St George's University of London

Peer Worker Research Project
Informing New Ways of Working in Mental Health

together FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

New Ways of Working in Mental Health Services: introducing Peer Worker roles into mental health services in England

> *I think the greatest thing that's in you is real empathy and a desire to want to make a difference … use what you have been through, share what you have been through, what's worked for you, what hasn't worked for you, to help make a difference for someone else*
>
> (Peer Worker)

Why we did the research

Peer support has long been practiced by people experiencing mental distress to support each other in hospital and in the community. The value of peer support has been widely recognised, and peer support roles – Peer Workers – are increasingly being introduced into mental health services in England, both in the NHS and in the voluntary sector.

Peer Workers are people with lived experience of mental health problems who are employed, in a paid or unpaid capacity, to explicitly use those experiences to support others using mental health services.

Research is increasingly documenting the importance of peer support, and the potential benefits of Peer Worker roles. This research project was a response to the need to identify what makes the Peer Worker role work well and what can challenge effective implementation. We also aimed to provide mental health service providers with learning to support the development of new Peer Worker roles.

PROOF

Who did the research?

The research was undertaken by St George's, University of London along with Together for Mental Wellbeing, Kingston Business School, Warwick Business School, South West London & St George's Mental Health NHS Trust, South West Yorkshire Partnership Foundation NHS Trust and Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. Researchers with personal experiences of mental health problems were core members of the research team.

How we did the research

We studied 10 cases across England where new Peer Worker roles were being introduced: three in mental health NHS Trusts, four in the voluntary sector, and three in partnerships between the NHS and either a voluntary sector or Local Authority partner. Two of our voluntary sector cases were projects specifically run for people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities.

What we found in the research

Valuing what is distinctive about the Peer Worker role

Peer Workers are able to build relationships of trust with service users based on shared lived experience, engaging service users with mental health services and role modelling a sense of hope in the future. The different knowledge and different way of working that Peer Workers bring needs to be valued at all levels of the organisation. Where understanding of the role is not widely shared, Peer Workers can become a repository for generic or unwanted tasks, so diluting the role. Parity of pay and opportunities for promotion and career progression demonstrate value.

Maintaining peer identity

Characteristics of shared lived experience and shared identity between Peer Workers and service users vary in each service setting. It is important to support Peer Workers to maintain their peer identity in their work. Over-formalisation of the role – sometimes referred to as 'professionalisation' – can act as a barrier to forming peer-based relationships, including in Black and Minority Ethnic specific services. The language used to describe the role can act as a bridge or a barrier to building peer-based relationships, especially in culturally-specific contexts.

Supporting the individual Peer Worker

Peer Workers should be provided with skilled, dedicated and accessible one-to-one support that includes both task-related management, and support around the specific challenges of maintaining wellbeing and working in a Peer Worker role. Peer Workers value being part of a supportive team, but it can be disempowering where colleagues respond as clinicians to Peer Workers' support needs. Peer support from other Peer Workers should also be readily available.

Evolving organisational structures to support the Peer Worker role

There are a number of key facilitators of Peer Worker role implementation: having a critical mass of Peer Workers in each team; supportive managers at all levels of the organisation; good fit between the values of peer working and the wider strategic agenda of the organisation; flexibility and creativity in policies and procedures. Modifying the Peer Worker role to fit existing organisational structures can result in the Peer Worker role losing its distinctive peer qualities.

Evolving organisational culture to empower Peer Workers

Introducing Peer Workers has the potential to challenge and fundamentally change the culture of service delivery in an organisation. Peer Workers need to be trained and supported to exercise individual control over how they share their lived experience – to manage personally (rather than professionally) defined boundaries in their practice. Peer Workers feel most empowered in their work where there is a culture of valuing and using lived experience throughout the organisation.

For more information
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