



The Wellness Hub's
**Peer Support
Toolkit**

**Peer-to-Peer
Support
Groups**

**Leader-Led
Peer Support
Groups**



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What is Peer Support?

Peer support is a **supportive relationship** between **people who have lived a common experience**.^{1,2}

“A system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement of what is helpful”^{3, 5}

This toolkit outlines a framework to bring peer support to diverse populations and settings, such as long-term care or retirement homes and other congregate care settings.

Four Key Features of Peer Support



Scheduled conversations



Social/emotional support



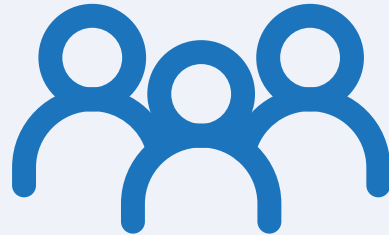
Access to community resources



Ongoing support

Person-centered Peer Support Principles

- Choice and empowerment
- Shared decision-making
- Collaborative and reciprocal
- Recognition of culture and other needs such as accessibility



(Modified from Peers for Progress “Global Evidence for Peer Support: Humanizing Health Care”)⁴

Benefits of Group Peer Support:

Evidence suggests that peer support can result in small improvements in **personal recovery**, which includes better connectedness (such as relationships), hope, identity, meaning, and empowerment. 4 There is also some data to suggest similar small improvements exist in the short term, including at 3 and 6 months after attending a peer support group.^{6,7}

Our understanding of the benefits of peer support is still evolving. While some studies have suggested benefits to peer support, additional research is required to determine the true impact of peer support programs on outcomes relevant to staff, particularly for staff working in long-term care and retirement homes.

Benefits of One-to-One Peer Support:

Like group-led peer support, the benefits of one-to-one peer support are still being studied. There is some evidence on the benefits of one-to-one peer support among roles like case managers and healthcare assistants, but it is not specific to long-term care or retirement homes. Some of these benefits include⁸:

- ✓ Decreased risk of being hospitalized for those receiving peer support
- ✓ Small but significant benefit on recovery of mental and physical health
- ✓ Moderate and significant improvement on empowerment

The benefits of group and one-to-one peer support come down to having a well-trained individual who can successfully lead the support group. Important organizational factors include having⁸:

- ✓ Dedicated peer support training programs
- ✓ A clear description of the process and understanding of peer support
- ✓ Support structures for peer workers (e.g., supervision)

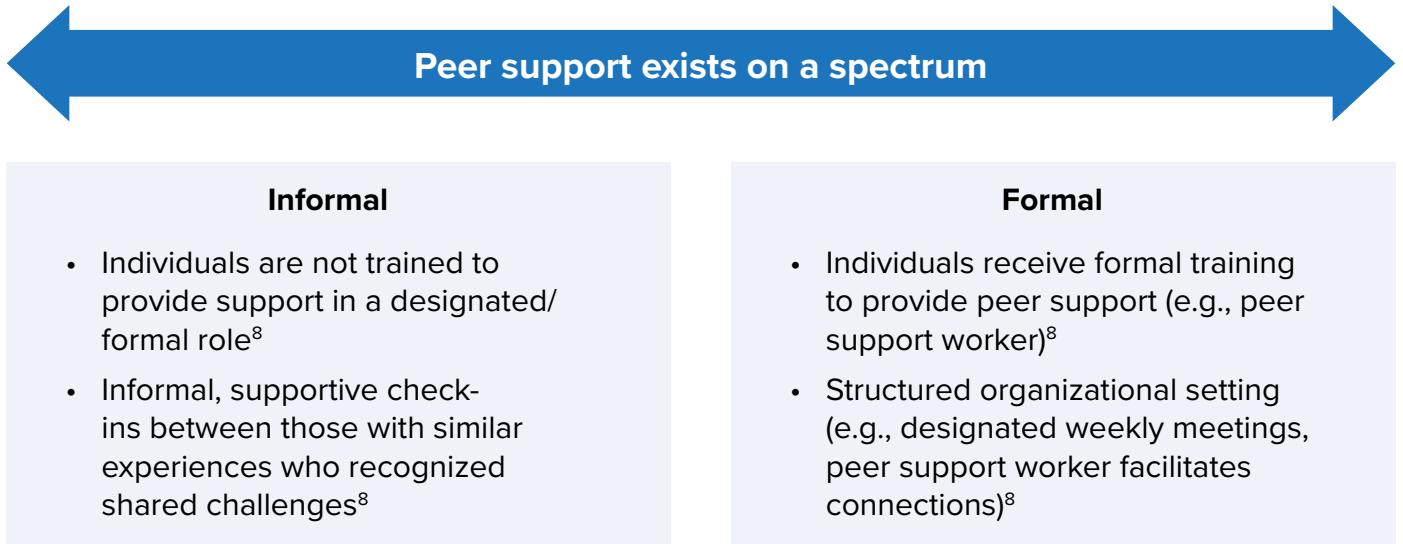
What Peer Support IS and IS NOT:

