

## RECOVERY AND PEER SUPPORT

Many of us will face personal hardships (e.g., adverse experiences, chronic and severe physical illnesses, substantial pain) in our lives, sometimes resulting in mental health problems (e.g., sadness, anxiety, fear), difficulties with developing and sustaining relationships (e.g., social isolation), stress-related physical symptoms (e.g., problems with sleeping), and “personal critiques” in how we think about ourselves (e.g., “I’m worthless”). Recovery – involving an “individualized” process – helps us to “reclaim” our identities and sense of self-worth, to once again take the lead on charting the direction of our lives.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) identified key recovery components, one of which is *peer support*. Recovery is person-centered, self-directed, holistic, non-linear, and strengths-based rather than problem-based. It is grounded in respect, personal responsibility in charting one’s recovery journey, and hope.

RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE. It can be promoted (1) by receiving peer support, engaging in meaningful activities, contributing to the community, and rediscovering a sense of purpose in life, (2) by managing and reducing stress, and (3) by receiving trauma-informed care and mental health services (e.g., counseling, case management).

For individuals who have struggled with significant life challenges and hardships, benefits of recovery and remaining well can be tremendous. Benefits include improved quality of life, increased social connectedness, employability and becoming employed, and resilience.

This article focuses on peer support, which has been linked with recovery. Professional mental health services complement but do not replace peer support.

### **What is Peer Support?**

Peer support is grounded in supportive relationships with others who have had similar lived experiences (e.g., trauma, mental health challenges), offering a focus on strengths, acceptance, fellowship, a give-and-take dynamic, hope, and socialization. Peers support each other in identifying attainable goals, making independent decisions, being empowered, and learning to find their own way. Peers “get it,” empathize, offer validation to what is being said about experiences, and understand the challenges of navigating a fragmented mental health system. In contrast with relationships with professionals, there are no “us versus them” issues, no explicit power differentials, and no overwhelming feelings that “they don’t get it – I’m alone.”

Peer support activities can involve “checking in” with each other, chatting, and listening; leading and engaging in group activities; sharing thoughts about self-help strategies and ways that have worked to remain well; education, outreach, and advocacy (e.g., stigma can be reduced); mentoring; and building and strengthening healthy relationships. Support can be emotional, instrumental or informational in nature (SAMHSA).

Trish, a certified peer support person, noted that peer support is “not to help solve problems so much but to be with you [the peer] as you don’t have to face them alone.” The process involves “never judging,” providing “feedback” rather than advice “when requested,” and “always loving with compassion.” She indicated that “as we [those providing peer support] listen, we also learn. As we give, we take. Everybody wins.”

Peer supporters offer hope, exemplifying that recovery happens, that it is within reach.

Drawing from what she has learned personally, Stacey indicated that “when family and friends stretch to try and understand my struggles, I feel unheard and unloved since they have no reference to my pain. Their advice falls hollow. My peer supporter, however, does understand – through her life experiences. No longer do I feel isolated, alone or misunderstood when I share authentically and trustingly. I feel heard.”

SAMHSA reported that peer support is effective. Benefits include increased confidence, hope, empathy, engagement in self-care, sense of empowerment, and social functioning. Also, peer support has linked with decreased depression, with lower rates of psychiatric hospitalizations, and with decreased signs of psychosis or “being out of touch with reality” (e.g., hallucinations).

### **Pathways Peer Support Program**

Pathways Peer Support, under the auspices of Catholic Charities Services, reaches individuals – aged 18 and older – facing life challenges, who believe that they could benefit from programming offered. Pathways receives funding from the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County (MHRB).

Group activities are grounded in trust, mutual respect, and confidentiality. Groups focus on sewing (an initiative which was developed and expanded using grant funding awarded from the Peg Foundation), movement/mindfulness, meditation, writing for recovery, emotional blackmail, healthy cooking, artistic expressions, and more.

Pathways Peer Support is located at the Professional Building, 34 W. 2<sup>nd</sup> St., Ashland, regularly open from 10 am – 3 pm, on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. Calendars and newsletters are posted on Pathways Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/PathwaysPeerSupport>). For more information or to request that calendars be mailed, contact Kala Brean, LSW, or Deb Brookshire, MA, LSW, LPCC-S, CTP, Program Administrator (419-496-0140 X 25).

**For more information** about recovery (e.g., “Our Human Community” was a resource used when writing this article), visit the MHRB website ([www.ashland.mhrb](http://www.ashland.mhrb)).

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