

A TOOL TO ASSIST PEER WORKERS TO CONNECT ACROSS SOCIAL DISTANCES

One of the foundations of peer support work is that the worker and the peer will share some elements of life experience and/or identity. It can be very powerful and transformative to connect with someone who has shared a common struggle, and to grow and learn with each other by sharing life stories and lessons learned. Developing new relationships can be complex and this process needs to be handled with care, *especially when the worker may experience some social (systemic) privilege in their life that the peer does not experience*. For example, imagine a peer support worker named Morgan. Morgan is a white, straight woman who grew up in poverty and has lived and living experience of substance use. Morgan is working with a peer named Shel who is a queer, Indigenous person. Shel also grew up in poverty and has lived and living experience of substance use, as well as some mental health challenges. While Morgan and Shel share some elements of identity and experience, each has had their own pathway, and each has navigated different personal and systemic barriers (e.g. racism, generational impacts of colonialism, ableism, homophobia, possibly misogyny, transphobia, ...) that have led them to this moment of potential connection and mutual support. Here are some things to consider when offering support across differences.

BE MINDFUL OF OVER-RELATING

When you have some overlapping or shared experiences with a peer, it can be tempting to say “I know what you’re going through.” While this phrase is well-intentioned, it can actually make the peer feel as though you are not seeing the ways that their identity, history, culture, abilities, or other facets of their life may have shaped their experiences in ways that are quite different from your own. You can listen, empathize, and validate their feelings and experiences without over-relating or suggesting that you know exactly what they’re going through. This approach acknowledges that, although you may connect over some elements of your lives, the peer’s experience and story is their own and may have been influenced by systemic oppressions that you have not personally experienced.

If you haven't directly experienced a barrier that a peer is telling you about, that may be because privilege has protected you from that barrier. This doesn't mean that you have had an easy life, or that you haven't experienced hardship or oppression in other elements of your identity or experience! It does mean that, often, we are less aware of the barriers we **don't** experience compared to the ones that we do. Part of being in a peer relationship is being open-hearted and curious about the peer's life and experiences. At the same time, we need to be responsible about how we express our curiosity. If you have a question for a peer about an element of their life or identity that is different from your own, try running your question through this inside/outside filter:

1. **Inside voice:** Clarify to yourself why you're asking¹
 - a. **Do you really need to ask this question?** Why? How will it improve your relationship with the peer?
 - b. **Would you ask everyone this question?** Or, are you only asking this peer because you have perceived or assumed something about their identity or background?
 - c. **Who does the question/answer benefit most?** Are you asking to satisfy your own curiosity or lack of knowledge (in this case, the answer will primarily benefit you) or are you asking in order to provide the best support possible (the answer will primarily benefit the peer)?

2. **Outside voice:** Before you ask, express your intentions to the peer
 - a. **Explain, out loud, why you are asking.** Doing so should help clarify your intentions and give some context for the question that is about to come.
 - b. **Practice consent.** "Is it okay if I ask you about _____?" This allows the peer the option to engage in a conversation about a specific element of their life or identity, but also communicates that the peer is not obligated to share if they don't want to or aren't ready to.
 - c. **Give the option to not answer.** This shows that you, as the asker, don't feel entitled to an answer, and that you are not expecting the peer to educate you.

1. Adapted from FORGE Forward's "Know and Tell Why" Resource:
<https://forge-forward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FAQ-08-2012-know-tell-why.pdf>

Sometimes, part of your peer support role may be to help peers in getting connected to other supports or resources (if they've identified that they want that). Peers may be hesitant to get connected in with other supports or resources for a range of reasons, including having had negative to traumatic experiences with services providers in the past, having heard from friends or community members about negative or traumatic experiences of accessing services, or if they think you might be a just another gatekeeper or that you are there to "defend" the systems that they may have had challenges with or been harmed by in the past. Here are some ways of working alongside a peer as you navigate these systems:

Name the problem. Many systems have been designed to serve or benefit some people while excluding or harming others. When a peer is experiencing barriers or discrimination, it can be powerful to explicitly (i.e. out loud) acknowledge that it is the system(s), not the peer, that is the problem. Doing this can help to shift the narrative: It is not the peer's fault for not fitting into the system, but rather, the system's fault for failing to appropriately serve a diversity of people.

Remember: If you had an easy (or easier) experience of accessing services, this may have meant they were designed with people like you in mind. If you weren't aware of barriers or systemic problems, believe the peer if they tell you about them.

Acknowledge your limitations. Sometimes, you may be working in a system in which you have to follow certain outdated procedures (e.g. requiring "legal name" with no space to indicate other name(s) the peer may go by). Again, explicitly naming your own limitations as a peer support worker is one way of being transparent with the peer about what is and isn't possible for you to change in terms of your "rules for engagement."

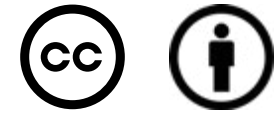
Find compromises. While you may need to follow certain outdated procedures, you may be able to still find compromises that will indicate to the peer that you're working to adapt to better meet their needs. For example, you may need someone's legal name for some purposes (i.e. for legal reporting), but you could still use the name (and pronouns) that they go by currently in conversation with them and others (as appropriate, and while maintaining confidentiality).

Use positions of privilege to consensually advocate or create change:

There may be supports or resources that were accessible to you that may not be accessible to the peer you are supporting. That may be because they may not be culturally competent/relevant/safe (e.g. services offered out of white-dominant organizations), they may not have services that acknowledge or are relevant for LGBTQ2S+ people (e.g. gender-specific addictions treatment programs), it may not be physically or geographically accessible (e.g. for those with limited mobility and/or who live rurally). In exploring how you can best support a peer, you could ask:

"Have you ever heard of or been to [Resource X or Organization Y], or know people who have been there? What was your/their experience like?"

If they haven't heard of or been to the resource or organization, you may ask: "Would you like me to call or email them to ask what kinds of training they have done around [certain competencies or identities] so that we both have a better idea of what to expect?"



This tool is part of the **Where We Are At:
Provincial Peer Support Worker Training Curriculum**

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