

Connecting Online for Peer Support: Participant Feedback

Background & Purpose



What training and program elements are important for individuals to connect virtually?

Purpose: As part of a project titled *A PAWSitive Support Project for Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Substance Use Health Concerns*, this fact sheet presents the feedback of Veterans and other participants on their experiences with four online peer support opportunities: three peer support training courses, and one online Therapy Dog program. The question and sub-questions asked are: What training and program elements are important for individuals, specifically Veterans paired with a service dog and diagnosed with PTSD and experiencing harms from substance use, to connect virtually to: (a) learn online about peer support, (b) build peer support skills, and (c) engage with peer support/others? Additionally, what role, if any, does a service dog have in these opportunities? Participant feedback was collected from each peer support opportunity, reviewed, and the findings are presented here.

Background: According to Veteran Affairs Canada (VAC) (2019b), a Veteran is “[a]ny former member of the Canadian Armed Forces who successfully underwent basic training and is honourably discharged”. Veterans and others with PTSD often feel isolated and disconnected from those around them. Peer support and the shared understanding of what others are experiencing can be a very meaningful and important contribution to Veteran wellness (Veteran Affairs Canada, 2019a; US Department of Veteran Affairs, 2020).

Online Learning: Online learning refers to learning opportunities that are delivered using technology supported modalities and delivered in virtual spaces and platforms. Delivery of can be synchronous (teaching occurs at the same time for everyone) or asynchronous (occurs at different times). Online platforms are increasingly being used to connect with Veterans to learn about, build skills in, and engage with peer support*.

Peer Support: Peer support exists on a continuum and is defined by the Mental Health Commission of Canada as “a supportive relationship between people who have lived experience in common...in relation to a mental health challenge or illness. This common experience might be related to their own mental health or that of a loved one” (2013, p.7).



Background & Purpose (continued)

Connection: Our multidisciplinary team identified that PTSD and problematic substance use (PSU) can contribute to Veterans' disconnection from other humans, as well as animals and the environment. A One Health framework recognizes that the convergence of people, animals, and the environment has created a new dynamic in which the health of each group is interconnected (CDC, 2021). The interdependence of the wellness of humans, animals and the environment is also traditionally recognized from within an Indigenous worldview (Papequash, 2012; Dumont et. Al., 2014). Considering PTSD and PSU simultaneously within this framework is an innovative and inclusive approach to mental health and substance use recovery**.

Service Dog: service dogs are trained to assist their handler with symptoms and limitations from trauma, injuries, and disabilities. service dogs are often trained to perform interruptions when the Veteran is going into or is in distress (e.g., wake from a nightmare, disrupt intrusive thoughts) and often form a close connection with the Veteran. This connection can also provide comfort, companionship, and support for the Veteran as they navigate day-to-day life. Generally, service dogs are visibly identified with a vest and have full access to public spaces because they are trained to perform tasks to support their handler.

To learn more about the role of service dogs in the lives of Veterans diagnosed with PTSD who are experiencing harms from substance use, please refer to the resource list at the end of this Fact Sheet.

Fact Sheet Limitations: This Fact Sheet has three key limitations. First, not all participants involved in the peer support opportunities reviewed here are Veterans (some are dog trainers, researchers, peer supporters), although the vast majority work alongside Veterans. Second, limited demographic information was collected from participants taking part in the online opportunities, other than knowing that over 50% of participants in four of the five opportunities were Caucasian females. Third, the program and training opportunities have varying goals and data was not collected uniformly across each, although a feedback survey was the dominant mode of data collection for each.

* Online in this context primarily refers to the use of Zoom, a virtual connectivity online platforms such as social media were also used in some cases.

** The term recovery is variously referred to, including: being in recovery, seeking recovery, wellness, health, healing journey, to name a few. Common elements amongst definitions of recovery are seeking a life worth living, optimism that recovery is possible, recognition that it is a process, and acknowledgement that there is always hope (McQuaid, 2017).

Service dogs are trained to assist their handler with symptoms and limitations from trauma, injuries, and disabilities.





Overview of Peer Support Opportunities

A | Mental Health Innovations (MHI) Peer Support Training:

MHI delivered online peer support training to 30 Veterans and staff from three service dog organizations. The aim of the training was to “lead innovative and sustainable change in organizations to enhance the mental health of their people...while supporting leaders looking to move beyond traditional methods of care (MIH, n.d.)” Eighteen hours of training was provided for 2 days a week over a 6-week period, between April 5 and May 11, 2021. A training manual was provided to participants.

