



GUIDE: **Peer Support During a Pandemic**

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Peer support is a model of providing emotional support to those exposed to occupational stress. It is used to mitigate physical and emotional responses due to an individual's experiences while encouraging resilience.

Important Note: This guide is not a replacement for psychological support / therapy. It is a guide to adapt to our current circumstances and not a replacement for traditional peer support methods.

A temporary solution for uncertain times.

There is an abundant amount of resources for the public on various social media platforms, and many offers of support from therapists to support frontline workers in an era of significantly changing circumstances.

What about in-house support?

If you have an existing Peer Support Team or are in the midst of developing one, peer support may look vastly different right now, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The following is a guideline to help modify traditional peer support methods as many on the frontlines may be exhibiting constraints of time and exhaustion.

★ ***Tip:*** Make the time for each other. You are worth it. ★

Safety First!

Essential vs. Non-essential Service Teams:

Essential: Maintain Covid-19 protective measures as recommended by the WHO if you are meeting face-to-face. Avoid face-to-face meetings, if it can be averted.

When you are meeting with peers pre or post shift with whom you will or have been in contact with, take the necessary measures to wash, change clothes and gather essential items prior to meeting (i.e. hospital staff). This way, a person can start their shift or leave for home without distractions.

Non-essential Services: Avoid all face-to-face meetings; create alternate means of connecting.

Identify and Accept

Peer support measures also need to be modified during a pandemic, like everything else.

Traditional peer support may not be feasible and will look different for each team.

Get that dialogue on the table immediately for inclusive acceptance.

Perspective: Adapting is not easy. Remember that this is only a temporary solution.

- **One-to-One Support:**

Keep it Simple. A 'hello' and 'how are you' go a long way.

- Find an area to talk without distractions. Create a safe environment.
- Ask if there is anything they need to be comfortable right now (i.e. food, drink, etc.).
- Acknowledge the incident, their feelings and their fears.
- Validate that their feelings / reactions are normal for an abnormal situation.
- Ask what they need right now. How can you help?
- Plan for self-care, external supports / resources, emergency help.
- Acknowledge understanding of a plan, if or when needed.
- Bring them back to the present. Check in on how they are feeling after your talk.

- **Group Team Support:**

Team Leader / Facilitator(s):

- Select a go-to person to organize a peer support team.
- This person does not have to be management, but management should be informed to avoid a duplication of support. Too much of a good thing may be harmful.
- The Team Leader is not the go-to person for all emotional support. They are the facilitator and connector. Avoid dual role of facilitator and support to avoid burnout.
- The team leader can also find and share helpful resources to help keep the team resilient.
- Important: The Team Leader is a conduit, not one who has the potential of being exposed to an event / incident, where they too may need peer support.

(Optional) Give your Team a nickname or acronym. It doesn't always have to be a serious one either.

Keep them small: The larger the group, the less cohesion. Maximum 10 to 12 is recommended. Go online! Create a chatroom, Zoom, Skype or Facebook private group to stay connected when not on duty.

Engage in online meetings:

Try to make it video conferencing. Part of the psychological triage of peer support is connecting with your colleagues visually to get a sense of where they are at.

Create an open concept, all-inclusive platform: come as you are! PJ's and bed-head is welcome. Bring your coffee/tea and some Kleenex (you never know when you will need it).

Tips for a successful Peer Support Team:

- Create a safe environment: All those participating should feel confident that they can speak openly in an environment which is non-judgemental, supportive and calm.
- **Confidentiality:** what is discussed in the room/online, stays there (unless there is risk of harm)
- **Ground rules:** Do not have discussions about operations. This is your time. (Alternate: You can identify who, where and when the appropriate time will be to discuss any operational matters)
- Create a regular / set time to check in with one another: before or after shift? What works best for everyone? Doodle Poll can be a handy tool for this, especially when social distancing.
- **Make it voluntary** (this is peer support, not peer pressure); there is no shame in saying 'no thank you'.
- **Set boundaries:** if you don't have it in you to be there for someone else, it's ok. Maybe next time...

- It's ok to say, "I really don't have it in me right now, but if you give me a (set your own time frame), I'm all yours.". This allows everyone an opportunity to emotionally prepare for the discussion.
- **Be honest:** For leadership, management or frontline, nothing connects a team more than acknowledging the obvious.
 - o "This one is tough. I am not sure how we are going to get through this."
- **Be supportive:** Letting another person know that you won't let them fall can be all it takes to help keep another resilient.
 - o "I am sure glad we have each other. We make a great team."
 - o "I am proud to be part of this team."
 - o "If we stick together, we can get through anything."
- **Provide Resources:** Let's face it, we get a lot of email; keep it short and to the point.
- If you set up a **Facebook private group page** and post there, people then have the option if they want to see it or not.
- **Have an internal resource list** from employee assistance programs, mental health hotlines and a list of peer support team members and phone numbers. Ask permission to share personal telephone numbers before posting.
- **Note It, Accept It and Respect It:** If a peer support team member is unavailable during a specific timeframe (i.e. identifying family time between 18:00 to 20:00 hours), note it, accept it and respect it. Having a list of your peer support team with these notes and preferences is always helpful.

Respect: You are all in this together. No one knows your jobs / roles better than you do. Honour each-others perspectives, feelings and reactions to create an environment that is welcoming, healing and respectful.

How to have a Peer Support Session:

- **Bring together homogenous groups:** only those who experienced the same incident or situation are to be part of this session. Having others who did not experience the event can be traumatizing. We are not collecting victims here.
- **Keep it timed and keep the meeting short.**
- **Before a shift:** Focus on where everyone is at now. Allow everyone to mentally prepare for what they will face during their shift. Encouragement and positive mindset. Remind the group that you will all still be there for each other at the end of your shift (if they want it!).
- **End of a shift:** Allow colleagues to wash, change and get essentials (i.e. food) before meeting.
- **Focus** is on allowing your colleagues to diffuse and stabilize before going home.
- **Acknowledge** the event / incident. Gather perspectives if others did not see it the way you did.
- Acknowledge thoughts, feelings and reactions.
- **Get comfortable with the uncomfortable silence.** Sometimes, silence can bring much relief. Embrace the moment.
- **Check-in** with where everyone is at. What are their plans for self-care? Who can they turn to? Ensure there are take-away resources.
- **Inform** the team, especially if there is a new face, how a member can be reached and where resources can be found (i.e. handouts, Facebook private group page/link, website, list of names and contact information).

Reinforce: Let your colleagues know they are not alone.
Let them know when you are available and where they can find other helpful resources.



We Need the Helpers. Let's #KeepThemStrong

Need Help?

- Crisis Services Canada: Call 24/7 → 1-833-456-4566
 - or text (between 4pm to midnight EST) to 45645
- Badge of Life Canada (Police & Correctional Personnel)
 - www.badgeoflifecanada.org
- Hope for Wellness Helpline (Indigenous Peoples of Canada) 1-855-242-3310
 - www.hopeforwellness.ca