Peer support is...	Peer support is NOT...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Voluntary✓ Confidential✓ Person-centered✓ Iterative✓ Recovery-focused (i.e., focused on return to health/well-being & not “the problem”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mandatory• Clinical mental health support/ professional therapy/ counselling• Documented• Focused on diagnoses• Focused on giving advice/ problem-solving• A replacement for Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

(Table contents from Alberta Health Services and Mental Health Commission of Canada)^{9,10}

Types of Peer Support

Informal vs. Formal



For a [list of external organizations/programs that offer formal peer support services](#), please see [page 17](#).

Peer-to-Peer Support vs. Leader-Led Peer Support

Peer support groups can also range from peer-to-peer support (i.e., those without a designated leader) to those that are leader-led.

1. Peer-to-peer support (non-facilitated)
2. Leader-led support (facilitated)

Choosing Peer-to-Peer vs. Leader-Led Support:

There may be benefits and drawbacks to both models. The design of a peer support strategy should be based on the unique needs of individuals and context of the organization. Please speak with your staff to decide what works best for your workplace context.

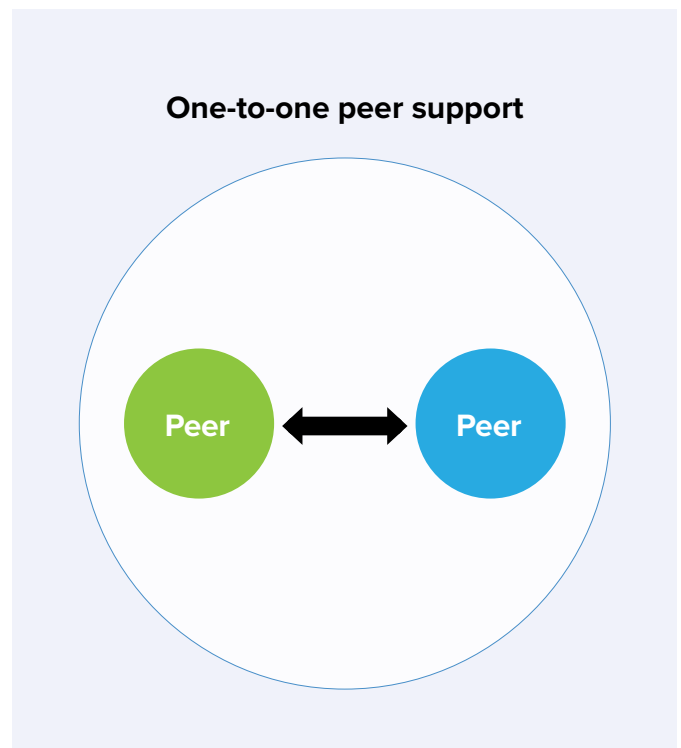
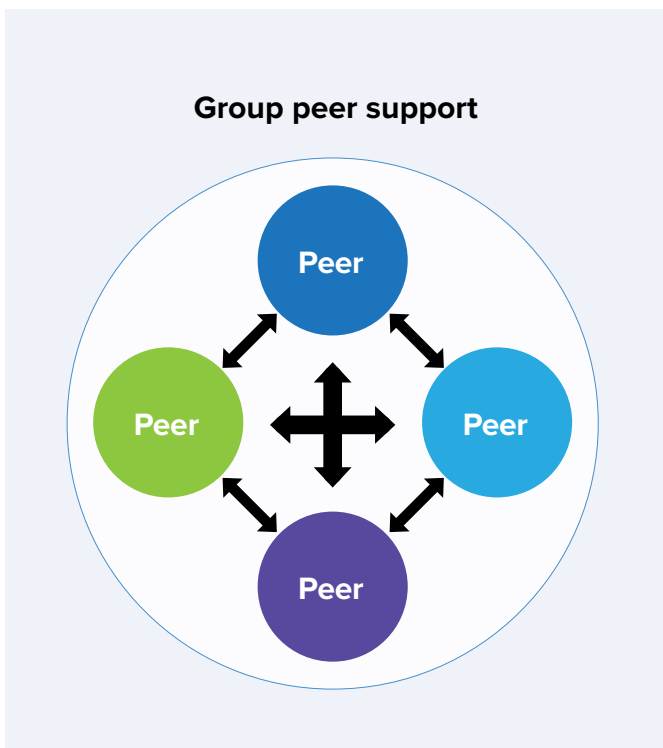
This booklet will now discuss both options in more detail.

