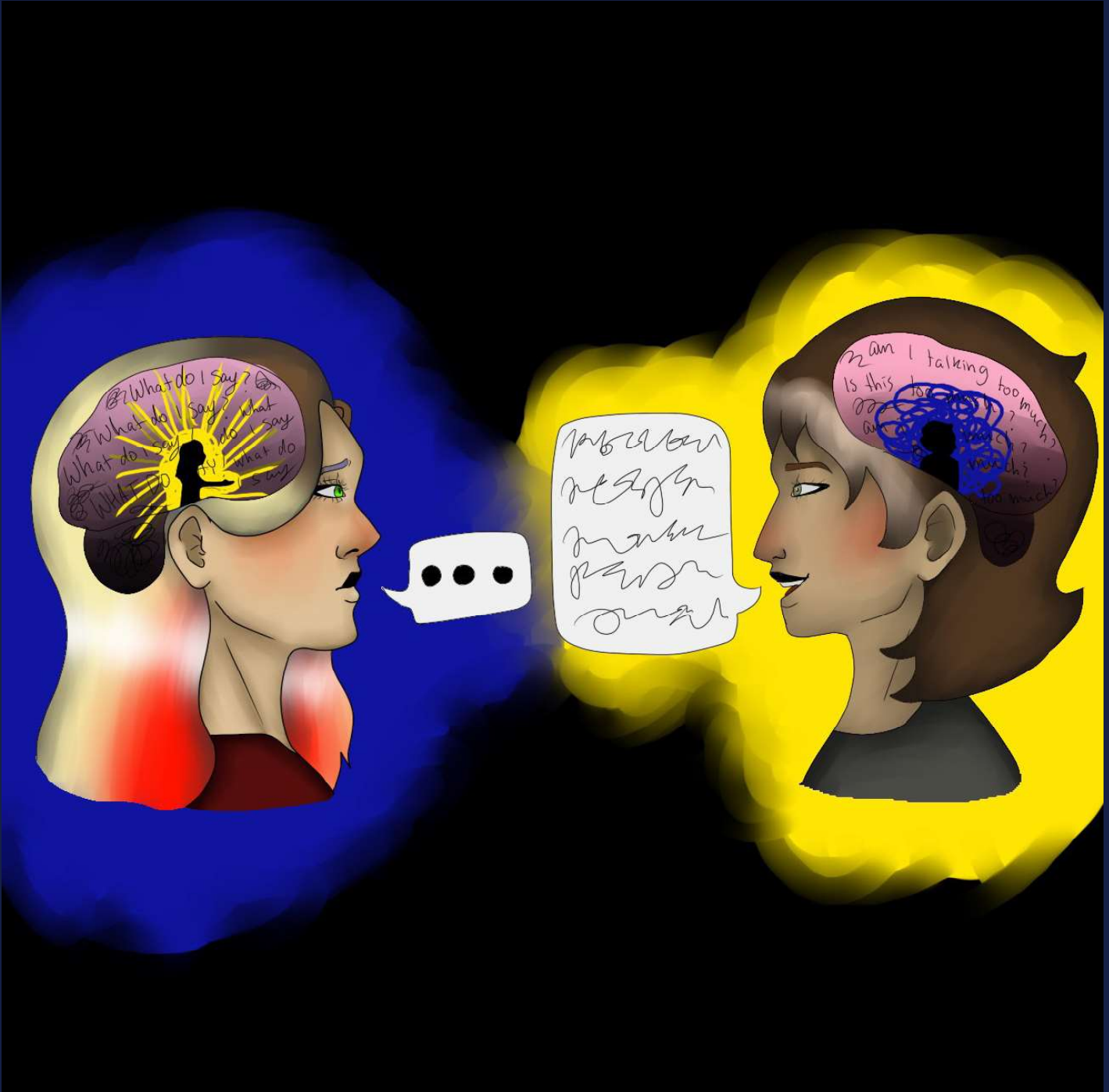


UNIT 3



Youth Art by Syd Tremblay from Windsor

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Peer support is a process of relationship building. This section will discuss the relationship-building we do with peers and communication skills that support that.

We cannot force someone to be ready to do the work with us, but we can hold space for them to show up whenever they are ready to. This might look like just hanging out and colouring or playing games together and asking “getting to know you” questions (you can even make a game of this to get to know each other).

You don’t always have to and can’t always expect to get right into the “deep work” with peer support. Sometimes all people need or are ready for is companionship and company and to share a safer space with someone they trust.

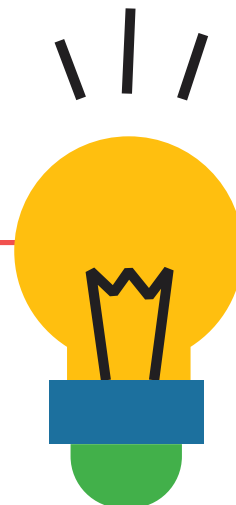


BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

When you trust someone, you can feel safe with them physically and emotionally. Their actions have shown you that they are reliable and you have confidence that they will be there for you. Trust is a crucial component of relationship building and is critical to the relationship you will have with your peers.

