Protecting & Supporting the Wellbeing of Peer Supporters:

The Importance of Self Care

Stress Management | PSP | Leaders | Peer Supporters | Worksheet

20 min read

Introduction

Providing peer support can be meaningful and rewarding — but it also comes with unique pressures. Peer supporters listen to difficult experiences, respond to crises, and may feel a strong sense of responsibility for others' wellbeing. Hearing about stressful and traumatic experiences may also remind peer supporters of experiences they have had, with the potential for emotional reactions (e.g., numbing out; intense anger). Over time, this emotional load can affect their own health, resilience, and capacity to continue in the role.

Importance of This Resource

Caring for peer supporters is essential for maintaining a safe, ethical, and effective peer support program, preventing burnout, and supporting resilience in those providing support. By supporting those who support, peer support can be a lasting and sustainable fixture within an organization.

Special Note

This tip sheet is informed by evidence-based peer support guidelines and modelled from the Peer Support Guidelines developed by the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families, the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT), and partners (2025). It reflects best-practice guidance on supporting the wellbeing, safety, and sustainability of peer supporters.

To support this work, **Appendix A includes a Personal Self-Care Planning Worksheet** that peer supporters can use to reflect on their needs and identify practical, personalized self-care strategies, with support from their organization.

Purpose of This Tipsheet

The purpose of this tip sheet is to help organizations care for and support peer supporters by outlining practical, evidence-informed actions that promote their wellbeing, safety, and sustainability in the role.

This resource reinforces the **shared responsibility** between peer supporters and organizations for self-care and boundary setting, supervision and wellness monitoring, access to appropriate mental health supports, and the ability to take breaks or step back when needed.

Appendix A provides a structured worksheet to assist peer supporters in developing personalized self-care strategies that can be discussed, reviewed, and adjusted over time as part of safe peer support practice.

This Tip Sheet is For. . .

- Peer Supporters
- Workplace leaders
- Peer support program coordinators
- Supervisors responsible for overseeing peer support roles
- Organizations that design, implement, or maintain peer support programs

Disclaimer

This resource is not a diagnostic or treatment tool. It is instead intended to support reflection and conversation and should be used to complement — not replace — professional supports. You are encouraged to experiment with what feels relevant and to build and maintain the healthy habits you learn through practice and reuse.



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What is Self-Care?

Self-care refers to the actions people take to protect their wellbeing and manage stress.

For peer supporters, it can mean recognizing personal limits, setting healthy boundaries, and using everyday strategies that help manage emotional load and stay well over time. Self-care does not mean "toughing it out".

Self-care is often the first way people respond to stress or everyday health concerns, with many health challenges being managed without formal medical care. Knowing when self-care is enough — and when additional support is needed — is an important self-care skill.

Self-care is best understood as a set of interconnected areas that work together.

These areas can include:

- Understanding your own health and knowing when to seek help
- Supporting mental and emotional well-being
- Staying physically active
- Eating in ways that support energy and recovery
- Reducing or managing health risks
- Maintaining good daily habits and routines
- Understanding which coping strategies help you and which do not
- Knowing one's own limits and setting appropriate boundaries on potentially excessive harmful activities and interaction
- Exercising the same self-compassion for yourself that you would for a family member or close friend
- Using health supports and services appropriately when needed

For peer supporters, self-care is a foundational part of safe and sustainable practice. It helps protect well-being, supports good judgement and boundaries, and enables peer supporters to continue offering meaningful support over time.



See Appendix for Personal Self-Care Planning Worksheet for Peer Supporters

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INFORMATION FOR PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Set Clear Expectations for Peer Supporters Around Self-Care

Self-care is not optional — it is a core part of the peer supporter role. Programs should clearly communicate that looking after one's own wellbeing is important.