Peer-To-Peer Support

In a **peer-to-peer** support group, peers are mostly equal in their positions and responsibilities within an organization, so there are limited power dynamics at play.¹¹ Peer-to-peer learning involves sharing ideas, experiences, and knowledge with your colleagues.¹¹

Peer-to-peer groups are **flexible** with people involved in giving, receiving, and sharing support.¹² They can be **tailored** to both the individuals who are part of the support group and the local community where the peer-to-peer support group takes place.¹¹

There are **two main types** of peer-to-peer support groups:



Group peer support involves three or more individuals coming together to support each other.

One-to-one peer support involves two individuals who may support each other. One-to-one peer support can be very informal – for example, two friends coming together to talk about a shared problem.

Leader-Led Support

A **leader-led** support group has a designated facilitator or facilitators leading a peer support group. Facilitators can emerge from peer support activities as time goes on and people feel more confident in their role.

Facilitators have several **responsibilities**, including:

- ✓ Coordinating/leading the support group
- ✓ Facilitating activities and discussion
- ✓ Upholding safety guidelines and agreements
- ✓ Resolving any potential disagreements

Reflection questions and prompts for leader-led support



- ✓ What type of activity will you be running?
- ✓ What tasks will you be involved in?
- ✓ How much time will be dedicated on a weekly/monthly basis to plan the support group?
- ✓ Are your peers willing and able to join your support group?
- ✓ What processes do you have in place to support the safety of your peers?
- ✓ What makes a good facilitator? (see below)

(Content adapted from Alberta Health Services, Mental Health Commission of Canada, NAV Canada)^{9, 10, 12}

Key Qualities & Attributes of a Peer Support Leader

Qualities of a good peer support leader/mediator¹⁰:

- ✓ Well-respected and liked by their peer group
- ✓ Non-judgmental
- ✓ Open to new ideas or concepts
- ✓ Worked in the organization for a while
- ✓ Considered trustworthy
- ✓ Good communication skills
- ✓ Shows concern for their co-workers and their well-being
- ✓ Has lived experience with the topic(s)
- ✓ Good coping skills & positive outlook
- ✓ Mature
- ✓ Responsible
- ✓ Ability to maintain boundaries and recognize the limitations of what can/cannot be addressed in a peer support group (i.e., when to seek professional supports)
- ✓ Alignment with the core values of peer support

Peer Support Environment

Starting conversations that allow everyone to feel included can be challenging. This can be especially difficult when you do not know each other very well, or you are in a new setting.

Below are some **steps to create a positive peer support environment**:

1

Identify experiences in common:

Peers share similar backgrounds, experiences, interests, and/or goals.^{9,10}

2

Create a safe space:

Peer support has structures in place to create physical and emotional safety.^{9,10}

3

Choice and control:

Peers have the choice to control how they are involved in their peer support.^{9,10}

4

Two-way interactions:

Peers have opportunities to give and receive support.^{9,10}

5

Human connection:

Peers should develop meaningful connections and be able to express themselves freely.^{9,10}

See [page 9-10](#) for more information on each step.

Identify Experiences in Common

What does this mean? In a mental health context, peers share common experiences of social and emotional distress.^{9,10}

Reflection questions and prompts



- ✓ Who is giving and receiving peer support?
- ✓ What are our shared experiences?
- ✓ Do people who join have more than one kind of experience in common? If so, what are they?
- ✓ What are the challenges, if any, of focusing on our shared experiences?
- ✓ Are there people who might not find this peer support helpful?

