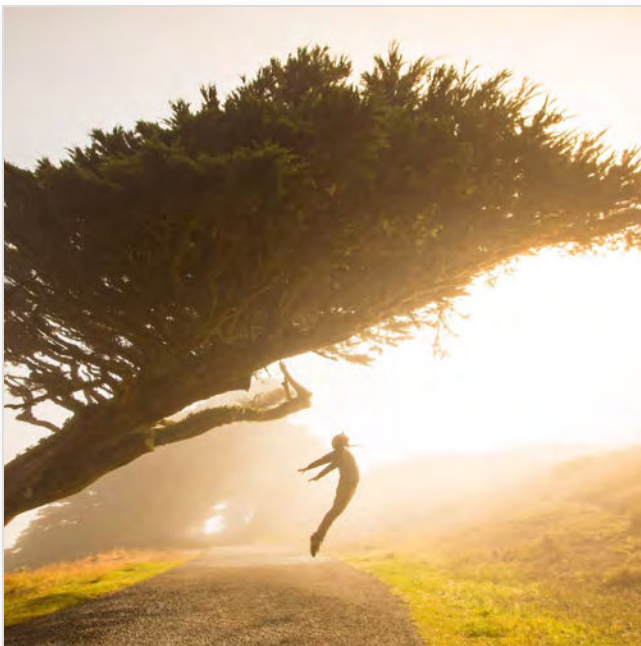
questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



Can you think of a past conversation you've had where you walked away still feeling very alone and unheard? How did that feel?

1 of 2



What about a time when you really felt heard? How did that feel?

2 of 2

CONTINUE

empathetic listening

Let's look at the core value of self-determination as it relates to communication.

Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions and have freedom from coercion. When we look at self-determination through a communication lens, we are mindful of the words we use. We avoid giving advice and, instead, choose to shine a light on a person's inner strength. In the book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey calls this type of listening "empathetic listening." Covey speaks about empathetic listening this way:



When I say empathetic listening, I mean listening with intent to understand. I mean seeking first to understand, to really understand. It's an entirely different paradigm.

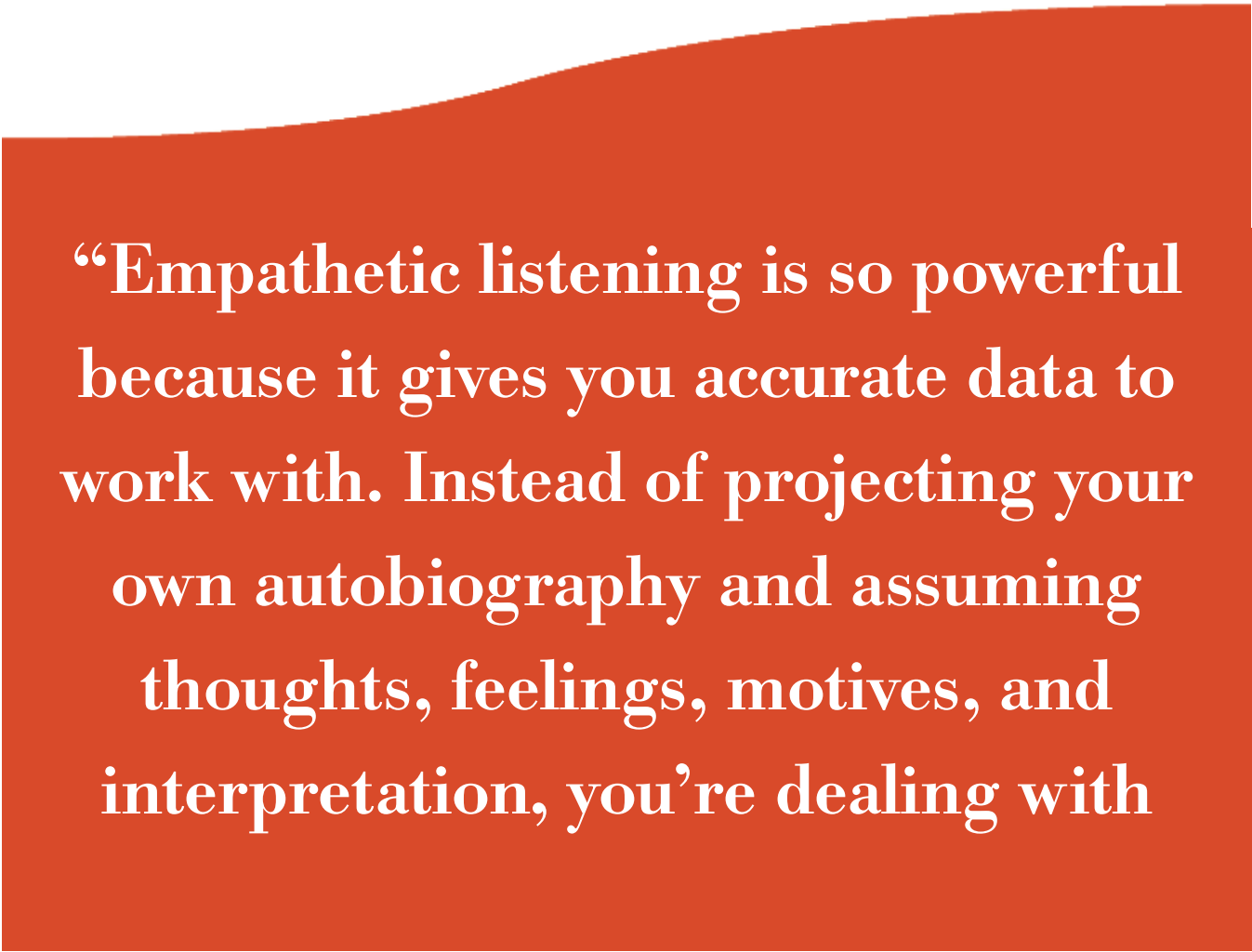
Empathetic (from empathy) listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel...

In empathetic listening, you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. (1989)

When we listen to understand, we're honouring self-determination. We've released the pressure to fix or save someone just because we're getting paid for the work. We can breathe a sigh of relief and let go of any need we have to know all the answers or be an "expert."

The findings of a 2010 Princeton University study on listening called "Speaker-listener neural coupling underlies successful communication" concluded that there is a lag time between what we hear and what we understand. When we apply this finding to the concept of listening to understand, we see the danger of rushing to reply. Rushing to reply means we haven't processed what we've heard. This leaves a high risk for comprehension breakdown, as well as misunderstanding, misconnection and conflict.

Listening to understand, then, requires patience, focus and letting go of the pressure to reply.



“Empathetic listening is so powerful because it gives you accurate data to work with. Instead of projecting your own autobiography and assuming thoughts, feelings, motives, and interpretation, you’re dealing with

the reality inside another person's head and heart. You're listening to understand. You're focusing on receiving the deep communication of another human soul."

Stephen Covey

tips for empathetic listening:

Let go of your desire to get your message across.

Instead, concentrate and listen to what the other person is saying.

Listen for a deeper story.

Anytime someone is speaking there is usually a deeper narrative and untold story. What is that untold story? Pay attention to what's happening beneath the words they are saying. Notice their presence and their tone, and remember other things they have told you in the past. But remember also that some people, particularly those who are neuro-divergent, may present differently from what is expected.

Pay attention to what's not being said.

Often people are experiencing so much more than they're saying.

Ask powerful, open-ended questions when you don't understand.

And ask them even when you think you do understand.

Pay attention when someone puts up a boundary...

...and respect that boundary.

Remember that the person is speaking from their experience and worldview...

...which is probably different from yours. But they are the expert on their experience.

Notice any judgements or biases that are bubbling up within you.

Be mindful to suspend them.

Be okay with silence.

Remember to take a moment to process what the person is saying before you speak.

W.A.I.T.

Ask yourself:

Why

Am

I

Talking?

Listen with all the empathy you can muster at the time.

Empathy means we perspective shift and feel with the person. The more empathetic we are, the more generous we are, and the less likely we are to judge and assume.

Be curious...

...while being respectful and humble.

Compassionate curiosity is a healthy and natural desire to learn and explore new things. It stems from a positive mindset, a willingness to understand and broaden one's knowledge.

Curiosity characterized by a negative intent is often rooted in selfishness or a need to feel superior to others. It can cause harm to the person being targeted, either by invading their privacy or making them feel uncomfortable.

Curiosity will be discussed more in the next lesson.

CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



Which of these tips do you think is the easiest for you to practice?



1 of 3



Which is the hardest for you to practice?

2 of 3



What are your goals for empathetic listening?

3 of 3

11. compassionate curiosity – asking good questions



From the core values:

Curiosity: We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.

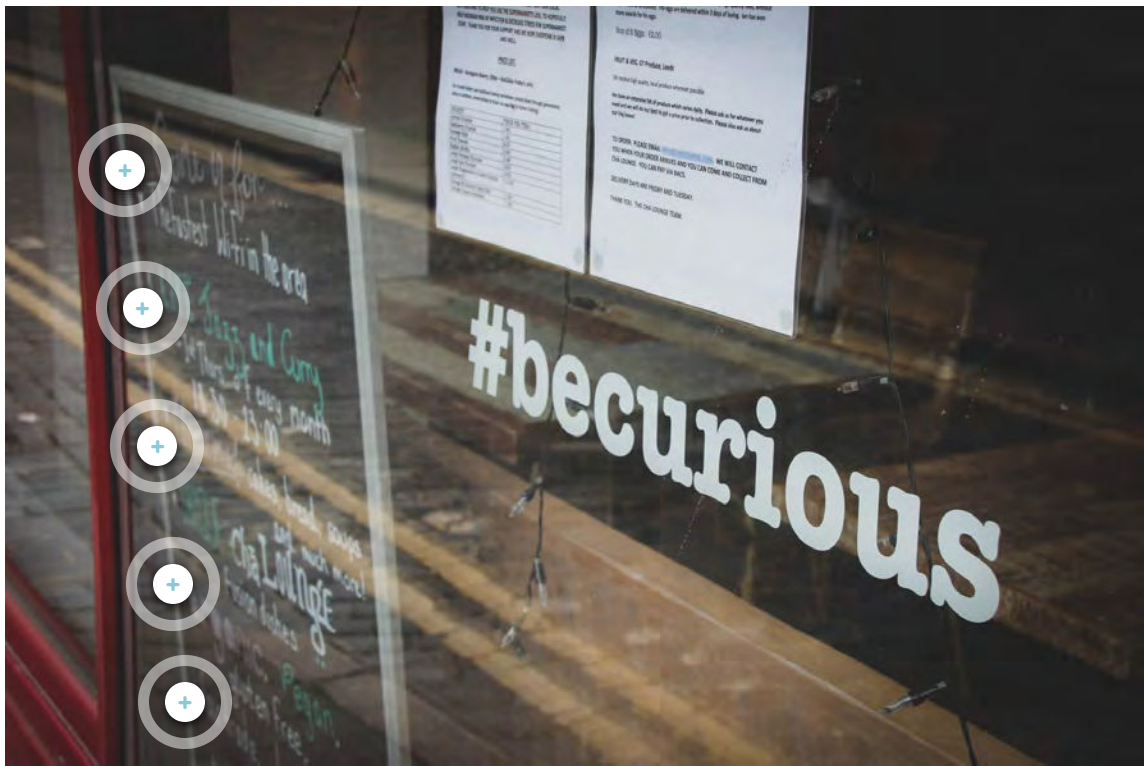
This curiosity isn't fueled by personal gain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support.

We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

CONTINUE

Fostering a sense of curiosity within relationships supports communication and connection.

Click the plus signs below to read some benefits of cultivating curiosity:





Curiosity calms the sympathetic nervous system (the stress response).



Curiosity supports us to seek out new possibilities, which makes way for HOPE.



Curiosity is the antidote to a . xed mindset. It supports us to think differently and shift our perspective.



Curiosity supports us to challenge our assumptions and biases.



Curiosity encourages us to get to know other people better.

Learning to ask powerful questions is important to peer support work. When we ask good questions, we're helping someone tap into their inner wisdom and reflect in a new way. When we ask questions rather than give advice, we acknowledge that we don't have all the answers."

We should be sure we are clear on the intention of our questions. If our purpose is only to satisfy a self-focused curiosity, it's best to withhold our questions."

To assess our intentions, we need to ask ourselves a few questions. Click the cards below.

QUE

Who benefits from this question?

STI

Is this question supporting the person to engage in self-reflection?

ONS

Does this question support connection?

After reflecting a little, we can assess if it's still a good idea to ask the question.

CONTINUE

Expand the boxes below to read examples of different kinds of curiosity.

Example #1

Here are some examples of compassionate curiosity:

A student who is interested in learning about different cultures decides to take a course on anthropology to broaden their knowledge. They ask their classmates who are from different countries about their experiences and beliefs in a respectful and open-minded way.

A group of coworkers want to understand the different religious holidays that their colleagues celebrate. They ask their colleagues questions about the significance of the holidays and how they celebrate them. They listen with interest and respect.