What workplace programs can do:

- Emphasize self-care during recruitment and selection so peer supporters understand it is part of the role
- Include self-care in initial training and ongoing learning opportunities.
- Encourage peer supporters to use self-care strategies that work for them and fit their lives
- Reinforce that modelling healthy boundaries and self-care also benefits those receiving support

Supportive policies should allow peer supporters to:

- Reduce their peer support workload when needed
- Take regular time off
- Step back temporarily during periods of increased stress or personal challenge

Provide Regular Supervision and Wellness Check-Ins

Ongoing supervision is essential for protecting peer supporters and the people they support. It also signals that the organization values peer supporters' wellbeing – not just their performance.

Good supervision includes:

- Regular, proactive check-ins focused on wellbeing
- Opportunities to debrief after difficult peer interactions
- Conversations about self-care and any barriers to using it
- Group or one-to-one check-ins, depending on confidentiality needs

Some programs may also include periodic *fitness-for-duty* or *readiness-to-continue* check-ins facilitated by a supervisor or qualified mental health professional. These conversations help identify early signs of strain, support informed decisions about role continuation, and normalize stepping back when needed.

Ensure Access to Additional Mental Health Supports

While self-care is important, it is not always enough. Peer support programs have an ethical responsibility to ensure peer supporters can access timely professional mental health support when needed.

Why This Matters

When peer supporters feel supported, valued, and cared for, programs are more sustainable, job satisfaction increases, turnover is reduced, and peer support remains safe and effective.

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INFORMATION FOR PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS (CONT.)

Programs should:

- Establish clear pathways to rapid mental health supports
- Ensure peer supporters know how to access these supports
- Communicate that seeking additional help is encouraged and supported

Support Taking Breaks and Stepping Away from the Role as Needed

At times, peer supporters may need to take a temporary leave or step away from the role entirely to protect their own wellbeing.

Key principles:

- Supervisors support peer supporters in deciding when and how long to step back
- No penalties or stigma for taking a break or leaving the role
- Decisions guided by wellbeing, not guilt or obligation



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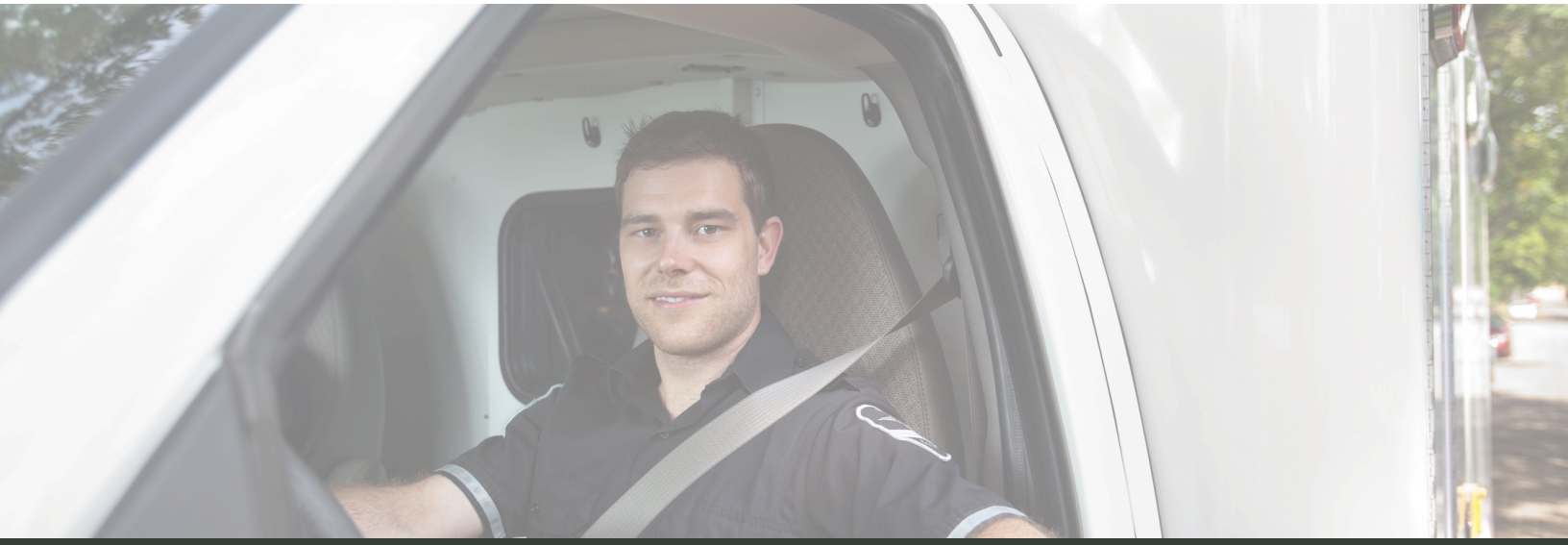