Create a Safe Space

What does this mean? The aim of peer support is to create physically and emotionally safe spaces to communicate ideas.^{9,10,12}

Reflection questions and prompts



- ✓ Is the area private? Can others listen in on the conversation?
- ✓ Is the room large enough? Are there enough chairs for everyone?
- ✓ Is the location accessible? Are there accessible toilets?
- ✓ Have accommodations been considered and implemented to support individuals with differing abilities (e.g., those who are hearing or visually impaired) or whose first language is not English?
- ✓ Does the location allow everyone to follow current IPAC practices?
- ✓ Is there access to a kitchen or refreshments/water?
- ✓ Is there space for people to take time out of their day to attend?
- ✓ Are there ground rules? If so, were they developed by consensus and have all peers agreed to them? How often are they revisited? What happens if someone breaks one of the ground rules?

Example to create a group agreement for “safety”

Peer agreement on what will help us work together^{9,10}



Confidentiality

- ✓ Only share what you personally feel comfortable sharing
- ✓ Do not share personal information about others without permission



Communication

- ✓ Try not to monopolize the discussion
- ✓ Listen carefully to what others have to say



Respect

- ✓ Challenge the view, not the person
- ✓ Respect individual boundaries
- ✓ Resolve disagreements within the group

Choice and Control

What does this mean? Peers must be able to choose whether and how they participate in a peer support activity.^{9,10}

Reflection questions and prompts



- ✓ How comfortable are peers leaving and entering a peer support group?
- ✓ Is it okay to not say anything during the peer support group?
- ✓ Can peers decide how the peer support group is run?
- ✓ Are there ways to provide feedback anonymously?
- ✓ How are boundaries discussed? For example, what are peers comfortable sharing and not sharing at the present moment?

Two-way interactions

What does this mean? Peer support is something that people do together.^{9,10} It is a type of support that occurs when people share a common experience and involves two-way communication, which allows for mutual learning, understanding, and support.

Reflection questions and prompts



- ✓ What opportunities are there for everyone to share?
- ✓ What are some other ways people can contribute if they do not feel comfortable talking in a group?
- ✓ How can we ensure that new members feel comfortable enough to contribute?
- ✓ How often do people interrupt each other when speaking?
- ✓ What steps can be taken if someone is interrupted?
- ✓ Do we need training or discussion to help develop listening skills?

Human connection

What does this mean? People involved in peer support actively acknowledge that they have a specific connection with each other based on their shared experiences.^{9,10}

Reflection questions and prompts



- ✓ Does everyone feel respected when they take part in peer support?
- ✓ What support is available to help people share difficult experiences if they want to?
- ✓ How can peers show that they understand or are inspired when someone is sharing their experiences?
- ✓ How do we build trust between peers?
- ✓ Are our peer support activities culturally appropriate and accessible?

Steps for Developing a Peer Support Strategy

1. **Ensure all management/leadership** of your organization is **informed & supportive** of initiating a peer support strategy
 - Staff may need time in their day for peer support
 - Support from management is crucial for uptake^{8, 11, 12}
2. **Provide staff education on** peer support to increase understanding & awareness^{9, 12, 13}
3. **Survey your staff** to assess their interest level & preference for structure, format, topics, etc.
 - Example: Anonymous online survey^{9, 12, 13}
4. Operationalize the peer support process if there is sufficient interest & resources to do so^{9, 12, 13}

Key Considerations for operationalizing a peer support strategy:

What are the goals of the peer support strategy?

- Examples: to direct and increase staff use of employee financial assistance program (EFAP), decrease levels of burnout, decrease rates of mental health leave^{9, 12, 13}

Who will be invited to participate?

- Frontline staff only
- Role-specific (e.g., personal support workers [PSWs])^{9, 12, 13}
- etc...

When will the sessions occur?

- Regular intervals (e.g., monthly) vs. on-demand (i.e., after stressor like a resident death)
- Drop-in basis (e.g., during a planned staff Wellness Day)^{9, 12, 13}

How long will the sessions be?

What topic(s) will the sessions focus on?

- Consider topics that staff need support with & those that are appropriate to discuss in these sessions
- For example, a topic like grief may be easier for people to discuss in an informal session
- Examples of potential topics:
 - Maintaining compassionate care
 - Approaches for resident and family conflicts
 - Behavioural challenges in resident care
 - Feeling underappreciated in your role^{9, 12, 13}

Who will facilitate the sessions?

