

The many faces of peer support

Peer support can be experienced in many different ways. From the informal sharing of knowledge and experience through to the formalised peer support worker role within services.



Whilst there are different forms of peer support, they all share a common ethos based on equality, mutuality and empowerment. Central to this is hope, the belief that people can and do live full and meaningful lives.

Connections and friendships

There are many opportunities to contribute to and benefit from peer support. Firstly, and most importantly, there is the peer support that people offer and receive through connections and friendships. Reciprocal relationships where we are able to talk freely and openly about our experiences knowing that we are more likely to be accepted and understood. This is the starting point for understanding the value and function of peer relationships.

Mutual/self-help groups

Mutual/self-help support groups provide opportunities to meet with others who share similar experiences. They can be found both independent of and within services. A common way to recognise a shared experience is through diagnosis, and many groups have been started by people with a particular diagnosis seeking to relate to others with a similar diagnosis, like [Bipolar Scotland](#) and [BEAT](#). Others focus on a common experience, like Hearing Voices groups and self-harm.

Digital peer support

The digital age is a developing resource for peer support.

Social media provides a great platform for people to engage in peer support and is invaluable especially for those who find it challenging to meet with others face to face.

Some people affected by mental health issues have developed their own interactive websites and share their experiences via blogs and vlogs. [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) are other useful websites. You can [follow SRN on Twitter](#).

Collective advocacy

Another form of peer support is collective advocacy, where groups of people meet to campaign on issues of importance to them. In mental health, the focus ranges from access to and quality of services through to the right to be treated as an equal citizen. The peer support is focused on change for the majority with the added benefit of the supportive nature of being part of a group. [Voices Of eXperience \(VOX\)](#), the national mental health service user led organisation, can provide information on local collective advocacy groups.

Peer working

The most formal peer relationship is peer working. There is a growing workforce of peer workers across the mental health sector. Peer workers can be employed directly within services and teams or by user-led organisations. There is also a growing development of volunteer peer roles that people can access support from.

The peer worker role involves:

- Developing mutually empowering relationships;
- Sharing personal experiences in a way that inspires hope;
- Offering hope and support as an equal

There is a great deal of strength gained in knowing someone who has walked where you are walking now and who now has a life of their own choosing. In this way it is different to support work" Peer Worker

SRN provide support and [a wide range of free resources to help peer working](#).

