Peer Supporter Training & Competency Guide

Tip Sheet | Peer Support | Competencies

20-25 min read

How to use this tipsheet

The information below is intended to help you identify the recommended skills, training and attributes that the members of a Peer Support Program will need to fulfil their role as a Peer Supporter or as part of a Peer Support Team.

Who is this Tipsheet For?

This tipsheet is for workplaces developing or improving a Peer Support Program. It supports leaders, coordinators, staff, and anyone interested in becoming a Peer Supporter by outlining the recommended skills, attributes, and training needed to build a safe and effective peer support team.

What is Peer Support?

Peer support is the process of giving and receiving non-clinical assistance for mental health, substance use, or other personal or professional challenges. A Peer Supporter may use their lived experience to offer understanding, encouragement, and hope. They do not provide medical advice or diagnoses. Instead, they listen, support, and guide peers toward appropriate professional or community resources when needed.



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Adapted from the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families and the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (2025). The full Atlas institute guidelines are available at: atlasveterans.ca/peer-support-guidelines.

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Ten Core Values and Principles of Peer Support

The following core values and principles are based on the Peer support guidelines for Veterans, military, public safety personnel and their Families developed by the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families and the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (2025). The full guidelines are available at: atlasveterans.ca/peer-support-guidelines.

Core Values

Core values reflect the shared beliefs that shape how peer support is delivered. They influence program design, policies, and how peer supporters interact with others. The following ten values come from research on peer support for Veterans, military members, PSP, and their families. Atlas and CIPSRT formed the Peer Support Community Network whereby members reviewed and endorsed the following values during their guideline development.

The values serve as a starting point for programs and peer supporters. They encourage reflection on what effective peer support looks like, while leaving room for programs to add or adapt values to fit their needs.

Principles of Practice

Principles of practice show how values can turn into real actions. They guide policies, procedures, and day-to-day behaviour in peer support programs. The principles are intentionally broad. They invite programs to adapt them into concrete practices that match their context and the people they serve.



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Ten Core Values and Principles of Peer Support

Core Value	Principle of Practice
Competence	Peer supporters have the skills, cultural awareness, and lived experience to help others. Programs set clear criteria for selecting supporters and offer strong training and supervision.
Confidentiality	Peer supporters protect private information and only share it when required. Programs have clear confidentiality rules and consequences for breaking them.
Empathy	Peer supporters try to understand what the other person is experiencing. They respond with care, sensitivity, and respect for the person's challenges.
Health and wellness of peer supporters	Supporting others can affect a supporter's own health. Programs promote self-care, model healthy behaviours, and offer extra resources so supporters can stay well.
Integrity and authenticity	Peer supporters act out of genuine care and a desire to help, not personal gain. Honesty and sincerity guide every interaction.
Mutuality	Shared experiences help strengthen the connection between supporters and peers. Supporters and peers build relationships based on mutual benefit.
Non-judgement	Peer supporters help reduce stigma and encourage people to seek support. They do not judge those needing help and respect the person's right to make their own decisions.

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Ten Core Values and Principles of Peer Support (Cont).

Core Value	Principle of Practice
Self-determination	People succeed when they choose their own path. Peer supporters help peers explore choices and build confidence in their own decisions.
Trauma-informed practice	Programs understand that trauma affects people differently. Peer supporters respond in ways that prioritize physical, emotional, and psychological safety and offer choice and control.
Trust	Trust is essential. Peer supporters build it through openness, reliability, and high-quality support. Programs reinforce trust by offering credible and safe services.



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Peer Supporter Competencies

The following are a set of core competencies that were identified in a report on Peer Support Training prepared by Addictions and Mental Health Ontario and the Canadian Mental Health Commission Guidelines for Practice and Training of Peer Support. (Sunderland & Mishkin, 2016). These competencies should be considered when selecting staff to be members of your peer support program team.

Core Competencies	Associated Skills
Lived Experience	• Ability to relate to experiences and challenges experienced as a result of exposure to trauma • Ability to detect when their own stressors and triggers may result in unhealthy or unwanted attitudes or behaviours and a willingness to request assistance • Ability to demonstrate a sense of hopefulness and strong belief in recovery • Personal commitment to self-care through stress management and resiliency strategies
Interpersonal Skills	• Ability to demonstrate active listening skills, valuing peers as equal • Ability to engage peers and encourage action • Demonstrate warm, empathetic and non-judgmental behaviours and actions towards others • Encourages peer to explore options and co-create solutions • Ability to appropriately share their own experiences in a manner that provides insight and assistance to instill hopefulness and focus on recovery

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Peer Supporter Competencies

Core Competencies	Associated Skills
Critical Thinking	• Demonstrate ability to identify issues or problems and explore and evaluate information to guide the development of a resolution • Encourage open dialogue focused on improved understanding of issues or problems, and/or potential solutions • Ability to determine individual needs (talking vs. action to initiate change) • Ability to detect what type of support is needed and work with the peer to explore alternative paths and/or knowing when to engage additional resources or help
Teamwork and Collaboration	• Clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and knows when to engage additional resources for support • Understands available support systems and how they can help • Ability to collaborate with others to solve problems and achieve results • Treats peers with respect and accepts individual differences • Keeps people informed and facilitates conflict resolution • Encourages peers to fully participate
Ethics and Reliability	• High regard for emotional and physical safety of peers while ensuring confidentiality is protected and all interactions aim to achieve emotional and physical safety • Demonstrates unconditional respect for their peers, their time and their needs • Commits to ongoing learning and personal development to fulfill their role as a peer supporter

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Peer Support Team Member Knowledge and Training

The following outline the suggested steps to help prepare Peer Support Team members for their role. These steps can guide your planning as you design or strengthen your workplace Peer Support Program.

