

UNIT 2



Youth Art by Gabriel Jargaille

WELCOME TO PEER SUPPORT

This unit will introduce you to the work that you will be part of as a peer support worker and give you the opportunity to reflect on how to engage in peer support in a way that honors your values, strengths and goals.

WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

Peer support is “a supportive relationship between people who have a lived experience in common”.¹⁰ While there are a wide range of common lived experiences; **the goal of peer support work is to provide emotional support, acceptance, validation, and empathy regardless of the circumstances.** The focus is to ensure the person feels supported through their journey. More importantly, peer support workers ensure that people in need of support are not isolated. Shame and secrecy often prevent people from seeking the treatment they need.

The flexibility of peer support work can also complement other treatments and support services which you’ll read about later. Navigating the healthcare system and learning about the many services available can be difficult and confusing. Peer support workers can help people understand the services and treatments available to them as well as help them advocate for themselves, their friends, and their family.

This training includes fundamental topics from Peer Support Canada (PSC), formerly Peer Support Accreditation and Certification Canada (PSACC). PSC is dedicated to the advancement of peer support. They provide National Peer Support Certification, Family Peer Support Certification, and Peer Support Mentor Certification. **This training is not aimed at telling you what part of your lived experience is valuable to others. It is focused on honoring the expertise your lived experience brings.**

This curriculum is also aimed at supporting you in figuring out how to use your truth to effectively support others who are going through similar situations while also protecting your own well-being.



DEFINING YOUTH PEER SUPPORT

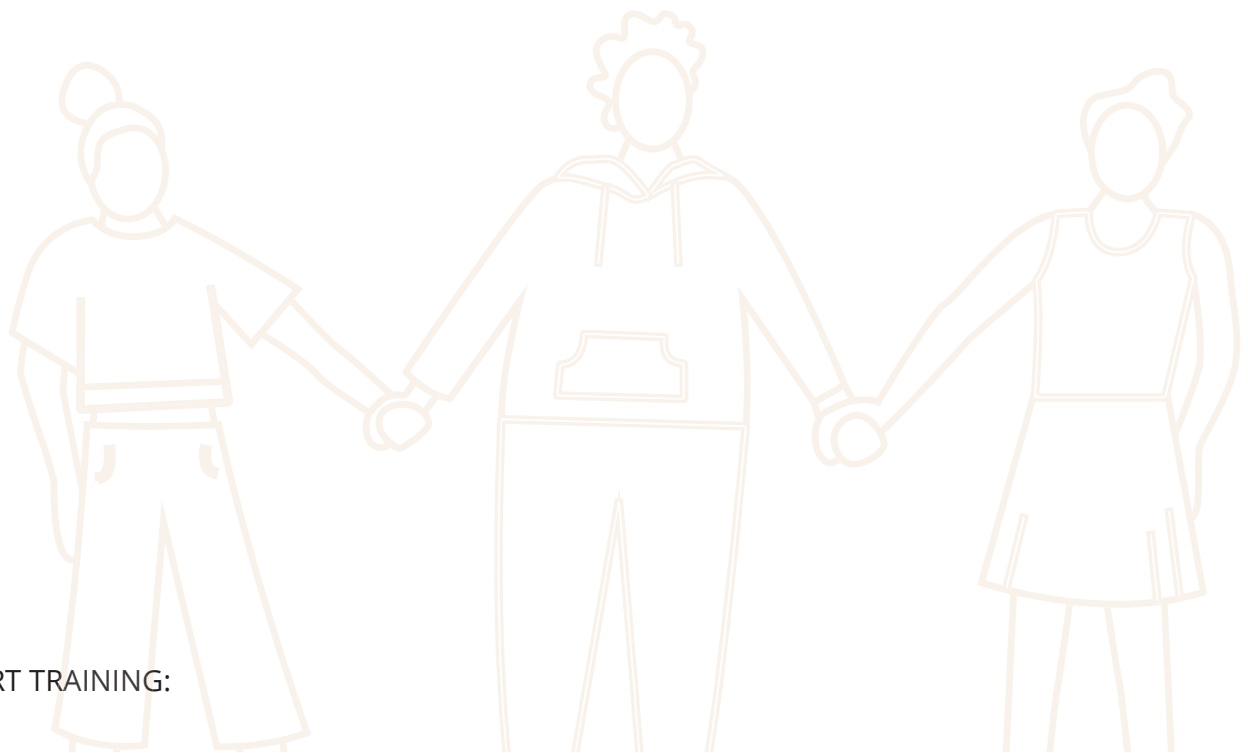
WHAT IS YOUTH PEER SUPPORT?

Youth helping youth.

When a group of young people with shared common experiences meet to exchange information, ideas, and emotional support, these individuals have the chance to empower one another. As the group builds a sense of community, participants learn that they are not alone in their experiences and that they possess skills they may not have been aware of before. As individuals with knowledge about recovery, you will be well-suited to assist others in finding their own expertise and their own paths to wellness.