THINGS TO REMEMBER TO SUPPORT TRUST BUILDING

- **Do what you say:** Accountability is huge in building trusting relationships.
- **Be honest:** Your words matter and mean a lot to the people you are working with. Do your best to be sincere, authentic, and candid in your interactions.
- **Honour your boundaries:** You know what is best for you, and you know what you need to feel comfortable. Listen to your gut feelings and enforce the respect of your boundaries and those of others you work with.
- **Be transparent:** Let people know when you can and when you can't keep a secret. Disclose when you have the duty to report.
- **Be open:** Open communication and welcoming body language can help you convey your feelings and build strong, authentic relationships.
- **If you make a promise, keep it:** Be careful about making promises. Life is full of unexpected circumstances which can make fulfilling promises within the context of a professional relationship difficult. If you make a promise, know that it is very important that you stay true to your word.
- **Be consistent:** Show consistency in your behaviour. Being reliable and dependable is super important in this field. For some people, you might be the one consistent relationship in their lives. This is an honour that should be respected.
- **Practice non-judgment:** When someone shares something that is potentially controversial or deeply intimate, try your best to lead with empathy, avoid personal or emotional reactions or observations and let them share what they need to in a safe space.
- **Be present:** You don't always need to share your opinion. Sometimes it is best to just listen, provide objective insight and be supportive.



THE STRENGTHS YOU BRING

Peer support workers are unique because they understand two different worlds which are trying to work together in a harmonious manner but often may not. These two worlds are split between the professional and the community member. That would make peer support workers professional community members in a sense. They are the people who can usually have a closer understanding of a peer's experience, based on their own experiences, while simultaneously understanding the ways professionals must operate and the way the system currently operates.

With this in mind, we might also look at peer support work as acting as a bridge between these two worlds. For some people, this bridge may be a small support in the grand scheme of things, and for others, it can be life-altering. People who are eligible for supports may never access them because of a lack of trust and lack of feelings of safety. **Just by being you, by your very identity, you can help these peers feel safer and want to access the help they so deserve.** This is a powerful gift peer support workers possess and one you cannot receive by anything other than living your life.

Sometimes, when working with peers who come from tough experiences which are similar to ones you have faced in the past, you may also inspire them to one day be peer supports themselves. In this way, you can teach them that struggles can be turned into strengths.

Never underestimate how influential and helpful your existence could be to another.



COMMUNICATION

The way we communicate with our peers can build our relationship with them and gift us with opportunities to better respond to their needs and nurture their goals.

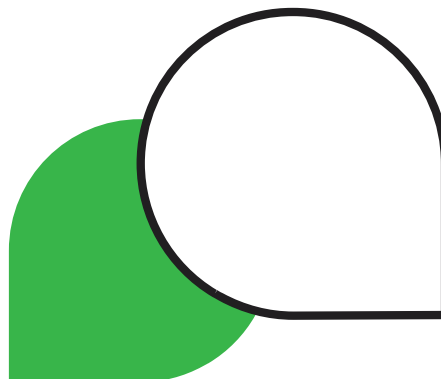
IT'S NOT JUST WHAT WE SAY BUT HOW WE SAY IT

What can often be difficult for young people accessing services is that there are many new words, terms and acronyms being thrown at them. Although you are a service provider, one of the gifts that you bring is your ability to relate to people in your peer group.

It is important that we take care to avoid using language that is overly complicated. **As peer support workers, one of our main goals is to make peers feel comfortable in the setting they are in.** To that end— don't worry about sounding too proper, and feel free to chat with peers using any slang or words common to your community. It is, however, important to be aware of the terminology you use and use language that peers will be able to understand. Be respectful of the language that peers choose to use when communicating with you as well.

When we are communicating with others, a lot of our communication goes beyond just what we say. Body language is what our bodies communicate to others, which includes our posture, our pose and the expression on our face. If we are in a bad mood and have our arms crossed, our eyes on the floor and a scowl on our face, this may communicate to some that we would like to be left alone or that we are having a hard time. Without saying a word, people can see that we are feeling a certain way.

When we are with peers, it is important that we be mindful of our body language as well as our tone. We might be having a bad day, which might make us sound irritable. Even if we are not irritated with the peer we are working with, they may interpret the situation as such. It is important that we reflect on the energy we are bringing and how that might affect the way we interact with peers. It is also important that we reflect on the energy that our peers are bringing and take note of shifts in tone or body language.



Practice having a conversation with someone in the group during a role play. Focus on getting to know this person as if they are a peer you are working with, then switch. Use the space below to write down any notes or things you notice following your conversation:

Take a minute to reflect on the role play. Think about your peer's body language, tone of voice, and topic of the conversation and how any of these things changed throughout your conversation:

ACTIVE LISTENING AND ATTENDING

Attending means being present. As an example, ineffective attending behaviours include turning away, not making eye contact, leaning away from the waist up, crossing your arms and legs and/or folding your arms. When we talk about attending as part of relationship building and communication, we can break it down into four different pieces.