Steps to Develop a Peer Support Training Plan

1. Identify the specific needs of your Peer Support Team using the competencies listed above and the training content below.
2. Define the desired outcomes of the training program.
3. Determine what content should be tailored to your organization (see Table 1 below).
4. Identify potential training providers.
5. Review available training programs.
6. Identify any additional training content that needs to be created.
7. Choose the most appropriate training delivery method.
8. Develop a schedule and communicate it to participants.
9. Deliver the training and implement the program.
10. Evaluate the program and make improvements as needed.

Select Appropriate Training Topics

The tables below outline the key training topics and steps needed to prepare Peer Support Team members for their role. They are intended to help workplaces plan, organize, and deliver training that supports safe, effective peer support.

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Table 1: Peer Support Training Topics

Topic	Learning Objectives
Topic 1: Psychological First Aid and Peer Support Team Roles and Responsibilities	• Peer support program overview • Core competencies of peer support team members • Roles and Responsibilities of Peer Support Team members • Fundamentals of peer support – hope and recovery • Peer support values and ethics, understanding how the support program works and specific conduct • Negotiating limits and boundaries within a peer support relationship • Understanding recovery and resiliency • Understanding how secondary trauma can impact the peer support team member and possible signs and strategies for self-management • Protocols for when to follow organizational protocols to seek additional support • How to conduct a peer support meeting • Demonstrate peer support team skills such as de-escalation of crisis, communication skills
Topic 2: Communication, Facilitation and Decision-Making Skills	• Active listening, probing, paraphrasing and providing feedback • Conflict resolution • Ensuring peer needs are being addressed • Goal setting • Understanding body language • Concepts and methods to promote peer-to-peer effectiveness • Using strategies to calm stressful situations • Identifying and mitigating potential misunderstandings and/or barriers to communication • Strategies for creating an environment of trust

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Table 1: Peer Support Training Topics (Cont).

Topic	Learning Objectives
Topic 2 Continued: Communication, Facilitation and Decision-Making Skills	• Modelling and providing individual empowerment strategies • Building trust in relationships and supporting another person through change • Balancing effective strategies with authentic and empathetic listening • Celebrating progress or success
Topic 3: Crisis Intervention	• Understand available supports and organizational protocols • Understand how to recognize the severity of a crisis and follow necessary life-saving protocols • Support peers in a manner that ensures safety and helps develop a plan and more hopeful outlook • How to explore options for community support • Suicide training and intervention • Mental health laws and human rights laws • How to collaborate with community supports and traditional care services
Topic 4: Anti-Stigma Practices	• Identifying and understanding stigma • Understand the effects of stigma and how to develop mitigation strategies • Understand the impacts of internalized stigma and how it may impact peer support, and developing mitigation strategies • Recognize the impact of social exclusion and how to support community participation • Understand the importance of, and approaches to, respecting diversity and cultural differences in peer support programs • Understand each individual has a unique perception of the world

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Recommended Selection Process for Peer Supporters

Recruiting Peer Supporters involves several coordinated steps. Consider the following structure for selecting Peer Supporters:

1

Managerial Consultation

Leadership reviews program needs, identifies gaps, and confirms whether new peer supporters are required.

2

Peer Nomination and Selection

Potential peer supporters are identified—often through nominations from colleagues or supervisors—and then screened for suitability.

3

Psychological Screening

Candidates may participate in a clinical assessment where available to ensure they are emotionally ready for the role and able to take on peer support responsibilities safely.

4

Panel Interviews

A multidisciplinary panel interviews shortlisted candidates to assess their communication skills, lived experience, boundaries, and readiness for peer support work.

5

Crisis Intervention Training and Other Relevant Trainings

Selected candidates receive training in crisis response and other core peer support skills.

6

Employee and Family Orientation

Both the peer supporter and their family receive orientation to ensure expectations, time demands, and support structures are clear.

7

Program Implementation

The new peer supporter begins their role within the program, supported by established policies and procedures.

8

Coaching and Mentoring

Ongoing coaching ensures peer supporters continue to grow, strengthen their skills, and receive support as they provide support to others.

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Conclusion

This guide provides the foundation you need to begin or strengthen your Peer Support Program. Using these competencies and training topics, your workplace can build a team that offers safe, respectful, and effective support.

Every step you take helps create a workplace where people feel seen, heard, and supported.





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