1. Active listening: When someone is sharing their thoughts or feelings with you, listen attentively and ask questions to better understand their perspective. Avoid interrupting or judging them and instead, express empathy for what they are going through.
2. Checking in with others: If you notice that someone is struggling, ask how they are doing and offer to help in any way you can. Show that you care about their well-being and want to support them through their challenges.
3. Asking open-ended questions: Instead of assuming you know what someone is thinking or feeling, ask open-ended questions to encourage them to share more about their experiences. This can help you gain a deeper understanding of their perspective and build empathy.
4. Seeking to understand different viewpoints: When you encounter someone with a different perspective or worldview than your own, approach them with curiosity and a willingness to learn. Ask questions to better understand their perspective, and engage in respectful dialogue to build bridges of understanding.

5. Acknowledging and validating emotions: When someone expresses difficult emotions, acknowledge their feelings and show that you understand how hard it can be to go through what they are experiencing. This can help them feel heard and supported, and can build trust and connection between you.

Example #2

Here are some examples of curiosity with a negative intent:

A person sees someone with a physical disability and asks intrusive questions about their condition without their consent, such as "What's wrong with you? Why do you look like that?" The questions are intended to satisfy their own curiosity without regard for the person's feelings or privacy.

A person makes racist jokes and asks offensive questions about a coworker's race or ethnicity, such as "Do you live in a hut? Do you have a pet lion?" The questions are meant to demean and belittle the coworker, rather than to learn or understand their culture.

1. Cyberstalking: Someone who obsessively monitors and tracks someone else's online activity, such as their social media accounts, email, or text messages, without their knowledge or consent. This behavior can cause the person being stalked to feel violated, frightened, and anxious.
2. Gossiping: When someone spreads rumors or shares personal information about others without their consent, solely for the purpose of satisfying their own curiosity. This can damage reputations, ruin relationships, and cause emotional harm to the people being talked about.
3. Voyeurism: The act of watching or observing someone without their knowledge or consent, often for sexual gratification. This behavior is illegal and can cause serious emotional and psychological harm to the person being watched.
4. Invasive medical procedures: When medical professionals perform procedures or exams on patients without their informed consent, solely to satisfy their own curiosity or to gain experience. This can cause physical and emotional harm to the patient and is a violation of their rights.
5. Interrogation: When someone asks questions in an aggressive or threatening manner, with the intention of extracting information or forcing someone to confess to something. This behavior can cause extreme emotional distress and trauma to the person being interrogated.

traits of powerful questions

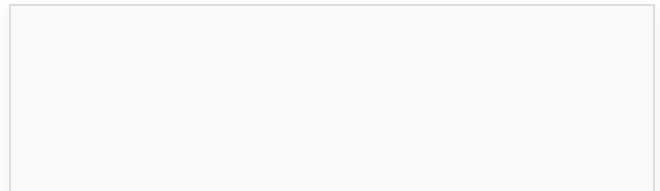
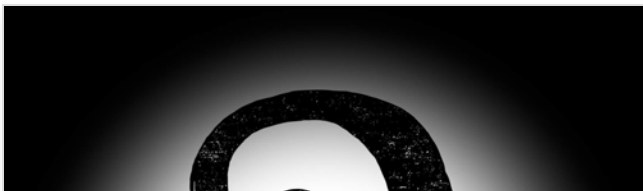
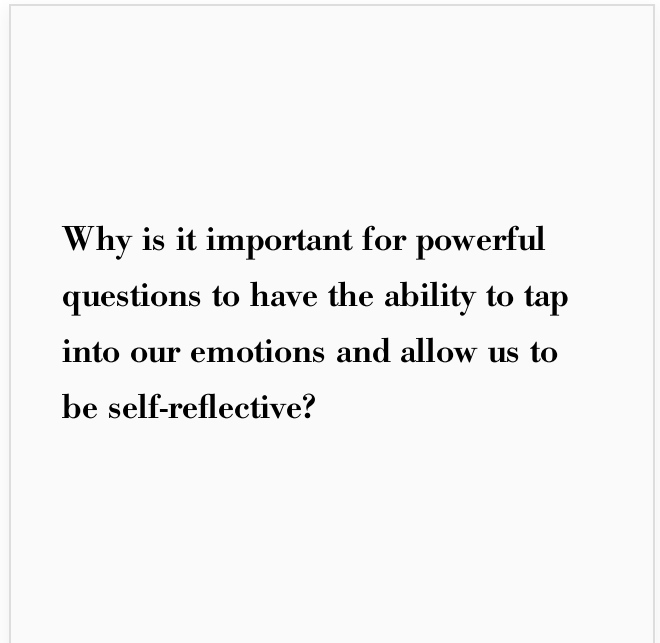
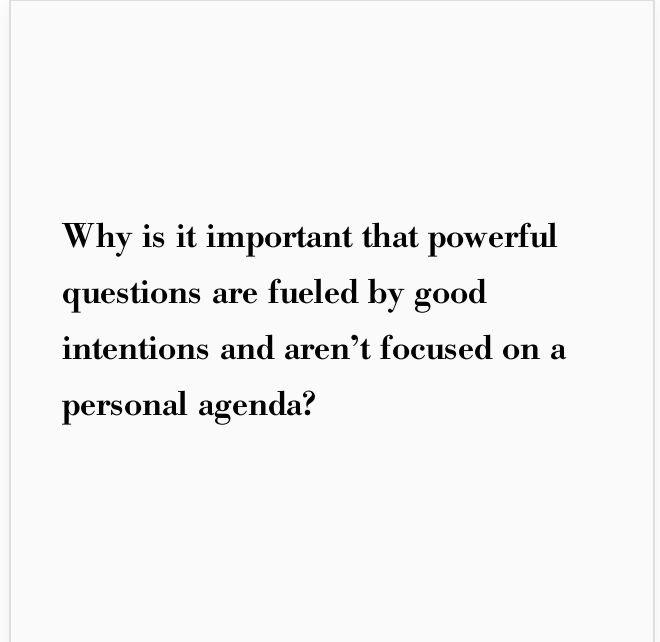
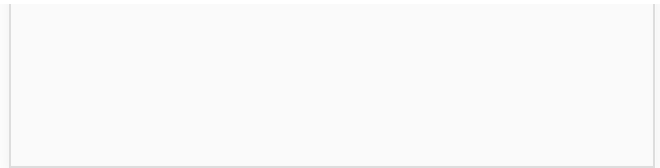
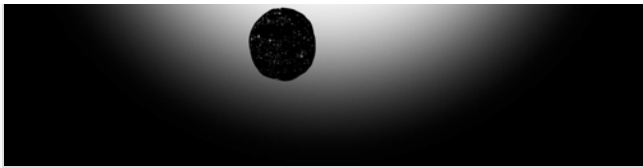
In your reflection journal, answer the following questions.



Why is it important for powerful questions to always be open-ended?



Why is it important for powerful questions to focus on the person and support them to uncover the untold story?





Why is it important that powerful questions in peer support are trauma-informed and safe.



12. practicing presence



Sometimes we find ourselves sharing space with someone whose mind is miles away thinking about something else. They think we don't notice, but we do and it creates a disconnection. In module **3. categories & containers: unpacking our biases**, we talked about how our minds fill in the blanks when we're missing a piece of the puzzle, and often our assumptions go to a negative place. In a situation where we're with someone who is emotionally distant, it's easy to wonder if the person has a problem with us. This only deepens the sense of disconnection.

Practicing presence means we're aware of what's happening within us, are noticing the other person we're with and are mindful of our surroundings. When we practice presence, we're doing our best to honour the people with whom we spend our time.

Some days it's just plain hard to be attentive and engaged. We may have had a stressful day, received difficult news or be experiencing pain or discomfort.

One of the amazing things about peer support and the spirit of mutuality is that you can be open about what's happening with you and the other person isn't left guessing. Rather than staying isolated and disconnected in your own world, this sharing allows you to find connection.

There are ways to practice presence. These practices can support you before you go to work or meet the people you are working with. They can be simple, yet powerful.

CONTINUE

Let's explore some ideas on how we can prepare ourselves to engage with others."

1

actively notice things.



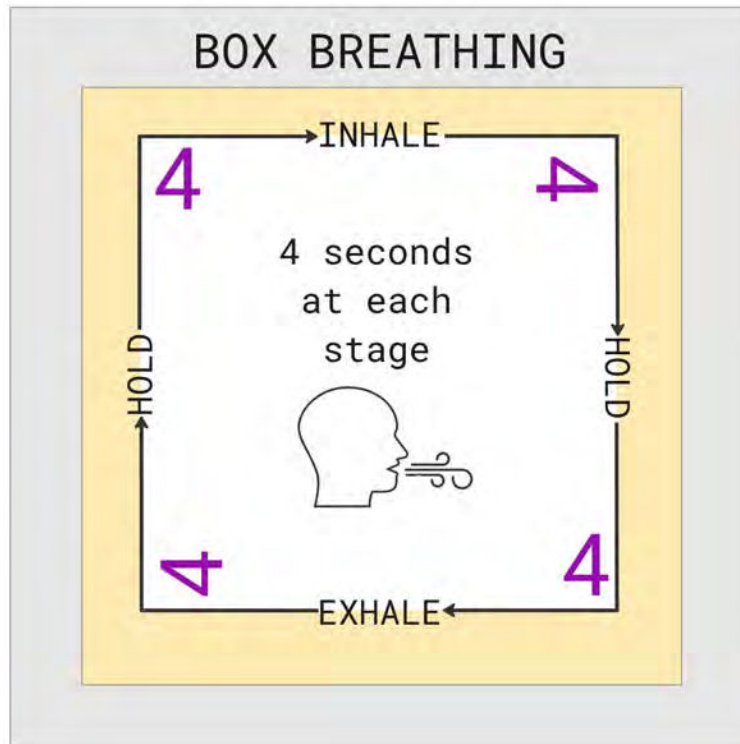
Dr. Ellen Langer, a psychology professor and western mindfulness researcher from Harvard, defines mindfulness as "the simple act of actively noticing things." This means if I choose to notice five things about the space I'm in, and/or about the person I'm with, I will be more mindful and aware, and more apt to engage with my surroundings.

spend a few minutes in nature.



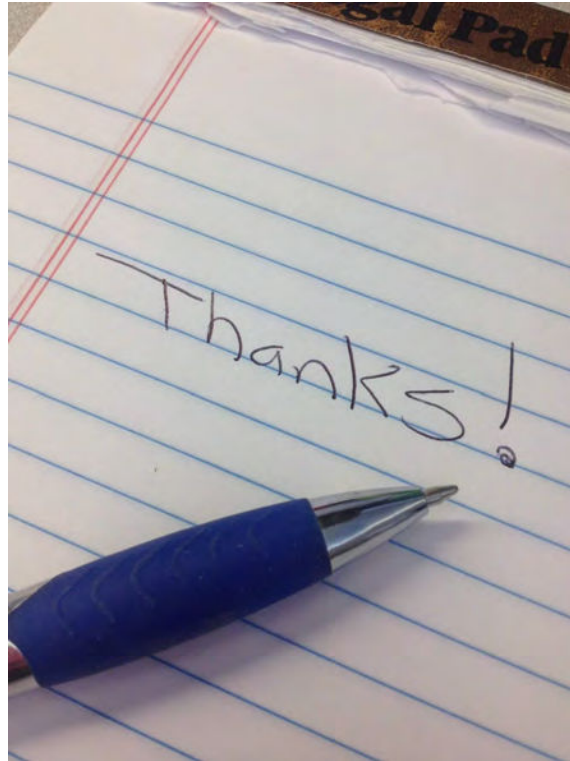
Get some fresh air. Noticing the smells and sounds can support the calming of our nervous systems.

do some deep breathing.



- Try box breathing:
 - Breathe in through your nose while slowly counting to four. Feel the air entering your lungs
 - Lightly hold your breath for four seconds
 - Slowly exhale for four seconds
 - Repeat at least three times, or until you feel a stronger sense of calm

think of three things you appreciate about your workplace...



... or the person you are about to see.

be curious about how you're feeling.



Do something kind for yourself.

leave your phone in your pocket as much as you can when you are with people.

