

Who is a Peer Supporter?

by Michael Tunnecliffe



The definition of Peer Support is a simple one

Peer Support is a program in which people within a workplace or group are trained to assist their colleagues affected by stress.

People have always supported to each other in stressful situations, because it's part of our human nature and our self-protection as part of a community. Most workplaces and

emergency services groups have supportive networks. Perhaps the questions we should be asking about collegial support are more to do with consistency, timeliness and appropriateness.

The peer supporter is not some super-expert in supporting others. He or she is a workmate, colleague or fellow member of a group or team who has received training in why, when, how and where to give support. Many peer supporters have instinctive support skills and the training assists to validate and refine these. There are also people who are not part of a peer support program or team, but they have these same talents. The benefit of being part of the peer support program comes from having a network of resources, as well as opportunities, to increase inter-personal skills and general knowledge about human behaviour.

There are added advantages which come from peer support. These include the credibility which comes from being part of the job, the informal nature of the support which can lessen the self-consciousness of the person under stress and the fact that peer supporters are there, on location, which makes them accessible to colleagues.

In significantly stressful situations, the aid provided by Mental Health Professions may be valuable, but the immediate support coming from peers is often initially more important to members of the workgroup or team. A peer supporter discussing the option of counselling support is an added advantage to any Employee Assistance Program. They often see colleagues badly affected by stress, but who will not seek the professional help made available because there may be a stigma attached to seeking counselling within that group or occupation. Their personal recommendation to seek employee assistance help can be more influencing than organisational announcements or information provided by senior personnel. There's data which suggest, in some organisations, the introduction of peer support resulted in a significant increase in employee assistance usage over the next few years.

The most important feature of a peer supporter is he or she is a workmate who is concerned about the well-being of colleagues and is available to provide non-judgemental support to that colleague when they need it.



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