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Appendix A
Personal Self-Care Planning Worksheet for Peer Supporters

Purpose of this worksheet

This worksheet helps peer supporters reflect on their needs and develop personalized, practical self-care strategies. Self-care is a shared responsibility between the peer supporter and the organization and supports safe, sustainable peer support practice.

How to Use This Worksheet

This worksheet is designed to support reflection and planning. Take your time, be honest, and revisit it as your needs change.

- **Step 1:** Reflect on how the peer supporter role is affecting you and notice early signs of stress or strain.
- **Step 2:** Identify your personal self-care needs, including what helps and what gets in the way.
- **Step 3:** Choose practical self-care strategies that fit your role, life, and current circumstances.
- **Step 4:** Plan how and when you will use these strategies, and what support you may need from others.
- **Step 5:** Review and adjust your plan over time, especially after challenging periods or changes in your role.

There is no single "right" self-care plan. The goal is to create strategies that are realistic, supportive, and sustainable for you.

It's okay to ask for help.
You're not alone.
Support is available:

If you or someone you know is in crisis, contact:

9-1-1
Immediate emergencies

9-8-8
Suicide Crisis Helpline (24/7

1-866-531-2600 ConnexOntario
(mental health and addictions)

1-833-677-2668
Peer Support: Boots on the Ground

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Review: What Is Self-Care?

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Step 1: Reflect on Your Role and Wellbeing

What parts of the peer supporter role feel most rewarding right now?

What parts of the role feel most draining or challenging?

What signs tell you that stress or emotional load is building for you?

Step 2: Identify Your Self-Care Needs

What helps you recover after emotionally difficult peer interactions?

For example: Going for a walk/exercising, practicing breath work or grounding exercises, speaking with a mental health professional or other supporters, or something simple like cooking a nutritious meal to connect with your senses.

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What boundaries help protect your wellbeing in this role?

For example: Setting limits on how many peer support shifts or calls you take in a week, reminding peers that you are not a mental health professional, limit personal sharing and keep stories relevant to context of the interaction, schedule rest time, etc.

What gets in the way of using self-care right now?

For example, a busy schedule, work, stress, fatigue, etc.

Step 3: Choose Your Self-Care Strategies

Examples of Self-Care Strategies:

Schedule: Schedule regular debrief time with another peer supporter

Set Boundaries: Set clear boundaries on availability and respect your off-duty time

Mindfulness/Grounding: Practice brief grounding or breathing exercises between conversations

Movement: Maintain regular movement (e.g., walking, stretching) during the workday

Sleep: Prioritize sleep routines that support recovery and consistency

Nourishment: Eat regular, nourishing meals and stay hydrated

Self-Compassion: Notice and acknowledge emotional impact without judgment

Connect to the Self: Spend time on activities that bring meaning, purpose, or connection

Reflection: Use reflective practices (e.g., journaling, quiet reflection, prayer, nature)

Rest: Take planned breaks from peer support roles when needed, acknowledge your limits

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Everyday self-care actions you can use regularly:

Self-care strategies after difficult peer interactions:

Strategies to use when stress builds over time:

Step 4: Plan How You Will Use These Strategies

When will you use these strategies?

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Who can support you in using your self-care plan?

What permissions or supports do you need from the organization?

Step 5: Review and Adjust Over Time

How will you know when your self-care plan needs to change?

When will you revisit this plan?

Important reminder: Needing support, taking breaks, or stepping back from the peer supporter role is not a failure. It is a responsible action that helps protect both you and those you support.

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