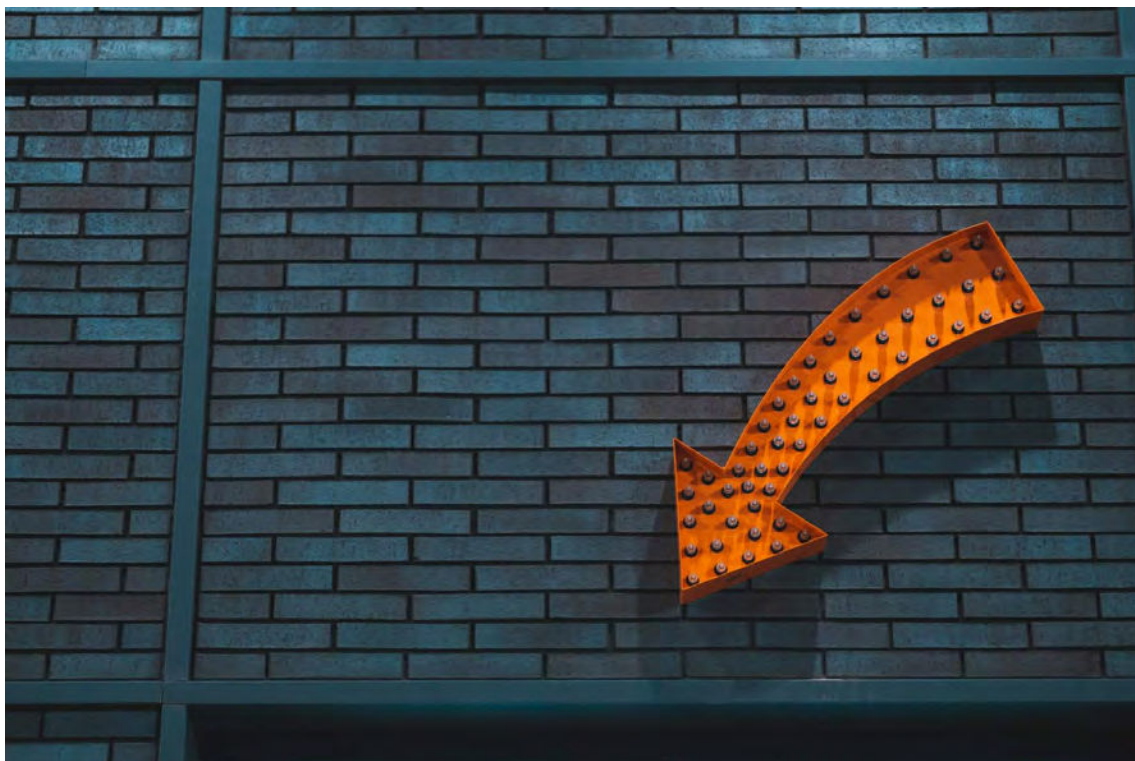


A 2013 study suggested that simply having a phone on the table – even if you aren’t checking it – distracts you from being present with the people you are with.

From the study, “Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality”:

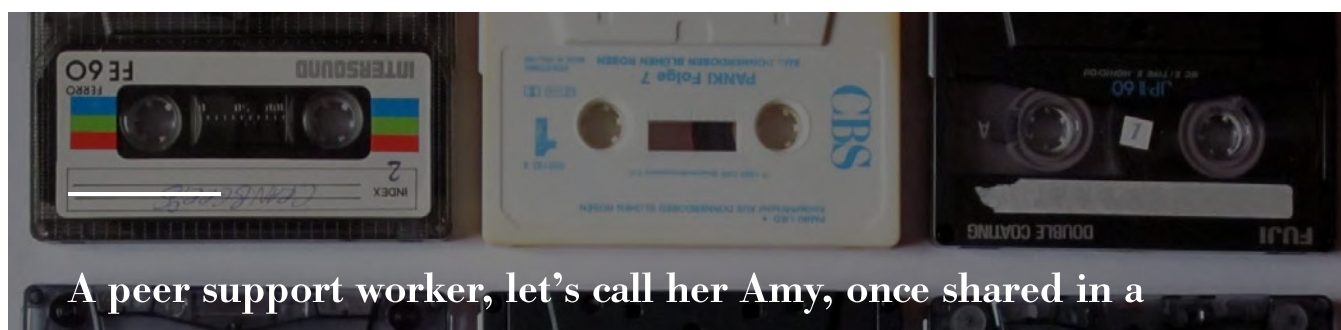
In two experiments, we evaluated the extent to which the mere presence of mobile communication devices shape relationship quality in dyadic settings. In both, we found evidence they can have negative effects on closeness, connection, and conversation quality. These results demonstrate that the presence of mobile phones can interfere with human relationships, an effect that is most clear when individuals are discussing personally meaningful topics. (Przybylski, Weinstein, 2013)

Of course, there could be times when you need to use your phone to communicate with the person you are with. For example, you may need a translation app, or an augmentative and alternative communication (ACC) app.



Scroll down to continue.

CONTINUE



A peer support worker, let's call her Amy, once shared in a

meeting that she and the people she works with pick a song together that represents their relationship and their intentions for connection. Amy then listens to the song loudly before she sees the person. She said this practice supports her to shift gears and let go of the earlier events of the day so she can be more present.

CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



What are some tools or practices that will support you to practice presence?



**What are some things you
would like to try?**



13. connection, disconnection & reconnection



connection

Connection is the goal of peer support. Similar to an electric circuit, we need energy to flow between both people for real connection to occur. Connection is like a back-and-forth dance, with each person giving and receiving. When this occurs, we can't help but feel a sense of well-being and belonging.

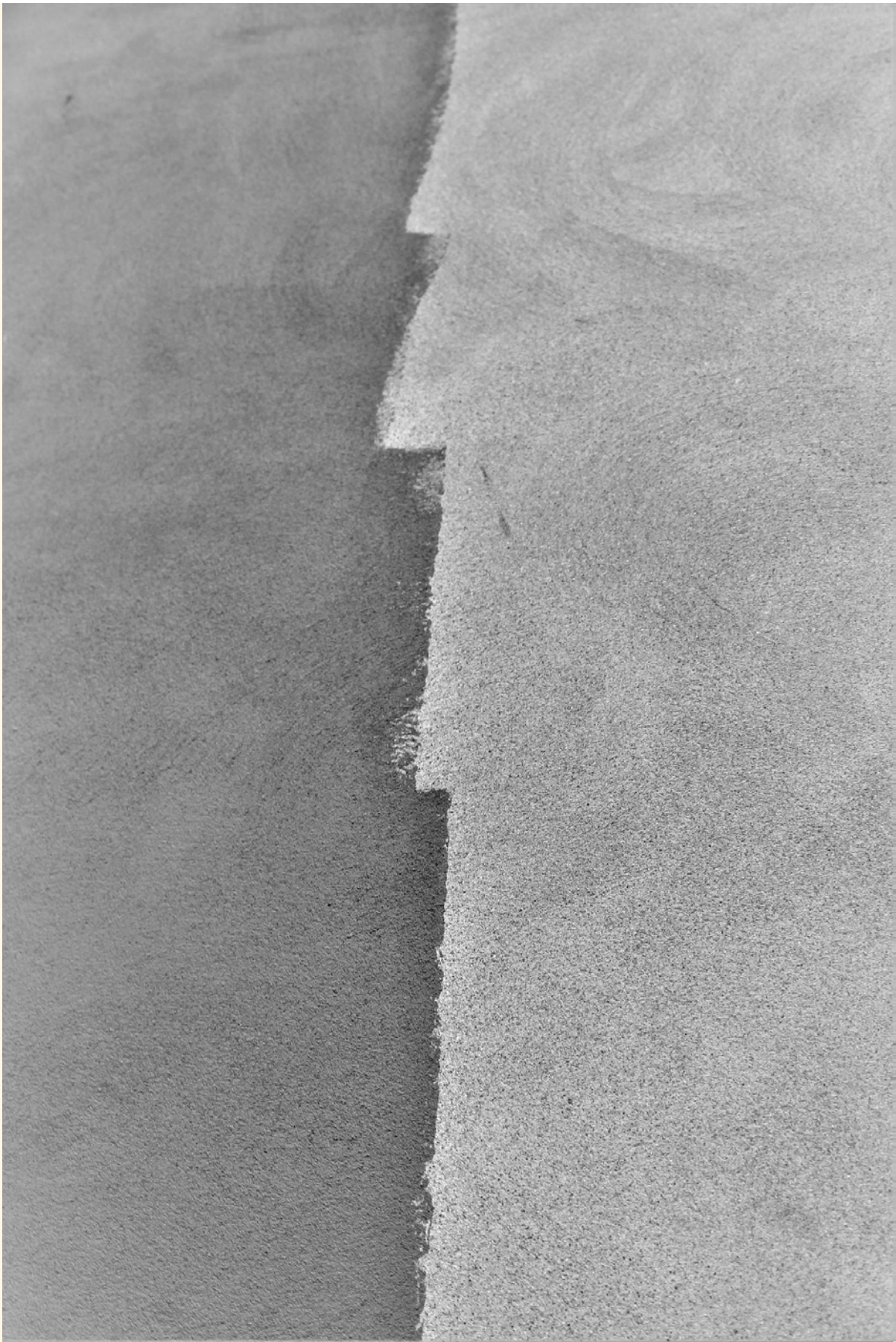
Let's look at an example that explores a few possible stages of this dance: connection, disconnection and reconnection:

Sam & Jesse – part 1 —

Sam, a peer support worker, and Jesse, the person he is supporting, are at their favourite coffee shop. Everything is great – they are talking and laughing. Sam feels so comfortable that he starts to share something with Jesse, something he hasn't shared with anyone else before. But, right at that moment, Jesse takes a bathroom break.

CONTINUE

disconnection



Sometimes something gets in the way of that energy flow, and disconnection happens. Disconnection can come from a misunderstanding, misinterpretation, miscommunication or simply from one person becoming distracted.

Let's continue our story:

Sam & Jesse – part 2

When Jesse returns from the washroom, his mood is different. He seems quieter and more distracted. Sam, thinking Jesse wants to finish up and leave, decides not to share what he previously wanted to share. They part ways soon after and, for a couple days, Sam wonders if he did something to upset Jesse. Clearly, Jesse's mood had changed after he came back from the bathroom. That created disconnection. What happened?

What Sam didn't know was what happened to Jesse while he was gone. When Jesse left to use the washroom, he took a moment to check his work email. One message contained some difficult news and it stirred up a lot of worry and anxiety for him. He wasn't able to distract himself from it, so he decided to cut the meeting with Sam short so he could leave and make some phone calls.

Jesse was so worried about his situation that he didn't realize how his mood shift affected Sam.

CONTINUE

reconnection

When disconnection occurs, it's important that we acknowledge the disconnect and work towards reconnection. The goal is to become more attuned to our emotions and how they may impact others. If we're aware of them and acknowledge the space they are taking up in our minds, we can work to release their power over us.

Let's finish our story:



Sam & Jesse – part 3

How could this situation between Jesse and Sam have ended differently? Consider this... What if Jesse came back to the table and acknowledged his feelings? He could then tell Sam that he was anxious and distracted because of the difficult email he just received. Just saying this to Sam may have diffused the situation for him. It also would have assured Sam that the disconnection was not about him. At this point, they could have had an open conversation about next steps. Either way, Jesse would not have felt alone in his stress, Sam would have known what was going on and could have offered support. The disconnection would have been addressed, and connection reestablished.

This is reconnection.

CONTINUE

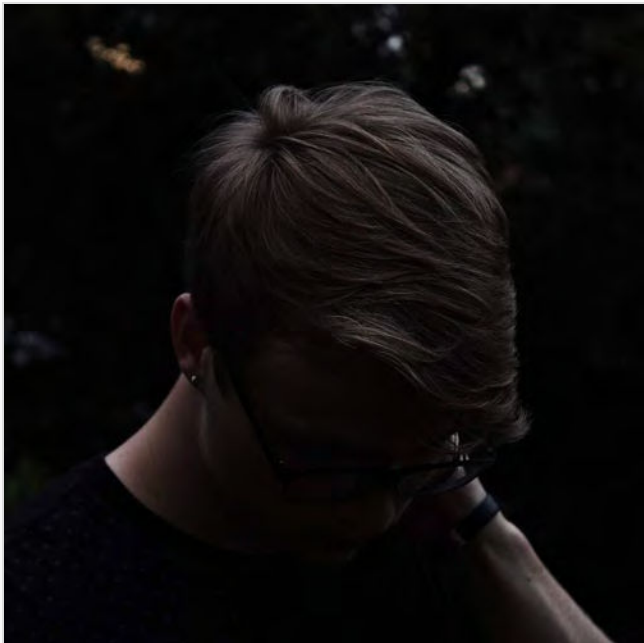
questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



**Can you recall a time when
you've been in Sam's position?
If so, how did it feel?**

1 of 3



**Can you recall a time when
you've been in Jesse's position?
If so, how did it feel?**

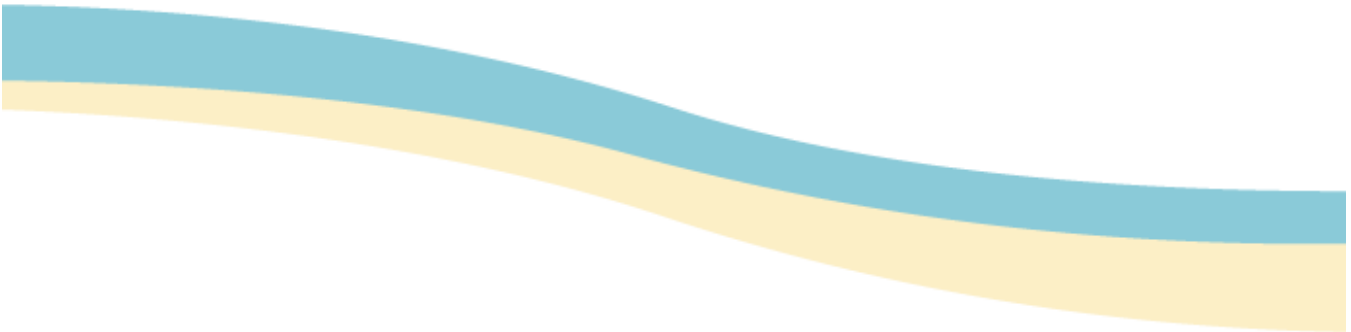
2 of 3





If you were the peer support worker, what would you do if you noticed a disconnect in the person you are with? Would you address it? Ask about it? If so, what would you say?

