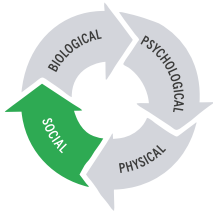


Peer support



The main focus of this treatment is social.



Remember, a sideways thumb just means not enough people have done research yet that shows that this approach works. This might be really helpful (and some people say it is), we just don't know for sure!

What is it?

Very often when you have unusual upsetting experiences for the first time, you can think that you're the only one who's gone through strange and sometimes frightening experiences. Peer support is when somebody who's also had these experiences – and often also used mental health services – draws on their experience of personal and social recovery to support you.

A peer support worker will be hopeful for you and for your recovery, helping you to make sense of the future, holding hope for the future, helping you to build your own recovery pathway. Peer support can involve lots of different things, from one-to-one sessions, to groups and drop-ins, depending on your preference and what the service you are in can offer.

What does it aim to do?

Peer support workers aim to support you to make sense of what's happened and to help you to set goals for yourself, to help you get on with your life. They are not there to give clinical advice or to tell you what to do.

They can help you to think about what kind of goals support your personal and social recovery, like making new friends or getting in touch with old ones or something more practical, like travelling to new places or to the places you used to go to.

They can also talk about how they got through difficulties with these kinds of things, for example being anxious, being worried about being judged by other people because of your experiences, or other difficulties.

Because peer support workers have gone through it themselves, they can often talk about things with you that are not so easy for staff from mental health services to understand.

They can use their experience to help you make best use of the other supports on offer to you.

“ I feel better supported meeting someone else with this experience, thinking about self help options. Peer support workers are able to give hope and I feel more confident about recovery. ”

David, 32

👂 Although there are over seven billion people on the planet, the idea that ‘you aren’t alone’ is not always obvious. It can be enormously helpful to connect with someone with similar experiences. Simply hearing someone else’s thoughts about these experiences, can offer valuable views on feelings you thought you were alone with.

Increasing hope, being empowered, and feeling like you belong are some of the main things that peer support offers. Providing a non-judgemental place to reflect and talk openly, without any sense of ‘us and them’, may provide a start for further understanding yourself.

Support from a peer (someone else who’s been through things like you), balances power evenly compared to more traditional therapy relationships. It can be helpful, for example, by sharing coping strategies with each other. Of course it’s important to remember nobody’s path is the same, but it may surprise you how often they cross or run parallel. 🗨️

John, Peer Support Worker

Does it work?

It’s too early to tell yet whether peer support works. There are a lot of first-hand accounts from people who’ve been supported by a peer support worker, saying that it’s helped them personally and socially, as well as being rewarding for the peer support workers themselves. There is limited evidence for peer support, and only one large RCT so far.

The evidence that does exist has often used clinical and service measures (like whether it stops experiences coming back and whether it stops you going into hospital) to see whether peer support works or not. A very recent study in 2018 did show that peer supported self-management slightly reduced readmission rates in the following year. There haven’t been any big studies looking at whether peer support helps with social and personal outcomes for people receiving a peer support service.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

NICE does recommend peer support as part of a package of support and as one way to help with recovery.

✔ Main pro

Peer support workers can be hope inspiring, just by being there, as they are living proof that you are not the only one and that it’s possible to get beyond difficult and scary times.

✘ Main con

We don’t yet know how peer support works and what it does that’s different to a support worker who doesn’t have unusual upsetting experiences. Some people just want to forget about their experiences as quickly as possible and would not want to be reminded by a peer support worker.