Participants: All participants were affiliated with a service dog organization, and included Vancouver Island K9 Consulting (VIK9), AUDEAMUS Inc., and K9RR Academy. Nearly half (43%) of the participants were military Veterans. All others were service dog trainers and/or peer supports that work with Veterans.

Methods: Sixty-two questions were asked about participants’ experiences with the online training opportunity and completed via an anonymous link in an email within two weeks of the training. The questionnaire was designed by MHI in collaboration with our team. All data were reviewed and organized into the four areas focused on in this fact sheet.

Participant feedback:

1 Key Element for Learning Online

Familiarity with technology. The use of Zoom, a virtual connectivity platform, was identified as an accessible and manageable platform for remote training. Half of the participants did, however, experience minor technical problems initially, which included: logging in (83%), managing an internet connection (58%), coordinating time zones (25%) and registering (8%). Participants suggested basic Zoom training before starting a course to enhance their learning experience.

2 Key Element for Building Peer Support Skills

Importance of facilitators. The program facilitators were identified as a key element of the online training opportunity. Participants praised the facilitators for being accommodating, organized, prepared, experienced, and knowledgeable. One participant commented: “All trainers and instructors were very experienced and knowledgeable, which enhanced the open discussions and [we] knew instructors knew their material and information was presented with confidence and strong leadership.”

3 Key Element for Engaging with Peer Support/Others

Small group interactions. Participants felt that more time should be allocated to active learning techniques such as small group discussions and role-playing exercises to allow for meaningful and deeper connections to be made. Participants also reported that larger group discussions could be longer, but were not as important for connection as small group discussions.

4 Insight into the Role of the Service Dog for Connecting Online

Service Dog has a role. Participants felt that the online training could incorporate the Veterans’ service dogs to learn about, build skills in, and engage with peer support. They suggested that greater attention to the service dogs could assist with breaking down barriers between participants so connections could be built. Participants shared that a service dog can generally aid in peer support when in-person by acting as an ice breaker to begin conversations. They felt the online environment could be modified to include the service dogs in this way.

The facilitator was good about practicing what she went over in the course when engaging with individuals.

Overview of Peer Support Opportunities (continued)

B | Crisis and Trauma Research Institute (CTRI) Equipping the Natural Helper Peer Support Course:

The CTRI course “explores the support process, key qualities of the peer helper, and issues that may arise when assisting others. This [course] is an interactive and experiential training where participants...work through activities designed to enhance their communication, develop helping skills, and learn practical strategies for supporting others” (CTRI, n.d). A CTRI facilitator delivered this training to 30 Veterans and service dog organization staff/clients over two days via Zoom on June 4 and 14 2021, for a total of 6 hours.

Participants: There were 30 participants from from 6 service dog organizations. Participants ranged from Veterans providing peer support, to dog trainers, to program administrators and researchers. Five individuals (17% of participants) who took this training had also taken the MHI training. Fifty-seven percent of the participants were Veterans.

Methods: CTRI emailed a questionnaire they designed to all participants following the training. It consisted of 20 questions focusing on the strengths and challenges of the course’s delivery. CTRI then shared the feedback with our team and it was reviewed and organized into the four areas focused on in this fact sheet.

Participant Feedback:

1 Key Element for Learning Online about Peer Support

Use of supporting materials. Participants shared that they liked the use of videos, reading material, and scenarios in the training because it accounted for various learning styles and preferences. However, it should be noted that some individuals found the video content triggering, which can be a concern in any mental health-related training with Veterans experiencing PTSD.

2 Key Element for Building Peer Support Skills

Importance of facilitators. An engaging and knowledgeable facilitator enhanced the training experience and enjoyment for the participants. High praise was provided for the course facilitator, especially their openness, active listening, and empathy. “The facilitator was good about practicing what she went over in the course when engaging with individuals. She was an active listener and always validated everyone’s point first”.



3 Key Element for Engaging with Peer Support/Others

Small group interactions. Participants appreciated the time taken for the group to share their own experiences and collaborate to address hypothetical scenarios. Significant time was dedicated to role-playing and group discussions, and some participants suggested this could be increased even more.

4 Insights into the Role of the Service Dog in Connecting Online

Sharing suggestions and learning from each other. While this program did not include a specific section on the integration of a service dog in offering peer support, the facilitator made time for individuals to share experiences about their service dogs and peer support. Participants shared how their service dog often picked up on the mental states of others and that it was helpful to have “another set of eyes” to identify people that may need support. Participants shared how their service dog had served as a connection point when engaging with new peers in in-person programming in the past. Participants also mentioned that sharing these ideas and experiences allowed them to bond as a group online.