3 of 3



14. safety in communication

In module **8. healing-centred connection: principles in trauma-informed care**, we examine in detail the principles of trauma-informed care. One of the big take-aways about trauma-informed care is the need to create a sense of safety for the people we support. Feeling safe when sharing is important. Let's take some time to explore what safety in communication looks like.



CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



Think of a time you shared something personal with someone and you felt really safe. Why did you feel safe?

1 of 4



What did the other person do/say to support you to feel safe enough to share?

2 of 4



Have you been in the opposite position, where you wanted to say something to someone, but you didn't feel safe?

3 of 4



What did they do/say that didn't make you feel safe? Or was there another reason you didn't feel safe?

4 of 4

CONTINUE

If we feel safe when we make connections, it's likely we don't feel safe when there are disconnections, and we often experience disconnection in relationships when there's a communication breakdown. Communication breakdowns don't encourage a feeling of safety. Instead, they make us feel anxious, frustrated and tired.

While there are many factors that can contribute to communication breakdown, one way to avoid them is to use the core values of peer support (see **lesson 21**) as a guide. Let's look at some other ways we can avoid disconnection and, instead, support safety in communication:

be honest and kind —

Approaching communication in an honest way means we are open and don't "stuff" or hide our feelings. When we do, they often come out at some other time in anger or as passive-aggressive comments. We should be honest – AND intentionally thoughtful and kind at the same time. Honesty is openness: it doesn't mean being brutal. And brutal honesty does not feel safe.

CONTINUE

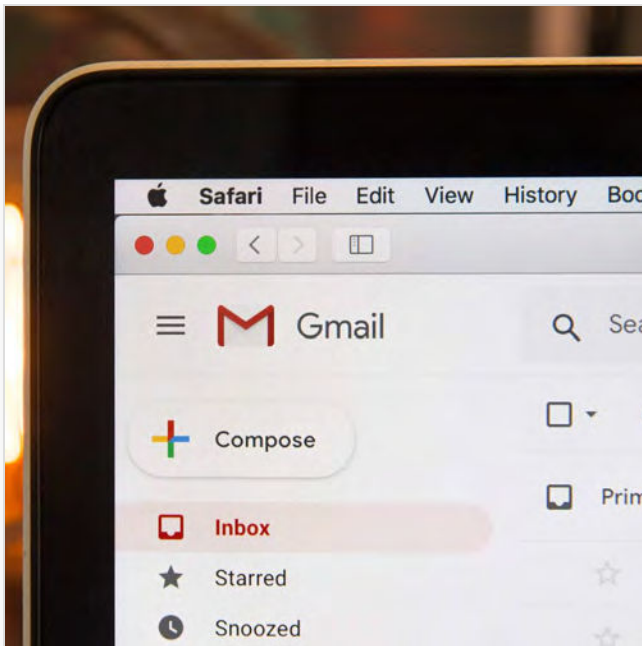
be direct —

Beating around the bush or leaving out crucial information can cause confusion, anxiety or fear – and it's not safe. Consider if you get an email from a supervisor that says, "I have something important I need to talk to you

about that came up after your last shift. Please come see me when you're in on Friday." Annnnnd...you get this email on the Tuesday *before* that Friday meeting. Most people will read a message like that and worry about it until Friday, building it up to be worse than it might be. That doesn't feel safe. It's important that we consider safety when we communicate things that could cause a stress response for someone.

Along the same lines, passive-aggressive communication feels unsafe to the receiver. This can show up as back-handed compliments, avoidance or saying something like, "Whatever you want. I don't care," when you really do care.

An honest and direct approach is much kinder and creates safety.



What could the supervisor who sent the message have done differently?

1 of 1

CONTINUE

be aware of tone and avoid curt language

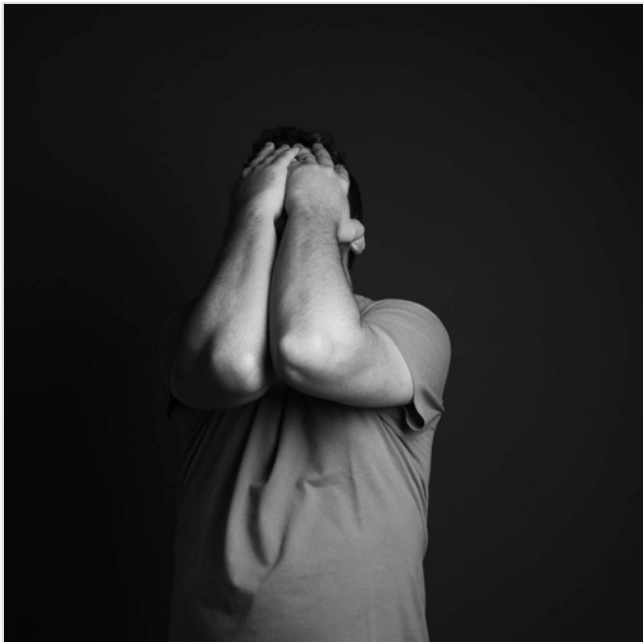
Curt means to be rude as a result of being very quick or brief.

Most of us are sensitive to tone, and when someone is curt with us, it can trigger a stress response.

We all have days when we feel angry, impatient or frustrated. In those moments, we must take care of ourselves so our negative feelings aren't spread to those around us.

But we should also keep in mind that neuro-diverse people or others may express themselves this way with no harmful intention or meaning behind it.

If a person's feelings are hurt as a result of curt language, a discussion to help clarify what happened can help bring about understanding/healing.



What do you notice happens within your body when someone is curt with you? How do you react?

1 of 1

CONTINUE

avoid being patronizing —

A patronizing tone or can make someone feel unseen or small and can be just as problematic as a harsh tone. Patronizing words can also cause problems. For example, some people – maybe your aunt or a dear friend – can call you honey, and it feels good. But if someone you barely know calls you dear or honey, it can feel patronizing.



What are some other ways tone can be patronizing?

1 of 1

CONTINUE

check your assumptions —

We'll dig into this a bit more in the next section on conflict, but a conversation filled with assumptions feels unsafe. Curiosity can diffuse those assumptions.



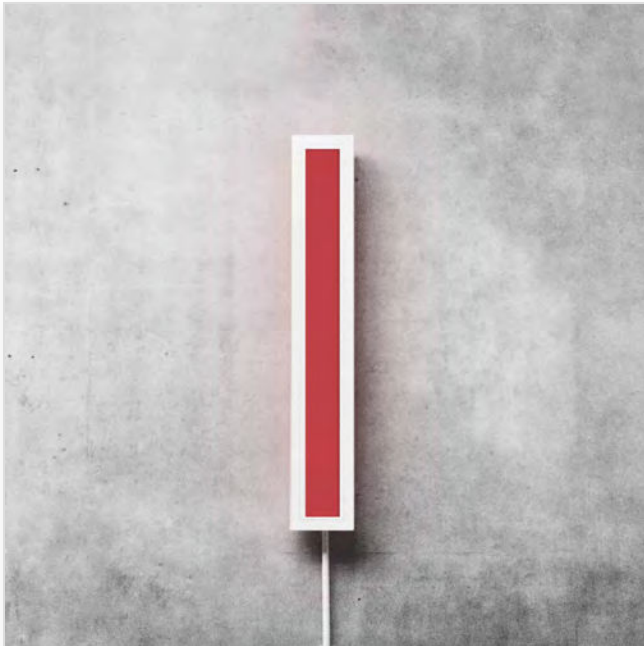
Think of some ways you can use curiosity to challenge your assumptions.

1 of 1

CONTINUE

avoid judgemental phrases like “you always...” —

As soon as a phrase like “you always” comes out of your mouth, the other person will become defensive. When someone is defensive, they're not able to listen in the same way they can if they're in a calm state. Consequently, they won't feel safe.



You notice the peer you are working with often changes the subject when the topic is about their childhood. You are tempted to say, “You always change the subject to avoid talking about your childhood?” But you don't. What could you say instead if you felt this was important to discuss?

1 of 1

CONTINUE

remember that you are not a therapist —

Establish boundaries that keep both of you safe.

If you're working with someone who really trusts you, they might start sharing some big, deep issues. This is a grey area because, while it may be what they really need at this point, there is still a power imbalance when you're being paid that makes this different than sharing deep feelings with a friend. They may be looking to you to provide counselling for them. You must be aware when sharing seems to cross the line. Speak with a supervisor if you feel like you're struggling to know where that line is. If we lead someone into a place where they are unpacking trauma, and we are not trained as a trauma therapist, we can actually cause them harm.

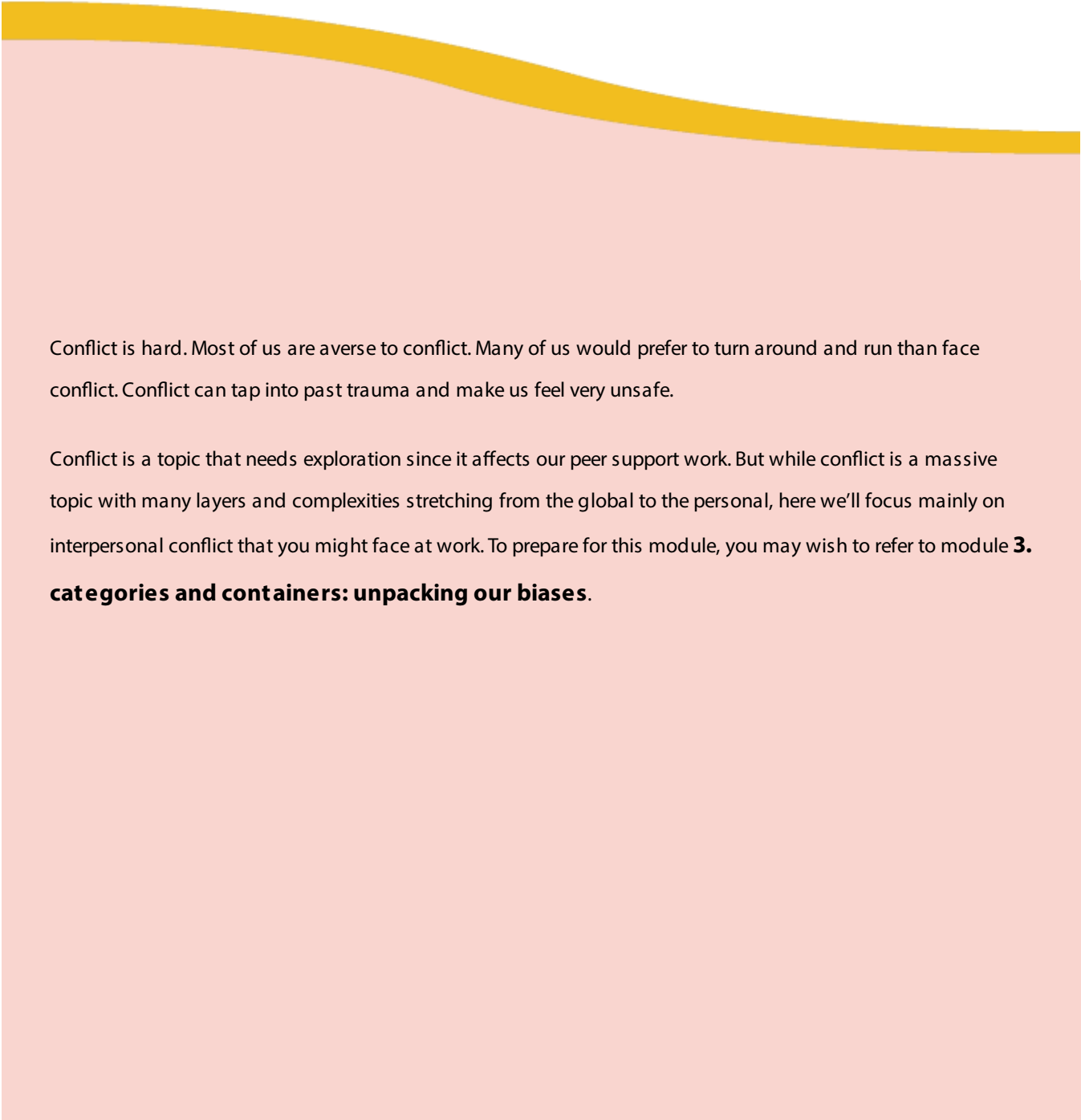


What will you do if you notice this happening? What boundaries will you set? What will you say? How will you say it in a kind, respectful and humble way?

