Trauma-Informed Peer Support: Effective Strategies for Domestic Violence Services & Organizations

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Peer Support Traditions

Traditionally meant informal, non-professionalized help from people who have had similar life experiences.

- Central to community belonging
- Adopted by mental health and substance abuse self-help movements
- *In our roots - in response to gender-based violence*

Poll #1

What is your current involvement with peer support?

1. Survivors supporting survivors - formal
2. Survivors supporting survivors - informal
3. Advocates supporting advocates - formal
4. Advocates supporting advocates - informal
5. Supervisory/administrative mutual support
6. Other
Defining Peer Support in Domestic Violence Advocacy

Peer Support

- A resource for growth and change.
- A dynamic, flexible approach to connection and mutual understanding among equals, based on a core set of values and principles.

Peer Support Principles

- Voluntary
- Non-judgmental
- Respectful
- Reciprocal
- Empathetic
Peer Support Can Include:

- Educational focus
- Advocacy
- Building connection to community
- Opportunity for reflection
- Space to test new coping strategies
- Opportunity for growth

Essential Ingredients

- Transparency in the relationships
- Letting everyone know the limits of the relationships up front
- Assuming people need information about the purpose and intention of peer support and teaching them what they need

Peer Support Can Counter Oppressive Experiences

- Additional forum to educate survivors about trauma, its impact, and what it means to be trauma-informed and domestic violence-informed
- With mutuality, each person is responsible for the relationship - power is shared
- Old roles and patterns are challenged

(Shery Mead, Intentional Peer Support
http://www.intentionalpeersupport.org)
Culturally Responsive Support

- Provides context
- Holds information about an individual’s sense of safety
- Offers a starting point to consider traditional/alternative healing approaches

Ensuring Diversity Among Peers Who Provide Support

- Honors and models resiliencies present among cultures and communities
- Acknowledges traumatic and oppressive experiences over the lifespan and current experiences
  - Gender-based violence, historical trauma, poverty, and ...

How Is This Helpful?

- Resource to support domestic violence advocacy
- Helps to maintain a recovery orientation
- Trauma disconnects; peer support helps reconnect
Trauma survivors often have sensitive “radar” for detecting dishonesty and good reasons to be sensitive to misuse of power and authority.

- Domestic violence-informed and trauma-informed peer support can offer equity, safety, and mutuality.

**Mental Health Crisis: What Are Our Challenges?**

**Complex Issues: Complex Feelings**

Given Her Experiences, Any Survivor May…

- Have a low tolerance for stress
- Have strong reactions to seemingly “minor” irritants
- Not be able to “get over” things that happen in the current day to day
- Disengage or not address conflicts, problems
- Avoid interactions or take the path of least resistance
Defining Psychiatric Disability

- Trauma and/or mental illness interfere with:
  - Learning
  - Thinking
  - Communicating
  - Sleeping
- Are normal parts of the human experience
- May come and go, may remit, may be persistent
- Safety and support can reduce psychiatric disability

Poll #2

Which experiences with a survivor’s mental health crisis are of most concern to you?

1. Danger to self
2. Danger to others
3. Escalating agitation
4. Threats and violence
5. Intrusive thoughts
6. Inability to care for self and children
7. Other

As advocates, our attitudes and stance are key…
Responding to Strong Emotions

Uncomfortable 🇬🇪 Unsafe

Stretching to Accommodate a Range of Survivor Views

- Unsure of or opposed to diagnosis and treatment
- Recovery occurred by overcoming obstacles present in the mental health system
- Unaware of the impact of trauma and coping strategies used
- Diagnosis provided understanding and explanation
- Hopeful about healing and recovery opportunities
- Aware of the impact of trauma and our responses and developing new ways to cope

Can our services be flexible?
How Do We Know What She is Experiencing and Needs?

- Ask her:
  - What she feels, thinks, and experiences
  - What the experiences mean in her life
  - What resources and supports she already has
  - What helps

Two Sets of Skills

- **Connection Skills**
  - Offering lifelines
  - Engagement
  - Flexibility

- **Reflection Skills**
  - Self awareness
  - Responsibility

Conversations

- **Using:**
  - Art
  - Music
  - Writing
  - Movement

- **Sharing:**
  - Hopes for change
  - Survival Experiences
  - Wellness tools
  - Ways of coping
Lifelines

• Don’t be afraid to name difficult topics
• Affirm each person’s uniqueness and worth
• Acknowledge that she has already survived
• Be willing to hear her story
• Offer success and hope

Peer support is another avenue to offer lifelines.

Peers Need to Be Domestic Violence Informed

• Peers Trained to be Facilitators
  – Wellness Recovery Action Planning™ (WRAP) and Advance Directives
• Planned response to crisis
  – Inpatient respite or crisis beds
  – Using mental health resources and peer support

Community Resources

• Self-help
• Advocacy
• Information about mental health issues and resources
• Assistance with employment and housing
• A place to focus on strengths, capabilities, and talents
• Reduce isolation and build community.
Crisis Response

- Do what survivors say works
- When we don't know…then what?

Suggested Strategies for Helping a Person Restore Balance

- Make a connection with the person who is in distress
- Establish a collaborative relationship
- Use words to help restore balance or calm
- Consider whether peers can have a role

Peer Support

- Can be an effective response to crisis
- Can be an opportunity for taking social action
- Can supplement domestic violence advocacy
- Can be available in the community (collaborations can be an opportunity for cross-training)
What concerns you about including peer support in domestic violence advocacy?

Serving Survivors Who Have Psychiatric Disability Involves…

- Universal access/Inclusive design
- Core Domestic Violence Advocacy Principles
- Attention to the impact of trauma
- Recovery-oriented approaches and peer support models
- Reflective practice
- Community partnerships
- Public policy advocacy

Involving Survivors

Getting feedback:

How can peer support be created here?

What would be helpful?
Resources

Engaging Women in Trauma-Informed Peer Support: A Guidebook available at:

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