- Recruitment of mediators can range between selection by management, nomination by peers, and volunteering
- Consider whether mediators should be different staff types or the same (e.g., if the group is for nursing staff, should the mediator be a nurse or not?)
- Training (if necessary)^{9, 12, 13}

What are the ground rules for the peer support program?

- Before the program begins, everyone should be involved in developing the ground rules, be aware of them, and agree to follow them to help ensure safety.^{9, 12, 13}

How will we assess the impact of these sessions?

- Evaluation approach will depend on goals of peer support strategy
- May include engagement with peer support strategy (e.g., # of registered staff), EAP usage, sick leave, employee feedback, productivity & engagement at work^{9, 12, 13}

Tips for a Successful Peer Support Strategy:

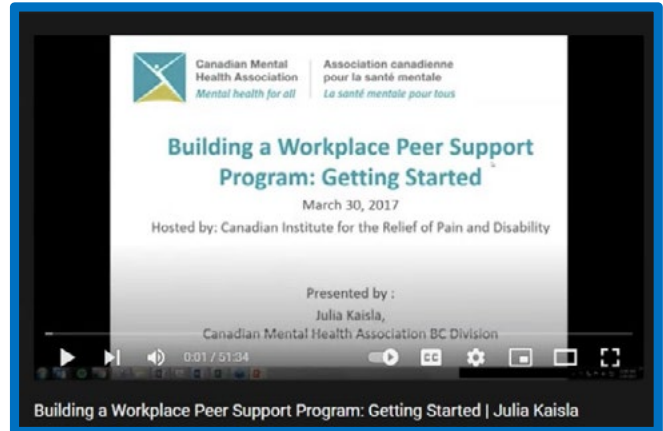
- ✓ Create guidelines around confidentiality that must be maintained.^{9, 12, 13}
 - Consider co-developing a privacy agreement in the first session.
- ✓ Consider equity, diversity, and inclusion principles while designing your strategy.^{9, 12, 13}

For example:

- Ensure that adequate consideration has been given for those with differing abilities, or whose first language is not English.
 - Select meeting times and locations that do not interfere with religious practices or create a barrier for those from various faith groups to attend.
 - Acknowledge the land and historical injustice/racism.
 - Ensure that those from racialized communities feel comfortable and safe participating.
 - Openly welcome members of the LGBTQ2+ community and normalize the use of pronouns at the outset of meetings or on name badges.
- ✓ Ensure that clear boundaries are established and implement check-ins to avoid dependency in peer support relationships.^{9, 12, 13}
 - ✓ Ensure that managerial/organizational support is clearly communicated so that staff have the time, support, and encouragement to participate and recognize that management care for their well-being.^{9, 12, 13}
 - ✓ Request anonymous staff feedback on the program regularly and update the program to best meet staff needs.^{9, 12, 13}

- ✓ Ensure that a quiet, private space is available for the peer support to take place.^{9, 12, 13}

For more information on how to implement a peer support program in your organization, please see the following **additional resources**:



- Canadian Mental Health Association video explaining step-wise instructions for implementing a peer support strategy:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDYUeCc7AGE>



- Alberta Health Services article outlines the steps employers can take to promote peer support and tips on where to start:
<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/healthinfo/AddictionsSubstanceAbuse/if-wrk-its-our-bus-workplace-peer-support.pdf>

Case Study of Peer Support in Ontario Long-Term Care: INNPOT

What is INNPOT?

A debriefing intervention (called ‘INNPOT’) was used to help staff manage their grief.¹⁴

INNPOT Stage	Goal for Stage
Introduction	Acknowledge death of resident & impact on staff
Need to say	Provide staff opportunity to discuss any aspect of resident, their death, and impact of death
Need to do	Determine what might need to be done to manage or support staff through next few shifts (either at individual or group level)
Plan	Solidify plan for each individual or the group
Understanding	Opportunity for staff to acknowledge experience, normalize reactions, and promote sense of collegial support
Thank you	Close session, acknowledge efforts, promote emotional stability and additional support (if applicable)

Who was involved?