Eye contact:

Keep in mind that cultures vary in what is considered a good amount of eye contact, thus a lack thereof doesn't always mean that a peer is disengaged. Most people are comfortable with more eye contact when you are talking, and less eye contact when they are. You may also find it helpful to talk to peers in ways where there is no pressure for eye contact (e.g., going for a walk, working on art side by side etc.)

Body language:

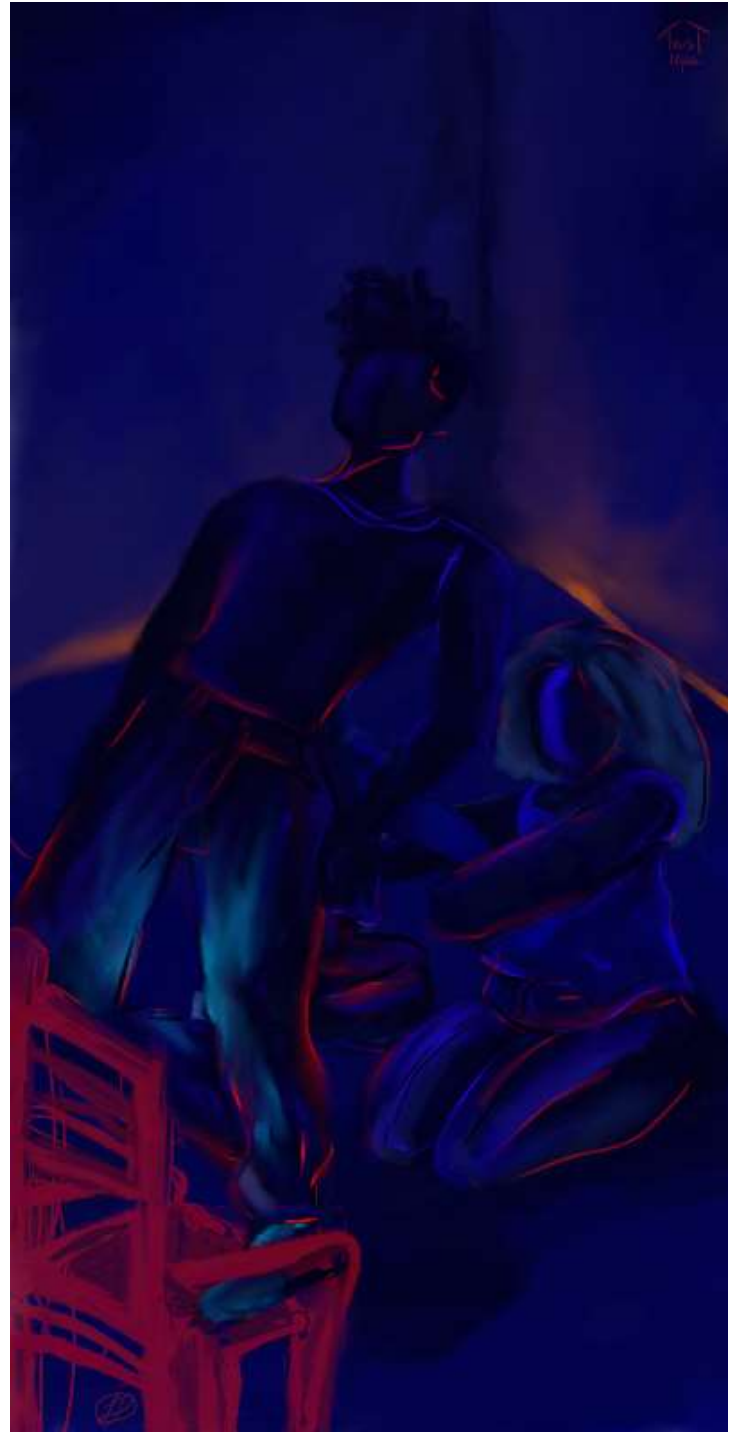
Keep a relaxed but attentive posture, lean slightly towards the client, when possible, match their body language if it feels natural (e.g., if they have their hands clasped in front of them, do the same)

Voice:

Your tone of voice should match the tone your peer is using—if they are speaking softly, also speak softly. If a client is upset and shouting, meet them where they're at and then slowly bring them down.

Verbal tracking:

Use your words to show your peer you are listening—paraphrasing and validating show this. Try to use words your peer has already used (e.g., if they say "I'm so tired of this happening" you can validate by saying "it does sound so tiring.")



Youth Art by Sumaiya Lewis, Toronto

Attending

Sit or stand comfortably

Open your posture

Lean towards the person

Eye contact maintained

Relax

behavior sends a very powerful message

It communicates your interest and sends the message that what the other has to say is important.

This helps build trust and demonstrates respect.

(mutual conditions of any relationship)

Attending shows respect by communicating

"I am with you."



·FOUNDRY·

Active listening is a crucial component to becoming a peer support worker because our peers deserve to be heard. There can be many blocks and barriers to open communication. For example, we are often thinking of a response when we are listening to another person instead of fully hearing and understanding what the other person is saying. Sometimes, people can't say what they are feeling or what they are experiencing.