1 of 1

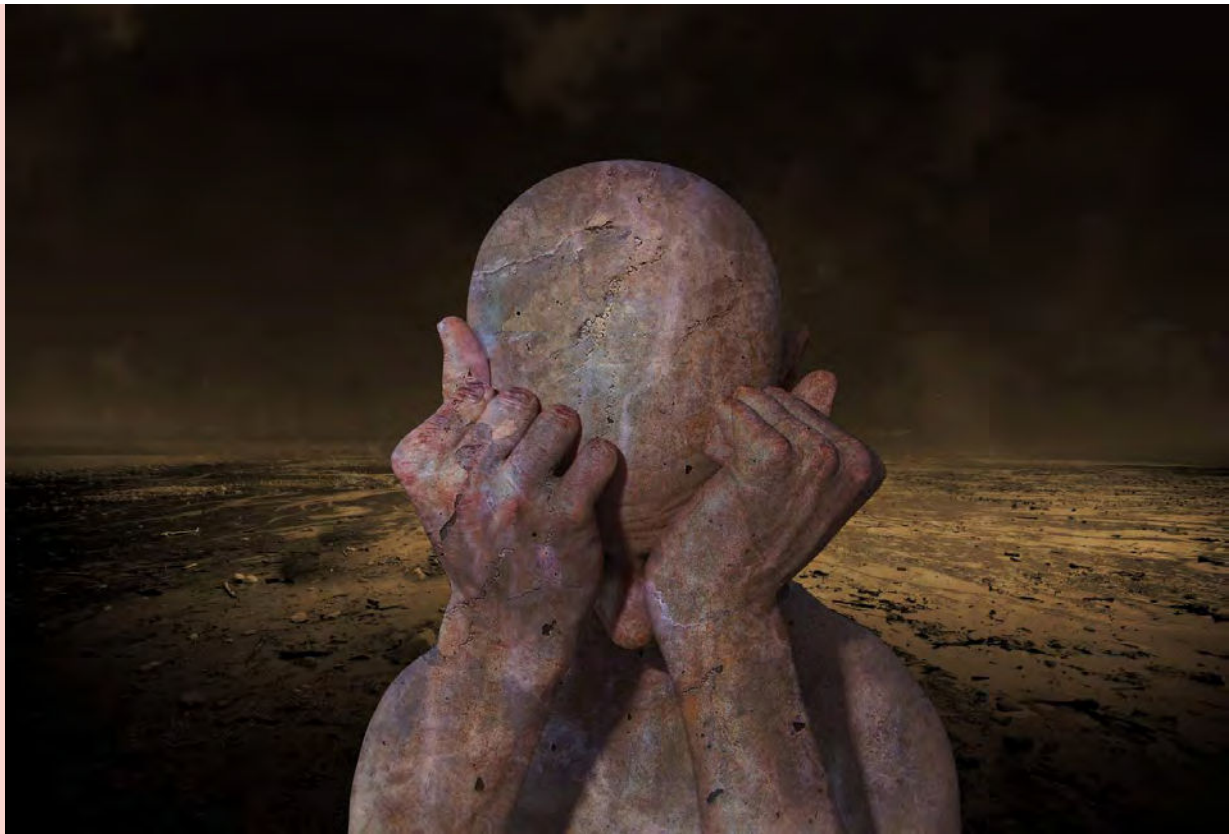


15. working with conflict



Conflict is hard. Most of us are averse to conflict. Many of us would prefer to turn around and run than face conflict. Conflict can tap into past trauma and make us feel very unsafe.

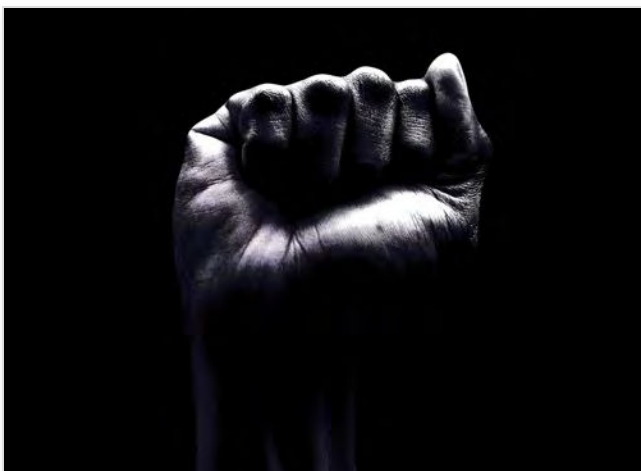
Conflict is a topic that needs exploration since it affects our peer support work. But while conflict is a massive topic with many layers and complexities stretching from the global to the personal, here we'll focus mainly on interpersonal conflict that you might face at work. To prepare for this module, you may wish to refer to module **3. categories and containers: unpacking our biases.**



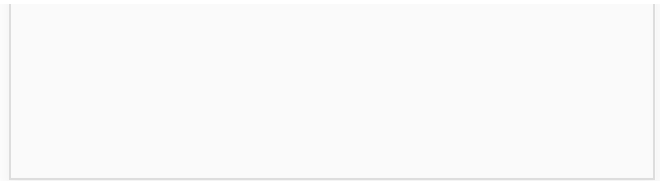
CONTINUE

question for reflection

Answer these question in your reflection journal.



**Do you see conflict as a bad thing?
Have you ever had a good
experience as a result of conflict?**



1 of 1



CONTINUE

Here's the million-dollar question: can we choose to perceive and approach conflict differently?

CONTINUE

perception & conflict

It's very easy to misunderstand each other. We have so much information coming at us at any given moment that we need to categorize it to make sense of the world. If we get lazy and rigid about the process of

categorizing and don't intentionally work to expand our thinking and challenge our biases, we can open up a breeding ground for assumptions and judgements.

But the ability to categorize gets messy when it comes to conflict. When we experience conflict, we can't help but filter what we hear/see/experience through our own worldview. This makes it difficult to understand someone else's worldview because we're stuck on our own, and ours is the "right one." This invites the opportunity to mishear and misinterpret the meaning of someone else's words and, suddenly, our communication is muddled.



If two people approach a conflict – each stuck in their own worldview – and are not willing to move until the other person sees their side, it's checkmate, game over. Conflict wins and the relationship suffers.

Peer support is about connection and building relationships, so it's essential we check our perceptions when we communicate with others. When we are mindful of our own perceptions, we reduce the opportunity for disconnection.

how can we check our perceptions?

Any time we sense that conflict is starting to bubble up, it's helpful to examine both our own worldview and that of the other person. To learn more about this process, visit module **3. categories & containers: unpacking our biases**. Ultimately, you have to realize that their story is different than yours.

There's an old saying, "Don't believe everything you hear, and only half of what you see." When it comes to assumptions, perhaps we can change it up a bit and say, "Don't believe everything you think."

Thoughts and feelings come and go all the time. Sometimes we get a thought that seems to come from left field and isn't tied to our core beliefs. We don't have to be defined by these thoughts, just as we don't need to be defined by all of our emotions.

“the work”

Byron Katie, an author living with a mental health diagnosis and a substance use disorder, created a self-inquiry technique called, “The Work.” The technique is based on a transformative experience she had when she realized that her long-held beliefs were harming her. “The Work,” which Katie started sharing in the early 1990s, is an evolving practice. This is a simple look at how it works.

First, we isolate one thought. Then, we form it into a statement. At that point, we ask ourselves the following questions.

STATEMENT: I am not good at my job.

question 1: Is it true? —

Answer: Yes, it's true. Last week I screwed up three times. And my supervisor has been giving me looks. I am sure she doesn't like me.

question 2: Can you absolutely know that it's true? —

Answer: Well...no. I've gotten some good feedback too. I know the people I work with like me.

question 3: How do you react? What happens when you believe that thought? —

Answer: I get nervous and uncomfortable. I worry and second guess myself all the time. I'm also more irritable at work.

question 4: Who would you be without that thought? —

Answer: Well, I would feel more comfortable in myself. I would be less edgy at work and more motivated to try new things. I would be less hard on myself and probably also to others around me.

Then Byron Katie tells us to turn that thought around and find the opposites of the original statement! In fact, she says to give it three turnarounds.

The turnaround:

1

I am good at my job. I'm good at XYZ.

2

Everyone messes up. I'm not the only one. I have good rapport with people and they appreciate my work.

3

My supervisor has a lot on her plate right now. She mentioned that she's experiencing extra stress. She did share some encouraging words with me recently.

Now, try it out for yourself! (Write your answers in your reflection journal.)



**Start with a
THOUGHT:**

1 of 6



Question 1: Is it true?

2 of 6



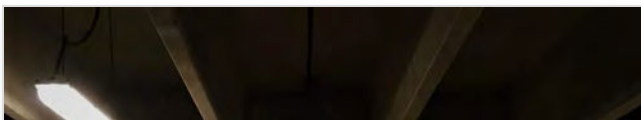
Question 2: Can you absolutely know that it's true?

3 of 6



Question 3: How do you react, what happens when you believe that thought?

4 of 6





Question 4: Who would you be without that thought?

5 of 6



Write three turnarounds:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

6 of 6

This method can really support us to change our troubling thoughts. If we use this tool, we might avoid conflict from arising. Check out [Byron Katie's website](#) for more detail.

what is the untold story?



When we meet someone, it's easy to forget that we often know very little about them, and that the part we 'see' is already being filtered through our worldview. So as much as we'd like to think we have the whole picture of that person's life, we just don't.

In addition, what we don't see is generally the most important part of that person's life. We can make all kinds of assumptions based on those parts, but they're just that – assumptions. Assumptions that are informed by our biases and judgements.

By acknowledging that a huge part of a person's life is invisible to us, we take the first step in acceptance, tolerance, grace and connection. There is so much in life we will never know. Understanding this is the beginning of wisdom.

CONTINUE



our brains are wired to survive – not to see reality

Our brains categorize information. We remember what we need to remember so we can survive. Because of this, our brains are not wired to be objective. It's only with reflection, mindfulness and a lot of work that we can get past our preconceived long-held beliefs and see the truth.

We mostly see reality filtered through our past experience, emotions, judgements and biases. Our narratives are strong and we can really get stuck in them.

It's essential that we challenge those narratives when we walk into conflict, because, just as we are filtering the situation through our experiences, the other person is too!

Asking powerful questions – including questions about our own assumptions – is the only way to think differently.

Have you ever had a conflict with someone who is stuck in what feels like a false story about you and isn't open to listening to your perspective? It's frustrating beyond belief. However, we need to remember that the brain is actually wired to favour our own biases, and as much as their behaviour is infuriating, we do the same thing too!

This kind of tendency towards personal bias results in reactive thinking and speaking, which, in turn, almost always leads to conflict and breakdown in a relationship. The only way around it is to:

Create an intentional pause

Know we are in our own story/narrative – and that the other person is as well

Know that our perspective isn't objective – that it's based on our perceptions

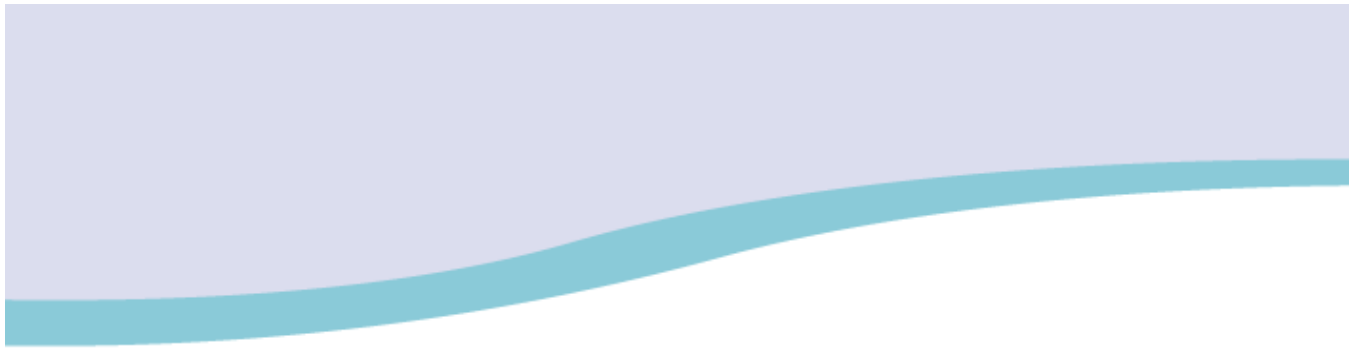
Question our assumptions

Seek to understand the other person

CONTINUE

“Conflict can and should be handled constructively; when it is, relationships benefit. Conflict avoidance is *not* the hallmark of a good relationship. On the contrary, it is a symptom of serious problems and of poor communication.”