- **Facilitators:** trained group of frontline staff who were on-site at the time of death & met the recruitment criteria:
 - Expressed interest in facilitating
 - Able to personally relate
 - Comfortable in leadership role
 - Respected and trusted among peers
 - Not a supervisor (to promote a safe environment)
- **Management:** supported by acknowledging grieving process / validating staff loss but were not in attendance
- **Attendees:** PSWs, nurses, life enrichment and dietary staff

When did the sessions take place?

- As soon as possible following a resident’s death, considering priority of care

What were the ground rules for the sessions?

- ✓ Voluntary attendance
- ✓ No one is forced to talk, but frontline staff are encouraged to participate from start to finish
- ✓ Everyone treated equally
- ✓ There are no right or wrong answers
- ✓ No interruptions permitted (e.g., cell phones)
- ✓ Differences in opinion are expected and valued

What were the outcomes of the INNPOT intervention?

Staff felt that the INNPOT intervention...

- Supported their self-care
- Supported closure
- Gave them an opportunity to openly acknowledge & process their grief

Since management was supportive of the intervention, it provided a unique opportunity **to promote individual well-being and organizational culture change**.¹⁴

For additional details or to read the full article, please click here:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244016665888>

Please note: this evidence is from one case study and was not evaluated in a randomized trial (which is considered the most reliable way to study a particular intervention or effect)

Starting Conversations

The following are some suggestions for peer support discussion questions and prompts. Please note that you may tailor the prompts based on the unique characteristics of your organization and its employees.^{1, 10}

Important Reminder to share before any discussions:

The peer support group is a safe space to discuss wellness and mental health

To start discussion about how the job may affect overall well-being/mental health

Use these Discussion Prompts:

- ✓ What is your energy level like after a day at work?
- ✓ Has your appetite changed since the pandemic?
- ✓ How has your relationship with your family and/or friends changed since the pandemic?
- ✓ Have any of your outside commitments suffered because of work?
- ✓ How would you rate your overall mood when you are at work, with 10 being very happy and 0 being very unhappy?
 - If you need mental health support, please seek help from a mental health professional.
 - Please see here for more information on seeking mental health services: <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/looking-for-mental-health-services>

To start a discussion about what worries your peers may have while they are at work

Use these Discussion Prompts:

- ✓ What worries you the most when at work?
- ✓ Can you tell us the last time you left work feeling upset?
- ✓ What do you struggle with the most at work?

To start a conversation about whether your peers feel like they are a member of the team

Use these Discussion Prompts:

- ✓ Do you feel valued as a team member?
- ✓ Do you feel fulfilled in your role here?
- ✓ Do you feel like you are respected?
- ✓ Do you feel like your voice is heard here?

To start a discussion about how the workplace/employer can better support your peers

Use these Discussion Prompts:

- ✓ Could you explain a time when you felt very supported at work?
- ✓ Do you feel like we have a supportive culture here?
- ✓ Do you feel like you have the necessary tools to do your job properly?
- ✓ Do you feel confident at work?
- ✓ How often would you say you felt positive about your mental health - all the time, very often, sometimes, rarely, never?
- ✓ Do you feel like you have a good work-life balance here?
- ✓ What could improve your work-life balance?
- ✓ Do you ever feel overworked or underworked here as an employee?
- ✓ How much enjoyment do you get from your job?

To start a discussion about what or who positively influences your peers' mental health

Use these Discussion Prompts:

- ✓ What would a perfect day look like to you as an employee?
- ✓ What makes you feel excited as an employee?
- ✓ What do you think your main strengths are at work?
- ✓ What makes you feel happy at work?
- ✓ Is there anything that you look forward to when coming to work?
- ✓ Who makes you feel like a valued employee and why?
- ✓ What are you grateful for at work?
- ✓ Whom do you find the most inspiring at work?
- ✓ What gives you hope when at work?

Formalized Peer Support Programs

If you are interested in developing a **formalized Peer Support Program** in your setting, you can leverage the following resources:

*Note: Additional research is needed to further clarify the benefits of Peer Support Programs. We encourage all users to evaluate if this approach is the best fit for your organization. Check with your organization to discuss any funding opportunities to support formal peer support options.