Answer yes or no to the following questions:

1. Do you listen primarily for facts or ideas when someone is speaking?
2. Do certain words, phrases, or ideas activate your own thoughts or ideas so that you cannot listen objectively to what is being said to you?
3. When you are puzzled or annoyed by what someone says, do you try to get the question straightened out immediately, either in your own mind or by interrupting the speaker?
4. If you feel it would take too much time and effort to understand something, do you go out of your way to avoid hearing about it?
5. Do you deliberately turn your thoughts to other subjects when you believe a speaker will have nothing interesting to say?
6. Can you tell by a person's appearance and delivery that she/he won't have anything worthwhile to say?
7. When somebody is talking to you, do you try to make him/her think you're paying attention when you're not?
8. When you're listening to someone, are you easily distracted by outside sights and sounds?
9. If you want to remember what someone is saying, do you think it is a good idea to write it down as she goes along?

The use of active listening skills provides the listener with the ability to be more present and hear more clearly and accurately what the other person is really saying or feeling. The goal of active listening is to build communication by demonstrating "attention, understanding, responsiveness, and empathy; to encourage the continued expression of thoughts and feelings"²¹ in order to develop trustworthy and meaningful relationships.

Instant responses to peer comments may give the impression the other person wasn't listening. Instead, your responses should be thoughtful, which may take some time and a short pause to generate, but it shows that the other person was listened to fully.

Active listening involves checking our body language or nonverbal communication and "a range of verbal behaviours" such as paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, assumption checking, and asking questions."²²

When you are involved in the process of communicating, it is important to attend to the other person. Attending behaviour sends a very powerful message. It communicates your interest and sends the message that what the other has to say is important. This helps build trust and demonstrates respect which are mutual conditions of any relationship. Attending shows respect by communicating, "I am with you."

CHECKING OUR PERCEPTIONS

The skill of perception checking will allow you the opportunity to describe what you think the other person is feeling as it relates to the content of the situation they are describing. It communicates a clear attempt to understand what the other person is experiencing and builds trust and confidence.²³

WHY DO WE CHECK OUR PERCEPTIONS?

- It tells the person that you understand or are trying to understand what he or she is feeling. This empathy will encourage the person to go on.
- It clarifies the person's feelings by mirroring them in a non-judgmental way.
- It brings feelings to the surface which may have only been expressed vaguely.
- It gives the person the opportunity to accept his/her feelings.
- It helps to verify your perception of the way the person is feeling.
- Perception checking allows you to check out messages received from the person's verbal and non-verbal behavior.
- In identifying feelings, you attempt to enter the other person's frame of reference by drawing on his or her own experience.
- First you must check which feelings the person is communicating before checking. To do this you label or name the feeling.
- It helps the other person infer that feelings are potentially causing the behavior. The purpose is to not identify their feelings for them.
- It allows for us to reflect on how our own worldviews or personal experiences might be coloring the way we are perceiving someone's experience.
- It can give you an opportunity to understand the intention behind someone's behavior instead of just the behavior, itself.



In pairs, read each statement out and write down your perceptions of each one.

A person getting red in the face with a raised voice and clenched fists says, "My mother keeps giving me advice on how I should live my life!!"

Empty rounded rectangular box for writing perceptions.

*With a big smile:
"Wow! I was just notified that I passed my Grade 12 G.E.D."*

Empty rounded rectangular box for writing perceptions.

Looking down, a person says, "I am finding it hard to tell people that I have been depressed. You never know how they will react."

Empty rounded rectangular box for writing perceptions.

"I just came from a job interview, and I didn't do so well."

Empty rounded rectangular box for writing perceptions.

"Whenever I meet someone for the first time, my knees tremble, and my hands sweat."

Empty rounded rectangular box for writing perceptions.

"I was arguing with my friend, and I called him some bad names; I know I shouldn't have."

Empty rounded rectangular box for writing perceptions.

"I just came back from visiting my Ministry worker, and he acted as if I wasn't even there."

Empty rounded rectangular box for writing perceptions.

VALIDATION

Realistically, you will never be in a position where every doctor and mental health professional on your team has an absolutely perfect interaction with every youth client. Health professionals are human, too (even though this is easy to forget sometimes), and with that comes their own biases, blind spots and bad days. **It's an unfortunate reality that - due to the diversity of identities and experiences held by those accessing services- not every person will have the same level of satisfaction or safety when interacting with another member of our health team.**



As peer support workers, we are in a unique position of being able to relate to and speak with clients on more of a “real” level. Since there is such an emphasis and importance placed on relationship building within our work, often, our peers will feel more comfortable sharing frustrations they’ve had with accessing services at YWHO or other youth service provision centers. A peer may share with you that a doctor has been using the wrong pronouns when referring to them or that a counsellor said something awkward in relation to their race and culture. This can put you in a position where, on one hand, you are sympathetic to their feelings and the harm they have experienced, while also potentially feeling pressure to represent the organization you work for. It can also feel as though, by working for that organization, you may be “part of the problem.”