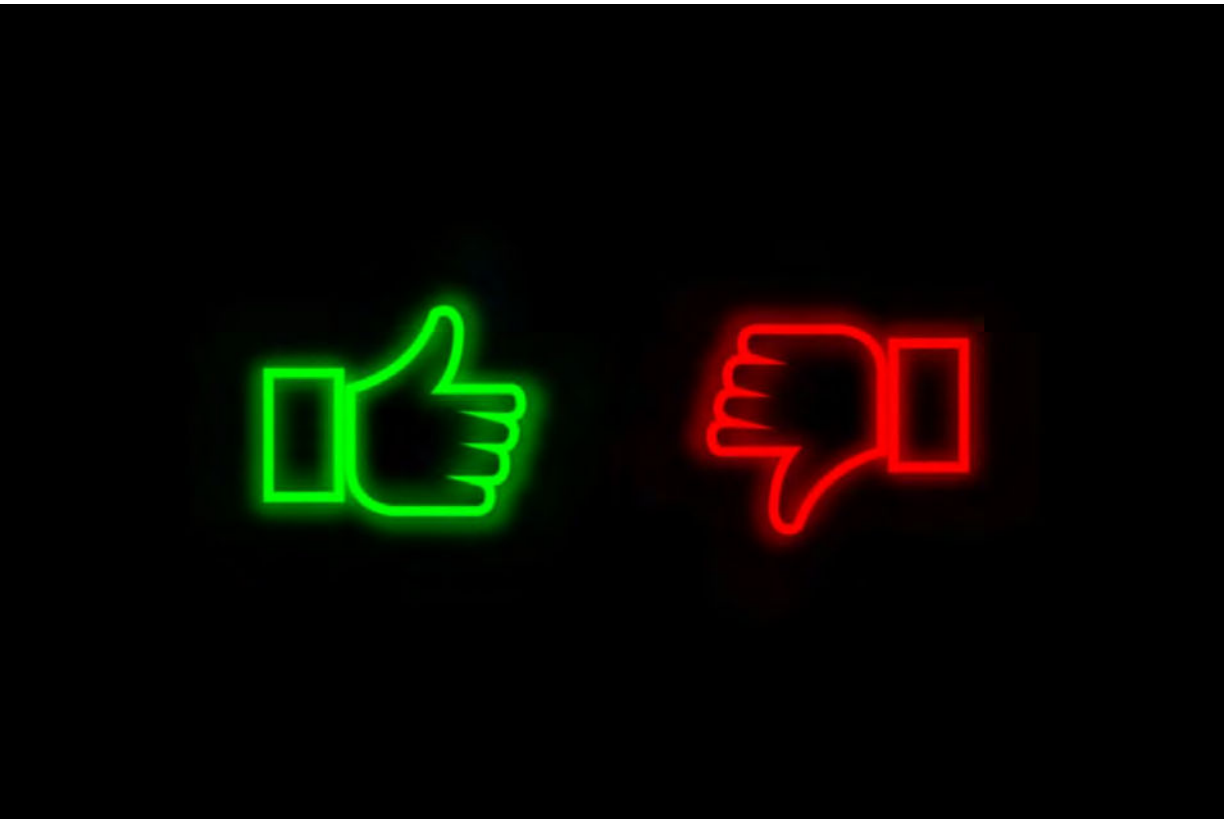
Harriet B. Braiker



CONTINUE

binary thinking in conflict

It's very easy to get into the binary thinking of good and bad, right and wrong. However, there's so much grey, so much in-between. No one person is all good or all bad – even the worst and the best people you can think of. Human beings are flawed, and also capable of greatness. We move between the two poles all the time.



Getting sucked into binary thinking is the first step to dehumanization. Dehumanization is when people are classed as “non-human.” Historically ALL genocide begins with dehumanization. But dehumanization can happen on an individual level as well. This is because we have a tendency to see ourselves differently than others. We don’t see other people as being as complex or layered as us because we simply don’t know them as well as we know ourselves. This is problematic. We can be less apt to offer empathy and compassion when we dehumanize someone and see them as just “a jerk” or “troublemaker.”

Binary thinking in conflict, then, is dangerous.

This isn’t to suggest that people should be less accountable for their actions because they have both good and bad qualities. There needs to be accountability. But we also need to remember that, because no person is all good or all bad, there is so much freedom and opportunity for forgiveness.

CONTINUE

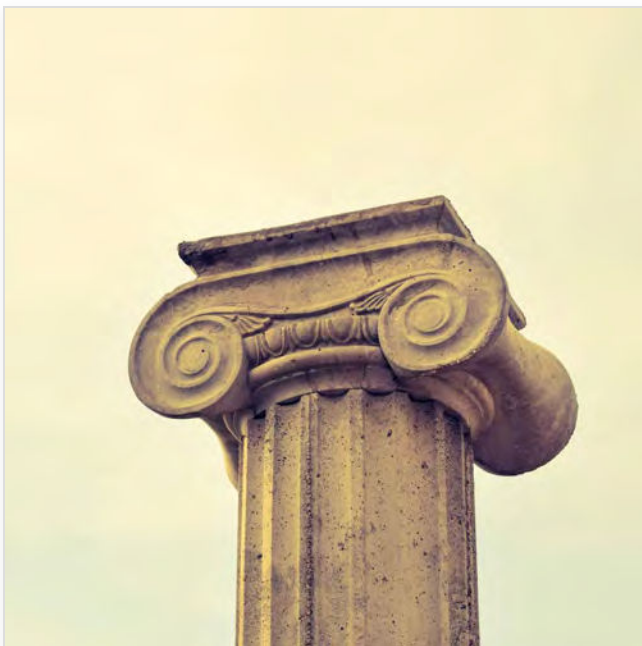
questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



Have you ever been put in a box? Labelled as either all good or all bad?

1 of 2



When we put someone in an “all good” category and place them on a pedestal, one day they will surely disappoint us because no one is perfect. How does this affect the relationship?

2 of 2

reframing the idea that all conflict is bad

Some conflict is problematic because it has disastrous consequences, especially when it ends in physical or psychological violence. But is the problem with the conflict itself, or with how we choose to both enter conflict (with the need to win) and react to it (with anger)? Is it because we don't see the problem eye to eye, or that we've lost our problem-solving capacities using perspective-taking, empathy and compassion?

What if we challenge ourselves to reframe the way we think about conflict? Conflict is a given. It will happen. No community of people is immune to conflict. Conflict comes with being human and has an important role to play in connection and communication.

Stephen Pocklington, a leader in the peer recovery movement in the U.S., once said in a workshop: "If you and I think the same way about something, one of us is redundant."



Consider any book you've read or movie you've watched. There wouldn't be a story if there wasn't conflict. It would be as boring as being stuck in a two-hour lineup at the store. It might get a wee bit interesting someone ahead of you left the line, but without conflict, there's no growth or transformation.

"There's no story if there isn't some conflict. The memorable things are usually not how pulled together everybody is. I think everybody feels lonely and trapped sometimes. I would think it's more or less the norm."

(Wes Anderson, Filmmaker)

When we all think the same way, it's a recipe for staying stuck. Growth requires us to seek out other thoughts and opinions. The brain only expands when there's movement: we won't learn and grow if we stand still. Consider confirmation bias, which we explore in module **3. categories & containers: unpacking our biases**. When people are only exposing themselves to things they already believe, they get stuck in echo chambers. The only way we can break out of these chambers is by choosing to expand our thinking and beliefs. To move. And that necessarily includes some conflict – both internal and external.

In the YouTube video, [A Better Way to Deal with Conflict](#), neuroscientist Beau Lotto says that we tend to enter conflict with the aim of shifting the other person's opinions towards our own. We want to prove that they are wrong. If we both approach conflict this way, we're stuck because no one is willing to move. Lotto suggests that instead, we approach conflict with a question: what can I learn about this? If we approach conflict with the goal of learning, we are less apt to have it escalate to psychological violence. In other words, what if we challenge ourselves to understand the other person when we are in conflict, rather than convince them that we are right?

This doesn't necessarily mean we'll move to the other person's thinking, but we will expand our own. We'll also have deeper empathy for them because we'll better understand their point of view. An important note here. In this process of shifting perspectives, we should also respect our boundaries and practice self-care. If, for example, a conversation – or even a relationship – feels toxic, we may have to walk away.

Dr. Michelle Buck, Clinical Professor of Leadership at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, teaches about conflict transformation as a better goal than conflict resolution. She shared this quote in an interview for the book *Braving the Wilderness*:

"[Conflict resolution] suggests going back to a previous state of affairs, and has a connotation that there may be a winner or a loser. How will this disagreement be resolved? Whose solution will be selected as the "better" one? In contrast, I choose to focus on "conflict transformation," suggesting that by creatively navigating the conversational landscape of differences and disagreements, we have the opportunity to create something new. At a minimum, we learn more about each other than before. Ideally, we may find new possibilities that had not even been considered before. Conflict transformation is about creating deeper understanding. It requires perspective-taking. As a result, it enables greater connection, whether or not there is agreement."



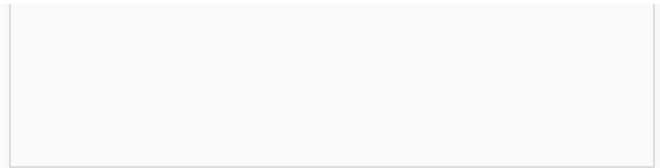
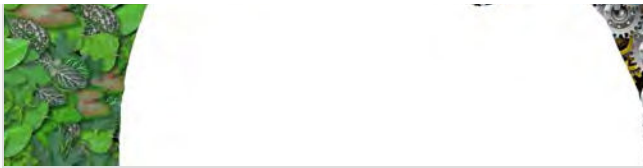
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questions for reflection

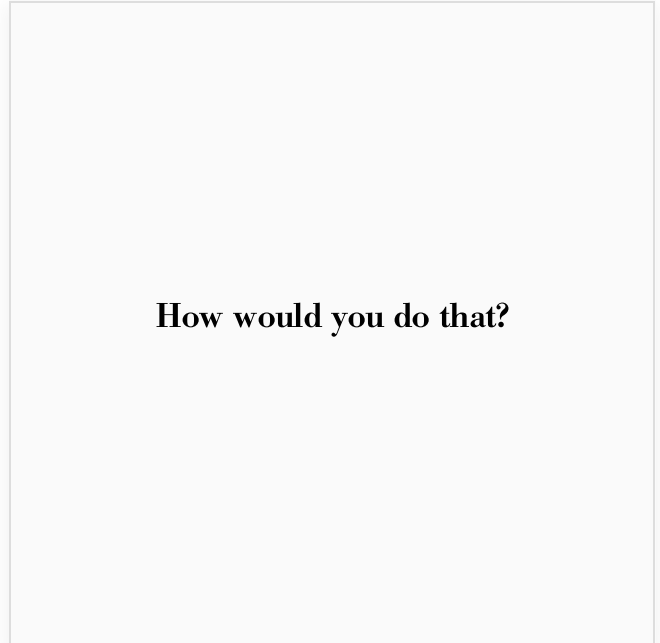
Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



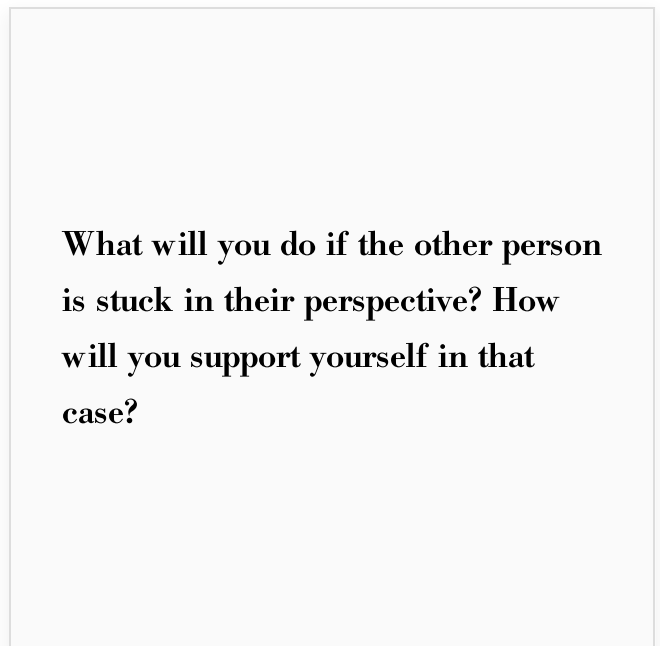
Have you ever thought to
reframe conflict as a positive?



1 of 3



2 of 3



3 of 3

CONTINUE

generosity of assumption

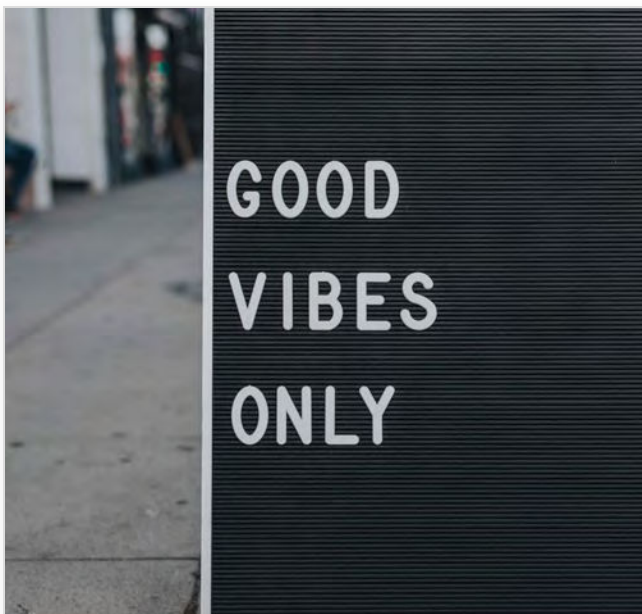
From the BC Peer Support Standards of Practice Glossary of Terms:

Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words. (2019)

CONTINUE

question for reflection

Answer this question in your reflection journal.