- **Realist Evaluation of Schwartz Rounds® for Enhancing the Delivery of Compassionate Healthcare: Understanding How They Work, for Whom, and in What Contexts**
 - Research article about how Schwartz Rounds work, for whom, and in what contexts
 - The article states that Schwartz Rounds provide staff with a space to talk and support one another.
 - For more information, please read the research article at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34275468/>
- **The Schwartz Centre Rounds: Supporting Mental Health Workers with the Emotional Impact of Their Work**
 - A study that evaluates the Schwartz Rounds offered to mental health services
 - Schwartz Rounds are valuable because they provide the opportunity to express emotions, share experiences, and provide support to colleagues. Schwartz Rounds are a positive intervention in mental healthcare settings.
 - For more information, please read the research article at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32413204/>
- **The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare**
 - Sessions involve a panel of diverse individuals (physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, allied health professionals, and chaplains) who present on an identified case or a topic. Caregivers in the audience then share their own experiences on the case or broader issues that are relevant to the discussion.
 - Provides research-based strategies, tools, and the support that caregivers need to create and sustain cultures of compassion
 - Membership fee required to receive support in running facilitated Schwartz Rounds
 - Visit this website for more information: <https://www.theschwartzcenter.org/programs/schwartz-rounds/>
- **Canadian Patient Safety Institute**
 - Includes detailed guidance and many Canadian-based examples of successful formal peer support programs for healthcare workers
 - For more information, please read the following article: <https://www.patientsafetyinstitute.ca/en/toolsResources/Creating-a-Safe-Space-Psychological-Safety-of-Healthcare-Workers/Documents/Manuscript%20Documents/Creating%20a%20Safe%20Space%20Manuscript.pdf>

- **Mental Health Commission of Canada**
 - Provides an overview of guidelines for formalized peer support training
 - For more information, review this information sheet: https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/drupal/peer_support_guidelines.pdf

- **Peers for Progress: Global Evidence for Peer Support – Humanizing Health Care**
 - Detailed overview of evidence for peer support, cost-effectiveness and financial considerations, key principles, case examples, and guidance for program tailoring
 - To review the guide, please see this website: <https://www.ipfcc.org/bestpractices/global-evidence-for-peer-support.pdf>

- **Canadian Medical Association Facilitating Peer Support Guide**
 - A guide on how to provide formal/informal peer support, in person & virtually, one-on-one or in groups, to create a psychologically safe workplace
 - To review this resource, please visit this website: <https://www.cma.ca/physician-wellness-hub/content/peer-support-guide>

- **Peer Support Canada**
 - Repository of many excellent peer support resources, including certification/training for peer supporters, family peer supporters, and peer support mentors
 - To visit this website, please use this link: <https://peersupportcanada.ca/>

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Appendix A

Core Values of Peer Support:

Note: Each organization should create/tailor its own list of guiding values and use them as checkpoints to ensure adherence to the program goals. Some examples are provided in the table below.	
Value(s)	Description
Self-determination, self-resiliency, and equality	Each person knows the path towards recovery that is best for them; it is the peer's choice if they want to participate in a peer support relationship.
Self-compassion	Empathy increases self-compassion, minimizes moral injury, and reduces stigma around seeking help.
Mutuality and empathy	Those involved in peer support can benefit from reciprocity of the relationship and a better understanding that comes from similar lived experiences.
Recovery, hope, and empowerment	There is power in hope and positivity that can aid in recovery.
Integrity, authenticity, and trust	Confidentiality, reliability, and ethical behavior are honoured in every interaction.
Dignity, respect, and social inclusion	Acknowledge the intrinsic worth of all individuals, regardless of background, preferences, or situation.
Health and wellness	Acknowledge all aspects of a healthy and full life.

(Table contents from Alberta Health Services and Mental Health Commission of Canada)^{8,9}

Appendix B

Peer Support Planning Checklist

1. A) What type of peer support will you implement?
 - Informal
 - Formal
- B)
 - Peer-to-peer support
 - Leader-led peer support
- C)
 - Group peer support
 - One-to-one peer support
2. Is site management/leadership aware of the peer support strategy?
 - Yes
 - No
3. Have you provided staff with education on peer support?
 - Yes
 - No
4. Have you surveyed staff on their preferences for the session (i.e., topic, length, structure)?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Have you surveyed staff on their preferences for the session (i.e., topic, length

6. Who will be invited to the session?

7. How long will the session be?

8. What topic(s) will be covered in the session?

9. Who will facilitate the session?

10. What are the ground rules for the session?

11. How will you assess the impact of the sessions?