Especially when working for a low-barrier youth service provider, this can create a double-bind situation where youth have experienced harm from your team, but they have limited options when it comes to getting the kind of support they need.

This is where validation comes in. Validation involves communicating to youth that we respect their thoughts and feelings as real and important. As a peer support worker, you do not want to be in a position where you are arguing with someone accessing services about how they emotionally react to things or trying to convince them that their experiences are not important or true.

It is such a valuable experience to have somebody listen to and affirm how we feel, especially for young people who are used to having their reactions dismissed or explained away. The most helpful thing you can do first and foremost when someone is upset is to practice active listening skills and to do your best to show empathy for what they are going through.

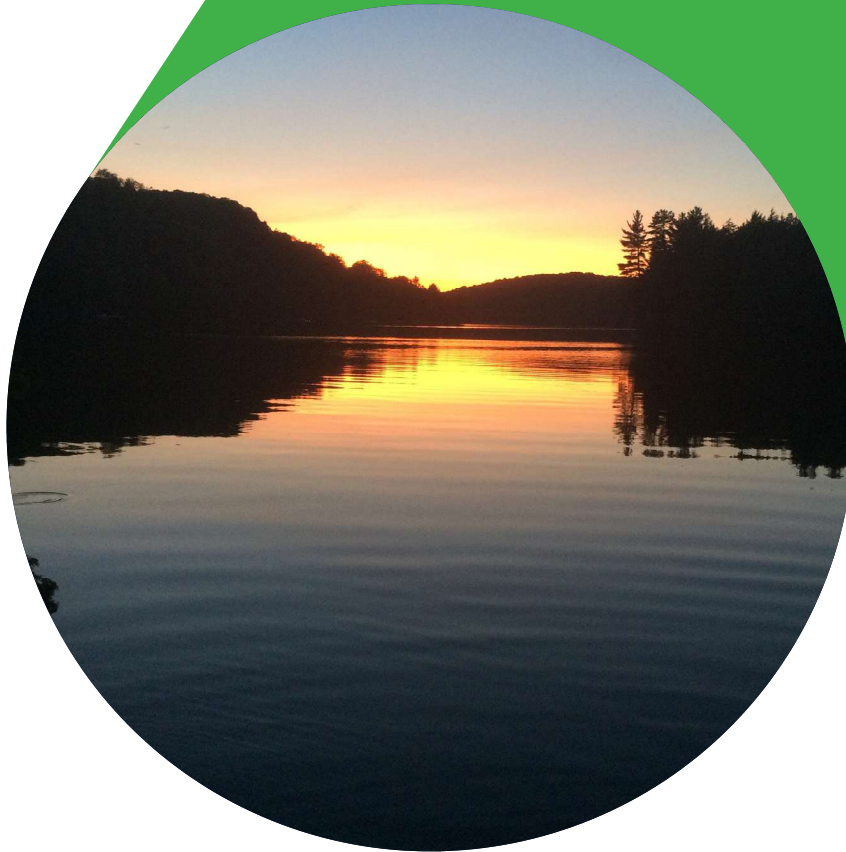
Part of recognizing the harm experienced by youth within access to services is also recognizing the ways that we can change and do better. It is not advisable to deny or “explain away” negative experiences that youth may have while accessing healthcare.

Luckily, we are also in a position where we can work to repair some of this harm and help to prevent future negative experiences. While we can’t travel back in time to prevent the initial moment of conflict or frustration, we can assure peers that we will do our part in working to ensure that this does not happen again.



SO WHAT
DOES “DOING
OUR PART”
LOOK LIKE?

1. Always start with validation! In order to validate, you must make an effort to understand someone’s experience from their perspective. The more you understand, the more you are able to validate, and the better you can understand where the challenge lies and what possible next steps are.
2. When figuring out next steps, do your best to involve the young person in informing the process while also respecting their boundaries and capacity.
3. Consider the context of the situation at hand and the context of the peer you are working with. Offer them options you believe would prioritize their well-being and desire to be heard with the amount of effort being asked of them. Ask them how they would want to be heard and what changes they would like to see. Likely, they have some ideas of their own around what could prevent something like this from happening again
4. Do not make promises to your peer that you can’t keep but do feel free to share that you are committed to taking action around their experience. Share with them the process you will be taking and what kind of follow-up they can expect (e.g., “I’m going to check in with my supervisor around reaching out to your counsellor to talk about the experience you had recently. I will let you know what my supervisor says”)
5. Once you have an understanding of how your peer would like to proceed—it’s time to advocate and act as a bridge from their experience to the experience of their care team (and your colleagues).
6. If your peer would like you to do so, you can offer feedback to your colleagues about their approach to working with young people. This can have a hand in affecting real change and informing their future practice. You’ll learn more about giving feedback later in this chapter. Similarly, approaching leadership at your place of work and requesting particular training can also be a way to ensure that the whole team experiences growth. **It is incredibly important to balance the need for feedback with respect for your peer’s confidentiality. Check in with your peer and ask them to explicitly state what they would feel comfortable with you sharing with others.**
7. Follow up with your peer and let them know what next steps have been taken. Keep them updated on any developments and continue to ask for feedback on how this is being handled and how they feel throughout the process in order to prioritize their comfort and safety.