Defining the age range for “youth” can be challenging. Some services may provide supports for youth aged 12-25, up to 18, or even up to 30 years. As you can see there is a lot of variation among how services define youth. For this training, when we refer to “youth” we take a developmental lens to meet youth where they are at and how they define themselves. For some people, to be a youth is more about lived experience, life stage, or mindset and can vary based on situation, geographical location, or culture. We encourage you to also consider the unique needs of different youth of all ages, for example, youth 12-15 may face different challenges than youth 16-24.

HOW DO WE DEFINE YOUTH?



PEER SUPPORT IN ONTARIO

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE ROOTS OF PEER SUPPORT?

An understanding of the roots of peer support work informs how important it is today to have these services available to those who need them. Although peer support has become more formalized over the years, it's important to remember that peer support has existed within community settings in more informal ways for many years and continues to exist today. The mental health and substance use field has changed greatly since peer support work became a growing practice. It is vital to our current practices to look back at the history of these services and to learn from the past because we are continuing the legacy of peer support work today. In addition to peer support in mental health and substance use services, they are also available in many different sectors in health care such as communities of people living with HIV/AIDS, people who have had injuries, and people living with chronic illness and/or diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

The value of sharing lived experiences is vital in helping others overcome their challenges.

HOW DID THE MOVEMENT START IN ONTARIO?

The first psychiatric institutions in Canada opened from the 1840s to the 1880s, with the first institution opening in Ontario in 1850, the Provincial Lunatic Asylum in Toronto (now CAMH).¹² Before the establishment of institutions, people living with mental health and substance use challenges had to navigate these struggles by themselves or receive informal support from other people in their lives, while some people were forced to live in houses run by charities or were put in jail. Many inhumane and harmful practices occurred in institutions, including isolation of patients from their loved ones and their community and verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse.¹³ In the 1960s there was a shift to deinstitutionalization, where many people were discharged from these hospitals into the community. This may seem like an effective change in how mental health and substance use challenges/addiction were treated but unfortunately, **many former patients were discharged into the community with no resources or support and there was a lack of existing services in the community that they could reach out to.**

The landscape of mental health care changed completely. Many people were left homeless and without any aid, which put additional stress on themselves, their families, and local communities to provide support with little to no resources themselves.¹⁴ **Although these people were no longer living in institutions, they faced stigma and discrimination because the general population did not have a strong understanding of mental health and substance use challenges/addiction.**

Frustrated with the level of care available and the discrimination they were faced with, many patient groups were established across Canada leading the consumer/survivor/ex-patient movement. These groups advocated for patient rights, created resources and services to help those in need, and provided education to challenge public perceptions about mental health and substance use challenges/addiction. Peer support initiatives were formed and changes to the Mental Health Act were lobbied for, such as increased patient access to their health records and restricting the use of restraints among patients.¹³

These efforts greatly empowered former patients who were no longer simply recipients of services but were creating their own community and taking the lead in helping each other.¹⁵ More importantly, they had their own voice in how they wanted to be treated.

An understanding of the history of the peer driven movement in Ontario informs our work today. The movement was born out of a need for change in how people with mental health and substance use challenges wanted to be treated.

What about the history of the peer driven movement interested you?

WHY DOES IT MATTER TO PEER SUPPORT WORK TODAY?

As you can see from the topics we've covered, we are still working on educating people about mental health and substance use, treatment, and support. We now better understand and value the rights of people experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges, or chronic illness. **We know they are experts of their experiences, who deserve to have a leading role in their care.** In the past, the medical model that was used resulted in people being treated poorly and being stripped of their rights. Now, we are shifting away from this perspective to recognize that there are many facets to health care that do not revolve around medication and hospitalization. This does not mean both cannot be important or necessary but that the individual can integrate many different practices into their care and there is no "one size fits all" treatment. The peer support movement's "non-clinical" approach treats people with respect and dignity and can enhance treatment and recovery.

RECOVERY

Recovery can have many different definitions. From an Indigenous perspective recovery is often known as "a healing journey." **In order to become leaders of our own treatment and to help others, we must first understand what recovery means to us and what it means to other people.**

What does recovery mean to you?

A way of looking at recovery is an ongoing, non-linear journey or "winding road" of exploring coping strategies and supporting overall wellbeing. **It is important for youth peer support workers to identify the needs, goals, and support necessary for recovery because it looks different for everyone.**

It is vital that we believe recovery is possible for all people and our work needs to be constantly informed by this core belief. Recovery is person-centered, meaning it will be informed by a person's unique circumstances and way of life. Not only will recovery be approached differently by people, it is also about possibilities and opportunities in which the person gets to decide where they want to go, live, work, study and who they want to spend their time with.