How do you think generosity of assumption fits with managing conflict?

CONTINUE

inquiry & curiosity

When we approach conflict with a question rather than an answer, we're more apt to transform that conflict into a learning experience. That means doing some self-examination and sleuthing work – we can put on our Sherlock hat and start exploring.

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves:

What's the history of this conflict?

Is there more going on with this conflict than meets the eye?

Do I have some unresolved resentment that I haven't worked through?

What's beneath my need to be right in this conflict?

Is it really about _____, or is there something else? What is the emotion beneath my point?

For example, is this conflict really about this particular policy, or for me is the reason really about the fear of being unheard, not valued and tossed aside?

What can we learn in this conflict?

What is the desired outcome for this conflict?

CONTINUE

debate

Assumes there is one right answer
(and you have it)

Style is combative, attempting to prove
the "other side" wrong

Listens to find flaws and counter argue

Critiques only the other position

Defends your own views at all costs

Encourages search for differences

Creates a winner/loser and
discourages further conversation

Involves no focus on feelings, often
actively seeking to belittle or offend

dialogue

Assumes others have pieces of an answer
and you can craft a solution together

Style is collaborative, seeks to find
common understanding

Listens to understand

Critiques all views, including your own

Allows others' thinking to improve your own

Encourages search for basic agreement

Creates an open end, leaving the topic
open for further discussion

Involves a real concern for the other;
doesn't actively seek to alienate or offend

Modified | Original Graphic by Holiday Phillips | @holidayphillips

16. communication basics: O.A.R.S. & non-verbal communication



The O.A.R.S. method comes from a counselling model for supporting people to explore and resolve ambivalence, called *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People for Change* by W.R. Miller and S. Rollnick.

O.A.R.S. are a set of guiding skills used to create an atmosphere of acceptance and trust with the people you are interacting with. O.A.R.S. stands for:

- . **O** – Open-ended Questions
- . **A** – Affirmations
- . **R** – Reflections
- . **S** – Summaries

O: OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS	A: AFFIRMATIONS	R: REFLECTIONS	S: SUMMARIES

An open-ended question is one that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." It's asked without judgement and has no hidden agenda, meaning it's not intended to coerce the person to answer with a specific response.

Let's look at the question, "Have you ever thought about getting some help with that?" Is this an open-ended question?

No. It can be answered with a "yes" or "no." It also has a bit of a hidden agenda, since it offers underhanded advice – that the person needs help – disguised in a question.

What are some examples of open-ended questions?

**O: OPEN-ENDED
QUESTIONS**

A: AFFIRMATIONS

R: REFLECTIONS

S: SUMMARIES

Affirmations are a way to recognize and verbalize a person's strengths. They build rapport, strengthen connection, offer encouragement and boost motivation in the person who receives them.

Affirmations should come from a truly genuine place and be honest.

Here's an example of an affirmation:

I really enjoyed our conversation today. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas with me!

**O: OPEN-ENDED
QUESTIONS**

A: AFFIRMATIONS

R: REFLECTIONS

S: SUMMARIES

Reflective listening is a way to avoid getting caught in our own assumptions and worldview. It's a way to find clarity in what another person is saying and prevent relationship disconnection. Reflective listening involves truly hearing the other person's untold story and paying attention to their inner wisdom. That story and wisdom are then reflected back in a way that shows we are listening to understand. This process also supports the other person to clarify their own thought process.

Some phrases we can use as a lead-in, are:

- Am I hearing you say...?
- It sounds to me like you are saying...

O: OPEN-ENDED
QUESTIONS

A: AFFIRMATIONS

R: REFLECTIONS

S: SUMMARIES

Summarizing means we rephrase what the person said. We have an opportunity to use a summary to end one topic and link it to the next. We can also close off a conversation with a summary. This again supports understanding and clarity.

CONTINUE

non-verbal communication

Awareness of the meaning of our non-verbal communication is important, but, as we discussed in **lesson 7**, understanding the intention behind the communication is even more important.

For this exercise, reflect on the following question in your reflection journal.



Why are the following types of non-verbal communication important?

- Eye contact
- Body language
- Gestures
- Facial expressions

• Touch

1 of 1

These non-verbal cues are based on the assumption that someone is neurotypical. People who are neurodivergent will have a different non-verbal communication style. Other cultures will also have different non-verbal communication. It's always best to hold this concept lightly – with acceptance – knowing that not everyone fits into the same box.



17. digital communication



Today much of our communication occurs in digital spaces. Digital communication offers many benefits – as well as challenges – to its users.

CONTINUE

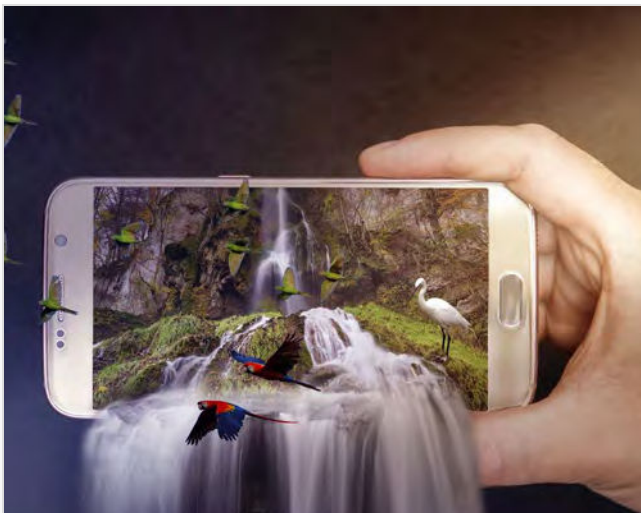
questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.

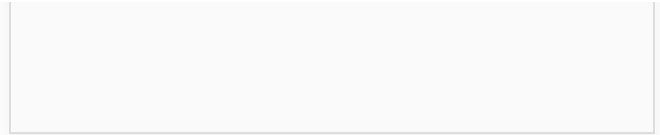


How does digital communication benefit you?

1 of 2



How have you seen digital communication benefit others?



2 of 2

CONTINUE

texting, messaging & email

Texts, messages or emails are often the most convenient methods of communication. Many of us tend to use our phones for everything BUT phone calls!

Even though online communication is convenient and easy, it also creates opportunities for misunderstandings. Most people tend to type messages quickly without putting much thought into the wording. Quick typing, especially on phones, also can increase the chance for typos that change the meaning of a sentence and create confusion and disconnection.

Tone and inflection can also get easily misinterpreted in a digital space. It can be hard to tell if someone is angry or in distress. Our own mood may also colour our understanding of what we read and we may tend to fill in messages with our own assumptions.

That said, it's also worth noting that for people who's tones are often misunderstood in person, texting offers an opportunity to communicate in a space where such judgements may be avoided.



Has someone ever misunderstood a



text or email you have sent? If so, what happened, and how could you have approached that differently?

1 of 1

social media

Social media can also be a great tool for connection. It can give us the opportunity to meet people we wouldn't have otherwise met. It helps us to stay in touch with loved ones who live far away.

There are also downsides to social media. Cyber-bullying is a real thing, both with youth and adults.



Do you use social media? If so, what are the benefits to using it?

1 of 3



Have you had to deal with interpersonal challenges on social media?

2 of 3



In the understanding boundaries & what it means to co-create them module, we cover a little bit about social media. Have you decided whether or not you will mix social media with your work?

3 of 3

CONTINUE

1

Re-read

Always re-read your message before sending it. Put yourself in the other person's shoes and ask if they'd like to receive that message as it's worded. If not, consider rewording it.

Discuss

Overall, try to limit the amount of online communication you engage in with people you support. Some peer support workers choose to talk about preferred methods of communication at the beginning of the relationship.

Conflict

Don't use digital communication to engage in, or resolve, conflict.

But let's add a caveat here: some people are not inclined to be confrontational in person. For these people, digital communication may offer the only opportunity to resolve certain issues. Regardless, even in these situations, it's best to stick to fairly low key matters.

Take your time

Don't feel like you have to respond to everything quickly. Not only does that create disconnection when you're with other people and stop to answer a message, but it creates more opportunities for miscommunication. Take your time. Tell people that you'll respond when you get a chance.

Think carefully

Emails can be forwarded and printed. Texts can be screenshotted. It's important to be mindful of what we write when we're communicating digitally.

Seek other options

No digital communication is fully private. If your communication requires more than a few sentences, consider calling someone instead of texting.

Wait

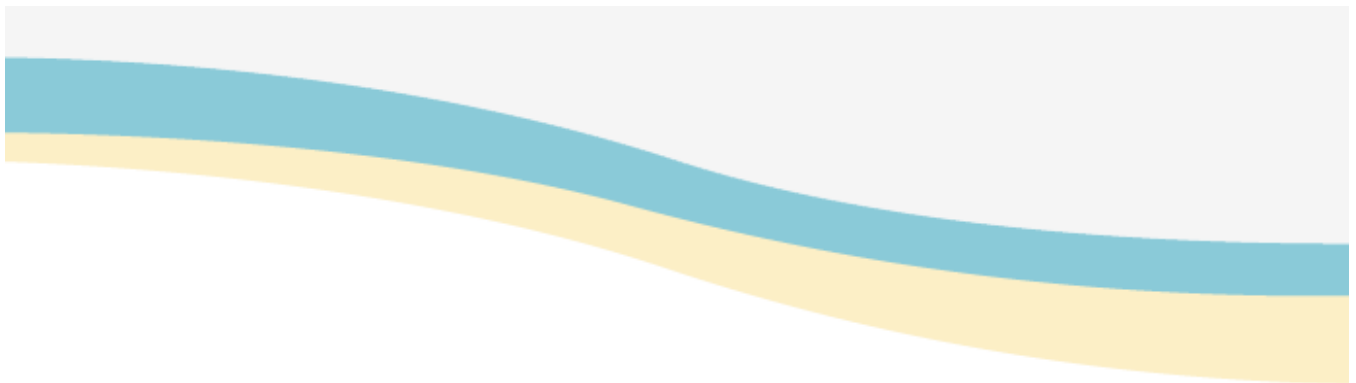
If you're feeling emotional, wait before sending your message. Then read it again when you have calmed down and make any necessary corrections.

Don't rule out digital support

As we saw during the years of pandemic, it may be necessary or advantageous to rely on digital media to offers others support. So even though person-to-person interaction may be the ideal for most, being open and flexible about using digital media as a tool for support is wise.

Can you think of some other tips?

What are some other things to consider with digital communication?



18. obstacles to communication



Most of this module focuses on the ways we can increase connection in our relationships. We believe that if we put our attention on connection, we'll be preventing other problems from happening.

However, it's still worth mentioning a few possible barriers to good communication. As you read the cards below, write down your thoughts on why they could be a problem – and what you could do to address the issue mentioned.

1

jargon and abbreviations

2

talking too much

3

external noise

4

your energy level

5

**shame/ embarrassment/
defensiveness**

6

lack of focus

7

**when someone talks around an
issue**

8

**unspoken expectation or
boundaries**

9

a physically unsafe environment

10

ability to hear

11

ability to read

12

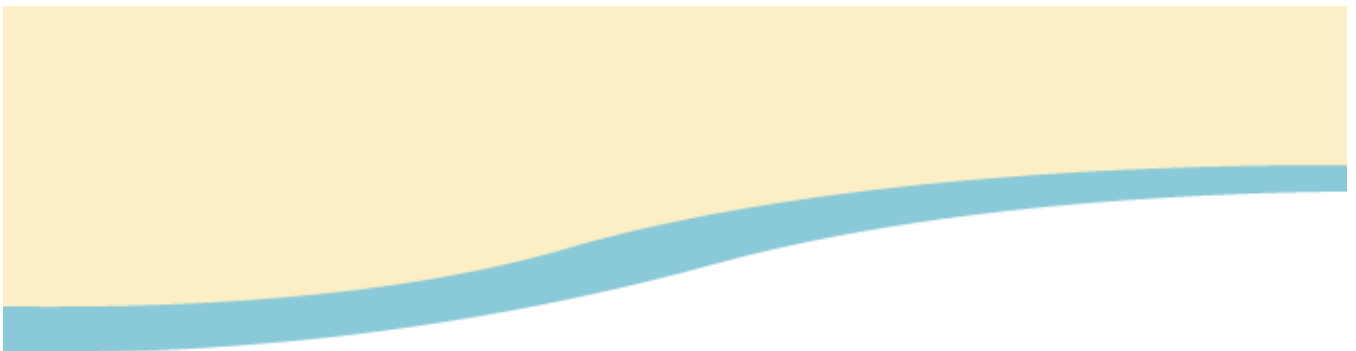
ability to process language

13

impaired by substance

14

mental health episode



19. have fun together!