If a peer you were working with approached you to let you know that a doctor that you work with had misgendered them—what steps would you take to address this?

Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is just as important in our communication with others. How we give feedback (our attitude, our facial expressions, and our stance) greatly impacts how others respond to us. Don't wait too long to give the feedback otherwise the individual may not remember the situation and they may continue with a behavior that is upsetting to you without understanding that it upsets you.

how can you help the receiver?

Giver: "You freaked me out when you frowned like that... it reminded me of the way my parents used to frown. What's going on?"



Receiver: "I didn't even realize I was frowning. Let me think about why for a sec."

does the receiver appear ready to accept feedback?



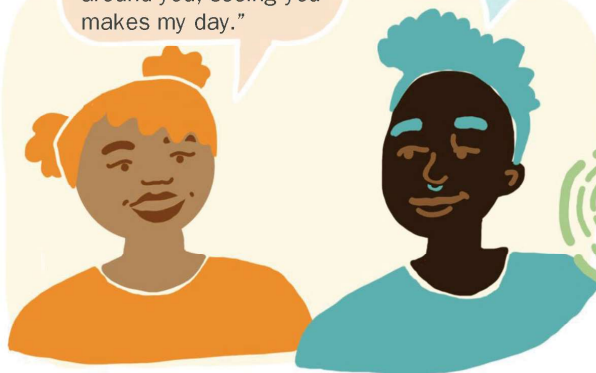
Giver: "You're crying, I can see that. What's going on?"

be direct with real feeling.

This helps build trust between the giver and the receiver.

Giver: "I love being around you, seeing you makes my day."

Receiver: "Awww, thanks. That's really nice of you to say."



••• hold space for the person you're giving feedback to, to move through feelings

describe the action and impact, not the person.

Instead of feedback about who they are as a person, which can be perceived as judgmental or threatening

Giver: "I appreciate where you're coming from. And when you do x I find it harmful in x way... or I don't agree with it because in my experience..."



be specific rather than general.

– with good, clear and preferably recent examples.

Receiver: "Oh, I didn't realize I was doing that. Thanks for being honest. Let me absorb that for a minute. I want us to be able to talk openly about this stuff."

Tune into what the receiver can handle at that time...



Giver: "I appreciate that you checked in on everyone in the group today, you were so great at picking up on when people needed support."

Receiver: "Thanks! I felt pretty good about today."

Giver: "I think maybe it would be helpful right now to think about all the times you've succeeded to pump yourself up a bit. A little faith in yourself can go a long way."



Receiver: "I know.... It's just hard. But I'll try."

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNICATING FEEDBACK

It can be hard to give feedback, especially when you're worried about hurting others' feelings, or you're not used to it. It can be helpful to remember that the intention behind giving feedback isn't to make others feel bad, it's to help them grow, to assert your boundaries and keep you safe, and to help build your relationship with each other.

SOME TIPS TO HELP WITH GIVING FEEDBACK ARE:

- **Be timely:** Give feedback as close to the behaviour, incident or experience as possible.
- **Be considerate:** When giving negative feedback, do it in private, so the person doesn't feel like others are judging them.
- **Be specific:** Focus on the specifics of a particular incident rather than general statements.
- **Be personal:** Use "I" statements.
- **Be kind:** Incorporate kind words into your feedback when possible.
- **Be curious:** Follow up after giving the feedback to see how it landed. It's okay if, at first, the person needs some time to process it.

Picture this:

A youth you have been working with is consistently showing up late to appointments they make with you, sometimes making you miss your lunch or making you late for other meetings or appointments. You really look forward to seeing them and working with them. However, you find yourself not having the time you want with them.

It also stresses you out when you are late to other appointments or meetings or when you can't get a break in. They have made an appointment with you today and show up 45 minutes late.

Keeping in mind the tips mentioned, roleplay in partners giving feedback to your youth peer.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Asking questions is important in active listening because it allows the speaker to elaborate on their beliefs and feelings.²⁴ However, the way we ask questions and the kind of questions that we ask can inform how our conversations go and where they take us.

There are two types of questions: **open-ended** and **close-ended**. Open-ended questions facilitate conversation by asking for more information or examples, which motivates the speaker to talk more about their experience.

On the other hand, close-ended questions run the risk of limiting the discussion, but they can be helpful as clarifying questions such as when you ask, "Do you mean...?" Make sure that the yes or no question does not stifle the conversation or make the speaker feel like they do not need to elaborate on the details.

