

Peer Support

Peer support is the assistance and support that people with prior knowledge and lived experience are able to give to each other. It is a system of giving and receiving help founded on the principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful.

In-house peer support programs are highly effective at helping individuals deal with a wide range of issues, but specifically mental health issues. Those seeking help feel less stigma and discrimination and are more likely to reach out for support if they can talk with people who understand their situation and are trusted at a peer level.

Why is peer support important?

There are many benefits resulting from peer support including:

- Linked to heightened self esteem and increased levels of self-efficacy and is part of a psychologically health workplace
- Provides a confidential and safe environment for authentic conversations about mental health or work-related stress
- Reduces stigma about reaching out for help, or disclosing you might not be at your best
- Promotes help seeking and demonstrates positive behaviours such as self-care which enhances mental health

What can we do to improve our peer support skills?

Informal peer support has been around for centuries and is provided by family, friends and the community.

In recent years, the sharing of lived experience has been increasingly recognised as an integral, complementary part of the recovery journey in mental health.

Here are some of the actions you can take to build a positive peer support program:

- Provide training in peer support to your workforce – while everyone can play a role, a trained, supported and aware peer support network is invaluable
- Check in with your co-workers on a regular basis and not just after emergencies. Ask how they are coping with their workload or with their work-life balance. The more frequent the check ins, the more this becomes ‘normal’ conversation
- Keep an eye out for possible issues in your colleagues as not everyone finds it easy to ask for help or open a conversation. If you notice anything, ask if they are OK or want to chat
- Unless there is a risk to the health or wellbeing of your co-worker or others, respect their confidentiality
- If a co-worker does want to talk with you or disclose something to you, make sure you are in a private place so they feel safe to share whatever is on their mind
- Every now and then people just want someone to vent to. When someone feels this way, just listen to them carefully and respectfully, and acknowledge that what they are going through must be challenging or stressful
- Sometimes the best thing you can do is listen. You don’t need to have answers or provide advice – just lending an ear at the right time can be very powerful
- There are many signs that someone might not be coping, here are few to keep an eye out for:
 - Changes in personal grooming or standard of dress
 - Loss of appetite or change of appetite
 - Appearing fatigued, or indicating they are not sleeping well
 - Appearing distracted, irritable or making errors
- Make sure your peer supporters and all of your workforce know what support resources are available to them. This may be your Employee Assistance Provider or other service offered by your employer