Overview of Peer Support Opportunities *(continued)*

C | Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) provided by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC):

Two trainers led two separate groups of 15 participants through the online MHFA course in the Spring of 2021. MHCC defines MHFA as “the support provided to a person who may be experiencing a decline in their mental well-being or a mental health crisis” (MHCC, 2020). The aim of the MHFA course is to equip individuals to feel confident to intervene when they believe someone is experiencing mental health concerns. The course was recently adapted to online delivery using Zoom and includes a pre-training online module (1 hour) and two live information sessions (each 4 hours in duration) over two days.

Participants: Thirty participants who took part in the course were from 7 service dog organizations and largely included Veterans (46%) interested in providing peer support to Veterans and other individuals paired with a service dog. Participants were mainly women (79%), affiliated with a service dog organization (e.g., dog trainer, Veteran service dog handler) (71%), and spoke English as their first language (96%). Training in English or French was an option available to participants, however only English was selected.

Methods: A 48-item questionnaire, designed by MHCC, was emailed to participants upon completion of the course. The questions covered individual demographics, asked how much participants felt they learned about specific training topics, and gathered feedback on course delivery. All data were reviewed and organized into the four areas focused on in this fact sheet.

Participant Feedback:

1 Key Elements for Learning Online

Importance of facilitators. The participants shared positive feedback about the two course facilitators and stressed the importance of having a strong, knowledgeable, and empathic facilitator for a positive online learning experience. Participants also acknowledged that having technological support decreased stress that could negatively impact their participation.

Preparation. Participants reported that the one-hour introductory training material that was required before the course was helpful with providing necessary background. Other course material such as the workbook and hypothetical scenarios were identified as helpful to the participants’ learning as well. Participants also shared that it would be beneficial to access the presentation deck following the training.

Technology use. Zoom was identified as an effective tool for the training, especially the use of breakout rooms. The only Zoom related challenges identified were related to a weak internet connection (12.5%) and confusion regarding time zone (12.5%). Some individuals also found the 4-hour training blocks too long to remain alert and focused in an online format. More frequent or longer breaks may help address this.

2 Key Element for Building Mental Health Support (including Peer Support) Skills

Acknowledgment of Self Care. Participants were asked to reflect on the course and how they may use the skills learned in their lives. The most common reflection was the need to remember to engage in self-care. Many participants noted that brainstorming ideas with other participants about self-care activities was a good reminder of its importance.

3 Key Element for Engaging with Peer Support/Others

Learning from each other. Participants overwhelmingly relayed that the use of breakout rooms was “great” (96%) and commented that they really enjoyed having the opportunity to talk with other participants, share experiences, and learn from one another. Some participants mentioned that they felt more comfortable talking and sharing in a small group setting online. In response to what elements worked well in the training, the majority identified feeling part of a community (92%), interacting with the trainer (92%), and interacting with the other participants (92%).

4 Insights into the Role of the Service Dog in Connecting Online

Service Dogs Assist the Learner. While the role of service dogs in peer support was not a topic of the training, given the participant population, significant attention was paid to how service dogs can support learners paired with a service dog. During distressing topics, participants were encouraged to pet their service dog, listen to its cues, and take breaks with their service dog as needed. Participants shared that in a virtual environment, encouraging the connection between the learner and their service dog helped keep them present.



Overview of Peer Support Opportunities *(continued)*

D | Online PAWS Your Stress (PYS) Therapy Dog Program:



A process evaluation followed by an outcome evaluation was undertaken.

PYS is a University of Saskatchewan (USask) program offered in partnership with the St. John Ambulance (SJA) Therapy Dog program. Therapy dogs and their handlers visit the USask campus several times a month to offer love, comfort, and support to university students, staff, and faculty. The SJA Therapy Dog program aims to “bring comfort, joy and companionship to members of the[ir] community who are sick, lonely, reside in long-term care and mental health facilities; are in hospitals, schools and library settings. Program participants reap the therapeutic benefits of the unconditional companionship of a four-legged friend (SJA, 2021).” In March, 2020 access to the USask campus was restricted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the majority of activities were moved online. Student, staff and faculty isolation and related stress was a key concern for the university community. To help address this, the PYS team launched online Therapy Dog visits using Zoom. The findings of the PYS evaluation are presented here because of their focus on virtual connection with animals, in particular dogs, and virtual peer support.

The online Therapy Dog visits were coupled with increased PYS social media presence on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Youtube](#), [Flipgrid](#), the USask Email/USask PAWS online news board notification system and a website was developed (www.therapydogs.ca). Zoom visits consisted of multiple breakout rooms with two to three handlers and their animals in each room. Participants joined the breakout room of their choosing and frequently moved between rooms. The sessions were one hour in length and, on average, included three breakout room options. Nineteen visits in total took place every two weeks between September 2020 and April 2021, with increased offerings during examination periods.