Open-ended

To begin an interview; encourage elaboration of details; elicit specific examples; and motivate the other person to communicate

Examples

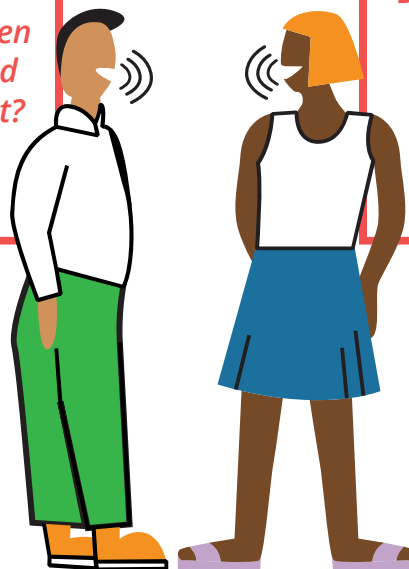
"What was your family like while you were growing up?"
"Why is that important to you?"
"What were you feeling when that happened?" *"What did you do when they said that?"*

Closed-ended

To obtain specific information; identify parameters of a problem or issue; narrow the topic of discussion; interrupt an over-talkative speaker

Examples

"Are you going to have the test done?"
"Did you drink before you got into the car?" *"Do you smoke often?"*
"Do you exercise?"
"Do you like your job?"



**WHAT
KINDS OF
QUESTIONS
ARE YOU MOST
COMFORTABLE ASKING
OR ANSWERING
IN YOUR OWN
CONVERSATIONS?**

**WOULD
YOU CHANGE
HOW YOU ASK OR
ANSWER QUESTIONS
IN FUTURE
CONVERSATIONS?**

PARAPHRASING

Paraphrasing is restating what another person has said to you, only in your own words. Paraphrasing is not simply repeating what the other person says word for word. It is a statement of what you understood, and it shows the speaker what their ideas meant to you. Through paraphrasing, you can show and test your understanding, and if you are wrong, you have an opportunity to correct your misunderstanding. This means you have to be open to correction and show the speaker you are listening to their words intently. Sometimes you can discover underlying messages that are not clear from what the person has said.

YOU ARE THE LISTENER, AND A PERSON MAKES THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS TO YOU. WRITE A PARAPHRASE RESPONSE FOR EACH ONE.

I don't even want to go to this therapy group because it'll just be another person telling me what to do.

The hardest thing right now is not having anyone to talk to about this.

I hate having to go to the food bank, I could never tell my friends I do it. They wouldn't get it.

COMMUNICATION BLOCKS

Sometimes there are actions or habits in our communication that blocks our discussion or conversation and prevents the speaker from sharing their experiences.²⁴ For example, sometimes we interrupt the speaker to show our agreement, and even though that may seem like a good thing, it prevents the speaker from talking about the topic in the way they would like.

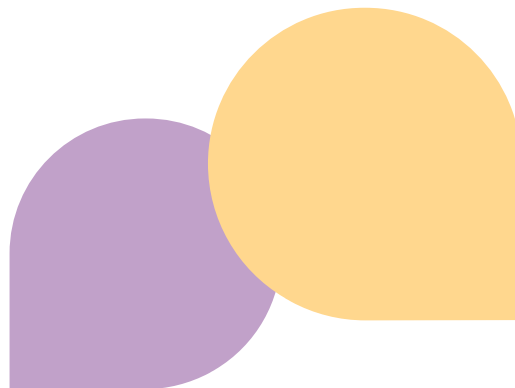
However, there are also other communication blocks that are much bigger than interrupting or showing agreement such as:

- Changing the subject without explanation
- Explaining someone else's behaviour to them
- Advice and persuasion
- Showing agreement too quickly and too often
- Expectations based on what has happened in the past
- Approval or disapproval on personal grounds
- Denying their feelings
- Commands or orders
- Emotional obligations
- Blaming the speaker for something



The following factors can also result in poor communication:

- Status, power imbalance or social role may act as a barrier if either party views their position as less or greater than the other
- Stereotyping by expecting certain behaviors because of a person's perceived cultural group
- Strong feelings about the subject or individual
- Emotional block due to a person's past experiences, which causes some words to become emotionally charged
- Past experiences
- Pre-occupation
- Hidden agenda
- Defensiveness



One of the best ways to communicate with your peers may be phrasing your thoughts and feelings using "I" statements. For example:

"I feel upset because you did not show up to meet me."

"I felt hurt when you called me stupid."

"I am really frustrated that you ran away from me in the mall."

A technique that may be helpful is to remember to use a format like this:

"I feel [describe the emotion you are feeling]."

"When you [tell the person what they are doing that makes you feel angry]."

"I need you to [tell them what they can do]."

What do you think the difference is between starting a sentence with "You are..." and "I feel..."?

How will the outcome be different?

SELF-DISCLOSURE

Self-disclosure, in the context of peer support, is the act of telling peers you're engaging with about some of your own personal and vulnerable experiences. Being a peer support worker is technically a form of self-disclosure, as you are more often than not presenting yourself as someone who may journey with some of the same barriers, obstacles, or experiences as those you work with.

The skill of self-disclosure involves the sharing of important personal information by the peer support worker. The most helpful self-disclosures are those related to similar past issues that the peer support worker has been through and that the peer is still struggling with.