Fun, laughter and play are very important parts of being human. But when you're deep in suffering and despair, it's hard to have fun or access a sense of playfulness.

Children engage with fun and play very easily but adults don't always realize its importance. As adults, we can feel like it's frivolous to be laughing when people are suffering. We can easily slip into a state of seriousness and feel pressure to work on "important things."

We know that laughter and fun support us to build connections. Play supports creativity – which is so much more than just making art. Play helps us to relieve stress and improve brain functioning. Play improves energy. Play is purposeless and pleasure, and not about completing a goal.

Most of us desire a life with more fun and adventure. Having a sense of purpose is actually fun and motivating. Therefore, building fun into our work is essential.

In the YouTube video, [Play Is the Engine of Change. How Do We Harness It?](#), neuroscientist Beau Lotto says, “the most adaptable systems in nature are the ones that play into adulthood.” He goes on to say that play:

- ☐ Celebrates uncertainty
- ☐ Encourages diversity
- ☐ Opens us up to possibility
- ☐ Increases our cooperation
- ☐ Motivates us intrinsically

Experts agree that play is essential for human development, even in adults. Psychiatrist Stuart Brown, the founder of the National Institute for Play, found that lack of play “...is just as important as other factors in predicting criminal behavior among murderers in Texas prisons.” In the *PsychCentral* article, *The Importance of Play for Adults*, author Margarita Tartakovsky writes, “...play is just as pivotal for adults as it is for kids.” Scott G. Eberle, Ph.D, vice president for play studies at *The Strong* and editor of the *American Journal of Play*, agrees, writing, “We don’t lose the need for novelty and pleasure as we grow up.”

Play brings joy and is vital for problem solving, creativity and relationships. In his book *Play*, author and psychiatrist Stuart Brown compares play to oxygen: He writes, “...it’s all around us, yet goes mostly unnoticed or unappreciated until it is missing.” This might seem surprising until you consider everything that constitutes play. Play is art, books, movies, music, comedy, flirting and daydreaming.”(2012)

CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



What fun things did you do as a kid?

1 of 3



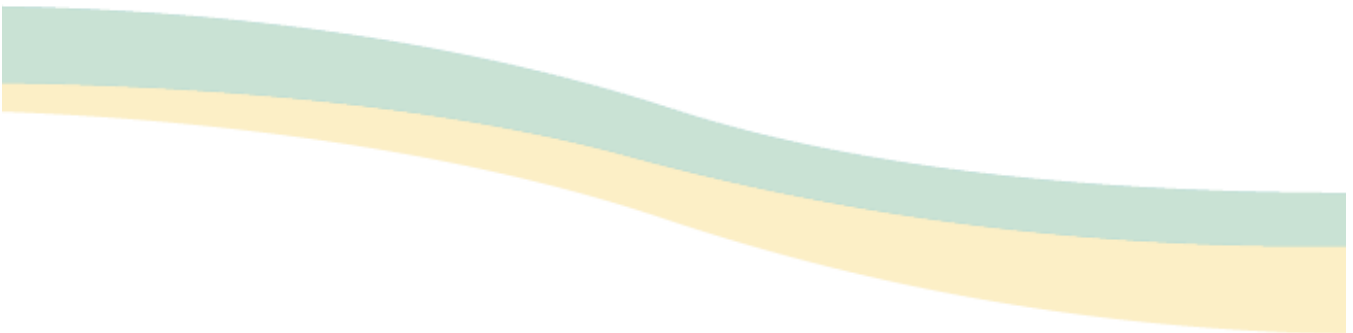
How can you add more fun and play into your life?

2 of 3



What kinds of fun things can you do with the people you support, and with your colleagues?

3 of 3



20. deep listening self-assessment

Download the following attachment to assess your own strengths and weaknesses as a listener.



Deep Listening.pdf

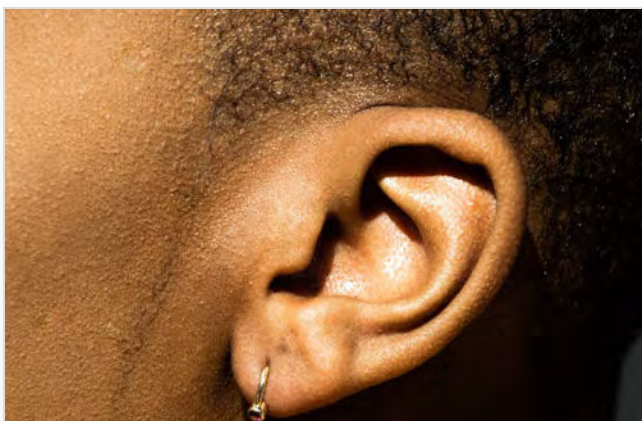
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CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



What are your strengths as a listener?



1 of 4



2 of 4

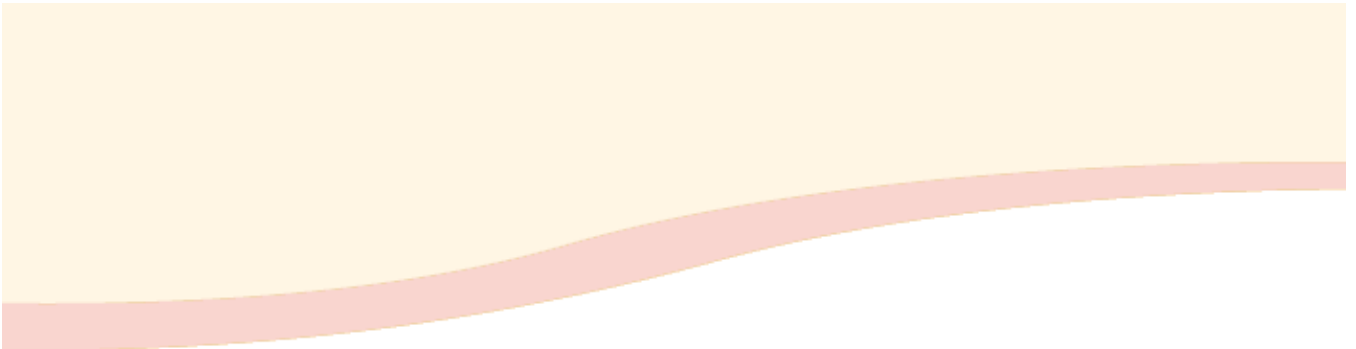


What are your opportunities for growth?

What benefits do you see in improving your listening skills?



What is one specific action you will make to deepen your listening?



21. core values assessment

question for reflection

Answer this question in your reflection journal.



In what ways have the core values (see list below) intersected with the topic of connection and communication?

1 of 1

CONTINUE

core peer support values



acknowledgement —

All human beings deserve to be seen for who they are.

IN ACTION: Peer support strives to acknowledge – and deeply hear – people where they are in their journey.

PSWs SUGGEST: Asking open-ended questions and actively listening to the PSW to see if they feel comfortable sharing their experience. Ask: “What do you think about that situation?” “Is there a coping strategy that you have used in a previous similar experience that worked for you?”

mutuality —

All healthy relationships are mutual and reciprocal.

IN ACTION: Peer support relationships are co-created, with all parties participating in boundary creation.

PSWs SUGGEST: Having a conversation about what is and isn’t okay to discuss with the PSW.

“...Even though I am a PSW, it’s painful for me to make eye contact with people. Hopefully, clients will see that if I’m looking away that it actually means that I am deeply listening to them. Being vulnerable and open seems to allow the other person to do their version of the same, building trust and respect and co-creating the relationship.”

strength-based —

Every human being has strengths.

IN ACTION: Peer support intentionally builds on existing strengths. It thoughtfully and purposefully moves in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.

PSWs SUGGEST: Finding things that the PSW feels really confident about and expanding on those areas or delving into those areas and supporting their choices.

self-determination —

Motivation works best when it's driven from within.

IN ACTION: Peer support encourages self-determination and acknowledges and holds space for resilience and inner wisdom.

PSWs SUGGEST: Support the PSW in making decisions and doing things on their own – based on their wants, needs and goals.

respect, dignity and equity —

All human beings have intrinsic value.

IN ACTION: Peer support honours human value by

- Practicing cultural humility and sensitivity
- Serving with a trauma-informed approach
- Offering generosity of assumption
- Addressing personal biases mindfully
- Meeting people where they are
- Serving with a knowledge of equity

PSWs SUGGEST: Treat PSWs as you would like to be treated and expect to be treated. Learn about them on a personal level and treat them as equals.

belonging and community —

All human beings need to belong and be a part of a community.

IN ACTION: Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community and it actively works towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support encourages a social justice mindset, and intentionally promotes empathy, compassion and self-compassion.

PSWs SUGGEST: Help PSWs feel wanted and cared about. Help them find resources that foster a sense of community and belonging.

“My quality of life improves immensely when I am surrounded by one or a community of people who understand me. I don’t feel alone. I can be myself among people who I know understand me on a deeper level. When I feel like I can be myself, I feel more confident and able to take positive risks, thus improving the quality of my life. The root of this is connection and being able to be seen for who I truly am. Peers can help people be seen in a real way.”

curiosity —

Curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.

IN ACTION: Peer support

- Is continually curious
- Challenges assumptions and narratives
- Asks powerful questions
- Offers generosity of assumption to those who think differently
- Knows that listening and asking questions is more important than providing answers

PSWs SUGGEST: Ask questions and be engaged in learning about your PSWs. Find out about their culture and explore with them.



22. summary

Let's review some of the key concepts covered in this module.

☐

Connection is the goal of peer support.

☐

In communication, words are important. Tone is important. But even more important than words and tone are the intentions beneath the words we use – especially the intentions we have to connect with others.

☐

At the beginning of a peer relationship, it's important to use communication to create mutuality. One way to do this is to share your story.

☐

Vulnerability is at the essence of being human. It allows us to see the suffering of others and choose compassion. We can be brave, courageous and compassionate by embracing our vulnerability.

☐

Empathetic listening – listening with our eyes and heart to receive the deep communication of another human soul – is a key tool in building peer relationships.

☐

Learning to ask powerful questions supports someone to tap into their inner wisdom and reflect in a new way.

☐

Practicing presence means we are aware of what's happening within us, are noticing the other person we are with and are mindful of our surroundings.

☐

We can avoid communication breakdowns by being honest and kind, being direct, avoiding curt language, avoiding a patronizing tone and checking our assumptions and judgements.



Any time we sense that conflict is starting to bubble up, it's helpful to examine both our own worldview and that of the other person, then do the work to build connection. Conflict can and should be handled constructively; when it is, relationships benefit.



Digital communication offers benefits and challenges. To avoid problems and misunderstandings, peers need to be careful about how they communicate over devices.



Obstacles to communication can include low energy levels, use of jargon and abbreviations, lack of focus and someone talking around an issue.



Play and fun are essential to our work relationships because they support problem solving, creativity and joy.



23. next steps

We want to thank you for taking the time to walk alongside peer support workers on a shared path of learning from lived experience.

You are now ready to visit another module of the Peer Support Worker training curriculum!

Please head home to <https://peerconnectbc.ca> where you will find the individual training modules and facilitation guides. You will also find a [resource page](#) at that site to continue your learning about peer support work and the issues surrounding it.

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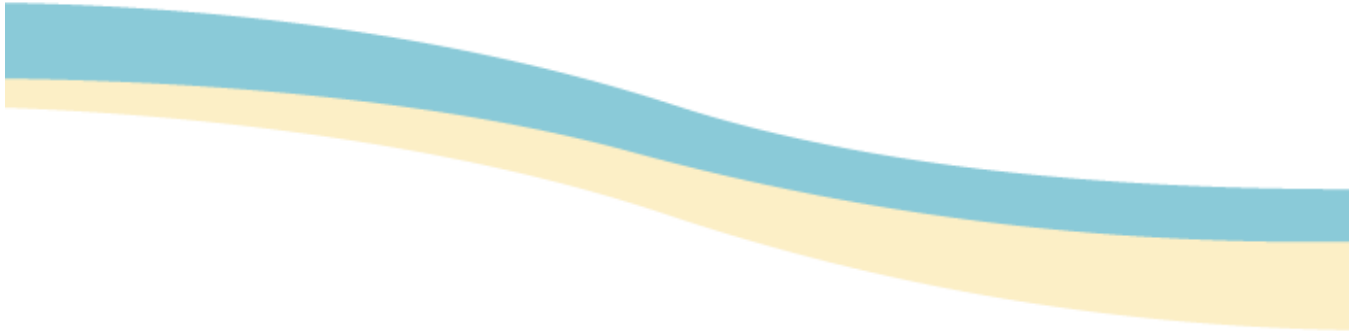
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24. module references

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