Participants: Participation in the online PYS program included two distinct groups; handlers sharing their Therapy Dogs and individuals who wanted to engage with the Therapy Dogs. Both groups included USask staff, faculty, and students, as well as community volunteers. To gain their feedback, a research associate interviewed both PYS representatives (i.e., coordination staff and handlers) as well as program participants.

Methods: A process evaluation (to identify benefits and challenges for how the program was delivered) followed by an outcome evaluation (to find out if participants felt love, comfort and support) were undertaken. As part of the process evaluation, ten interviews were completed with PYS Zoom participants. The outcome evaluation included five interviews with program participants. All data were reviewed and organized into the four areas focused on in this fact sheet.



Participant Feedback:

1 Key Element for Learning Online

Connections beyond Zoom. Various online platforms were used for advertising the online PYS program. While this was time-intensive, the team found that they were able to connect with unique audiences (e.g., by age) that are specific to each platform. Participants generally learned about the program from email, the USask PAWS newsfeed and social media. Participants also said that the social media posts served as a continued form of connection between Zoom visits and helped build connections.

2 Key Element for Building Skills to Connect Online

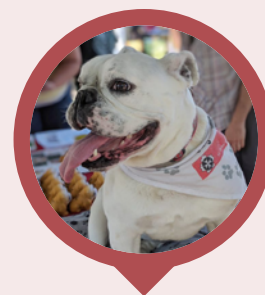
Technology use. The large majority of participants were part of the USask community and noted that they took part in Zoom meetings regularly for work and school. They found that the PYS Zoom sessions were a welcome reprieve from other meetings. While they would prefer to meet the Therapy Dogs in-person, Zoom was a good alternative. For some, they felt meeting online had the added benefit of not experiencing the stress or anxiety associated with going to an in-person event. Participants also shared that there were various reduced accessibility barriers online, including that they could remain anonymous.

3 Key Element for Engaging with Peer Support/Others

Connection. Participants overwhelmingly acknowledged that they felt comforted and supported by the Therapy Dogs and handlers through the Zoom sessions. Further, they felt the connections made during the PYS Zoom sessions contributed to their uplifted mood, happiness, decreased loneliness and isolation, and decreased anxiety, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4 Insights into the Role of the Therapy Dog in Connecting Online

Dogs as a point of connection. Participants and Therapy Dog/handler teams were able to easily engage in an online conversation about the participating animals. As rapport grew over a session, and for some between sessions, participants talked more openly about their lives, including their own companion animals. Participants often brought their companion animals on camera to meet everyone. Participants were asked what they believed to be the purpose of the program and the main responses were: improved mental health through stress-reduction; connecting with animals and other people; and continuing relationships built during the in-person program.



Participants preferred to meet the Therapy Dogs in person but Zoom was a good alternative.

Participants and Therapy Dog/handler teams were able to easily engage in an online conversation about the participating animals.





Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

These differing online programs all aimed to answer the questions: What program and training elements are important for individuals, specifically Veterans paired with a service dog and diagnosed with PTSD and experiencing harms from substance use, to connect virtually to: (a) learn online about peer support, (b) build peer support skills, and (c) engage with peer support/others? Additionally, what role, if any, does a service dog have in these opportunities?

We learned that it is possible to connect virtually, with unique benefits and challenges. Participant feedback across the learning opportunities was consistent, in particular among the three training programs. When learning online about peer support, working knowledge of the main delivery platform (i.e., Zoom) and related online platforms before the training begins is important, as is having access to context setting introductory learning materials. Further, these connections could possibly be fostered through the use of related online social media platforms. Building peer support skills online foremost requires facilitators who are knowledgeable, engaged, empathic and relatable in an online environment. Recognition must also be made that the use of online technology has unique advantages. Self-care was specifically identified as a necessary skill for online peer support. Engagement with peer support/others online was enhanced with small group discussions.

The role of service dogs and Therapy Dogs was apparent in each online opportunity. In an online environment, service dogs can aid in peer support as a point of connection for individuals to gain rapport and feel connected to others. When dealing with complex topics, service dogs can aid in supporting their handler during online training opportunities just as they do in-person. As reported, Therapy Dogs can be a source of comfort and support when experiencing isolation and stress. Overall, the dogs were a common connection amongst participants in the four programs and by actively engaging with the dogs, connections and learning could be enhanced.

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Conclusions and Recommendations *(continued)*

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