It can be so valuable for peers we work with to be able to recognize parts of themselves and their experiences in us, as they can trust that we know what it feels like to be judged or stigmatized for our life circumstances. Just as often, peers look to us as resources, as our real-life experiences accessing resources and supports can be a valuable tool in helping them navigate their own ways to wellness.

If peer support is a form of self-disclosure, then you may wonder—why do we need to be careful with it? The answer is that self-disclosure, like any tool, if used correctly and thoughtfully, can help build amazing things, and if used incorrectly or without thought, can be harmful. This is why being prepared helps us to gauge which situations, and in what ways, are best to self-disclose and which are not.

Take a look at the table below for a list of pros and cons associated with self-disclosure—take a minute to add any you feel are missing.

PROS

- It can reassure the peer that they are not alone in how they are feeling/what they are experiencing
- Can give peers a sense of rapport with their peer support worker, as it is something both of you can relate to
- Can make the peer feel more comfortable around you because they are being authentic – by self-disclosing you are letting the youth know that you understand their circumstance and you care about what they are going through
- Shows peers that just because the peer support worker is in this job role or seen as a “professional”, they are still human too and have experienced some adversity and are therefore willing to help support peers by sharing personal experiences; helps to validate what the peer is speaking about to the peer support worker
- Builds a sense of trust and safety between the peer support worker and peer

CONS

- It can take away from the initial reason of why the peer came to you in the first place/the peer becomes less important because now the topic has switched to being about you (the peer support worker) and not the peer
- Potential for over-sharing/material becomes irrelevant to the peer
- You can still connect and build a rapport with a youth without having to self-disclose
- Can make a peer feel that you are trying to tell them what they “should” do
- Could set you up to swoop in and try and “fix” everything
- Could make a peer feel that they now have to support you around your personal experiences
- Can be excessive to the point of blurring the lines and having a peer feel like a friend
- Can lead to your boundaries being breached by the peer



relevant & simple



Only self-disclose material that is relevant to the peer. Avoid extravagant and rambling stories about yourself. Keep self-disclosure as general and un-detailed as possible to connect or make a point without re-traumatizing yourself or the peer you're working with.



don't dump

Don't use self-disclosure as a means of unburdening your own unresolved issues on to the youth. This may result in the youth feeling as though they are mentoring the peer support worker.

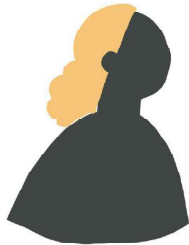
not too fresh



Self-disclosure of experiences or traumas should only be done with experiences or traumas that are well on their way to being healed as opposed to new or unresolved ones.

Self-Disclosure

for youth peer support workers



don't compare

Don't use self-disclosure to prove to a youth that their life could be worse.



purpose

Ask yourself – what purpose am I hoping to achieve with self-disclosing this? Before you go ahead.



not too early not too often

Be sure you don't use self-disclosure too early or too often.

· FOUNDRY ·

VULNERABILITY

Vulnerability is a key factor in the reciprocal nature of a peer support relationship. How many people in your life do you know that can quickly sum up what exactly a peer support worker does? Even at the core of this work, there's a lot of vulnerability in the fact that we're all still learning what peer support work is, and how to do it most effectively.

It can be a hugely positive impact for youth in our community to see that we can work alongside doctors and mental health professionals without knowing all of the answers, while still being valuable members of the team. It's common for youth to feel as though they'll magically "get it" once they become adults, and it can be frustrating to feel like things aren't falling into place quickly enough or like we're not progressing as quickly as other people our age. When we share our own challenging experiences, we give peers the opportunity to feel less alone.

Overall, being appropriately vulnerable with peers, while setting clear boundaries to preserve the therapeutic relationship can be a fantastic way of helping them to learn effective boundary setting. Your vulnerability may help them release some of the pressure of wanting to come across as perfect and "incontrol" and also help them realize that they have agency and can practice self-reliance when it comes to navigating their own paths to wellness.

In the work you do, there will also be times when you need to be vulnerable with colleagues such as doctors, nurses, counsellors or medical office assistants that you work with. As a peer support worker, the core of the unique expertise that you bring is having personal, first-hand knowledge of what someone accessing services could be experiencing. This might mean that you might find it helpful to disclose past difficult or upsetting experiences with services to illustrate a point to a colleague.

For example, you might share with colleagues that you have felt a greater power imbalance in the past when clinicians would have their chairs higher than yours. Or you may share that clinicians sitting behind a table to talk to you is distancing and makes you feel uncomfortable. This is a tangible way your experience can inform and better the experience of other youth accessing services.

Vulnerability is not something you must engage in, it is a tool to use, and like any other tool, there are appropriate times to pull it out. You do not have to make yourself vulnerable if you are anticipating it may not be safe to do so. Your safety is important, so keep this in mind as you work towards mutually respectful relationships with peers.



In pairs, brainstorm some signs that would indicate that it is a good time to be vulnerable and some signs that it may not be a good time.

**A good
time to be
vulnerable...**

**Signs
it may not
be a good
time to be
vulnerable...**