



Intentional Peer Support

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Sustaining Intentional Peer Support in Crisis Alternatives

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As more crisis alternatives are established, the need to clearly define and understand what is unique about peer support and what it is that we aim to achieve, is growing. This article seeks to outline the key tenets of Intentional Peer Support, how it differs from traditional notions of 'help' in the mental health arena, and how a different view of the role and meaning of 'crises' in our lives can enable those who experience them to learn and grow, rather than lose their sense of personal power and identity by having decisions made for them.

The concept of crisis in mental health is an interesting one. In spite of the fact that many traditional theorists have viewed crisis as an opportunity for growth and as an essential experience in the context of one's development (Erikson, 1976), we in mental health want to medicate it, lock it up, and restrain it. In other words, the "helping" relationship is grounded in fear with the basic assumption that I'm here to assess and control your "safety." The action taken is determined by a fear-based assessment. This response has led to the overuse of forced treatment (people hospitalized against their will) and a power imbalance that then lasts for years (e.g. community commitment). Worse than that, it has led to victims of this treatment seeing themselves as unpredictably out of control and dependent on someone else's interpretation of their experience.

Whereas fear drives the use of power and control it is connection and hope that can generate new possibilities. Intentional peer support can offer a fundamentally different approach to crisis by viewing risk as the vehicle of hope. In other words, there must be hope to try something new and different and we must take risks to build on hope. Safety, then, is seen as the relational environment where we feel supported and inspired by each other to try on these new ways of thinking: no risk assessment, no power imbalance.

Intentional Peer Support utilizes four basic principles: Connection, Worldview, Mutuality, and Moving Towards. Connection is defined by the presence and openness of the relationship. It is a qualitative experience and when working, produces and shares energy. Worldview is an awareness of how we've learned to think and understand in the ways that we do, while being curious and interested in the worldviews of others. Mutuality is the reciprocal

process of creating new meaning out of dialogue. The value of mutuality lies in the assumption and practice of each person both giving and receiving in the relationship, rather than the traditional assumption of one person being there to 'help' the other (creating a power imbalance and assuming one person has more 'expertise'). Finally; moving towards is the path that guides us in what we can create together and where we want to go, rather than being simply a focus on 'what's wrong' and on solving problems.

Barriers

A number of 'crisis alternatives' have been established in order to practice these principles, and while this all sounds relatively simple on the surface it requires an ongoing consistency of intention and energy to sustain, since most of us have learned about “help” from a place of power and fear; thus in difficult and challenging situations we tend to default right back to what we know, and revert to taking control. If we don't want to end up replicating yet another institution we will need to be particularly aware of some of these potential pitfalls:

- **We just want to “help.”** This need alone often focuses our attention on problems. It becomes our agenda to make a difference that we feel good about, leading to an expert/patient type of relationship.
- **We want a crisis alternative to be a relaxing, calm environment.** Although a relaxing environment can be a good thing, if that's what we stress we use power when things get uncomfortable
- **It's all about the needs of the guest.** We begin to see the guest as the one needing to do the work rather than using the intentional relationship to stretch both/many people.

So what are we trying to do?

In order to sustain intentional peer support we must constantly ask the foundational question, “What are we trying to create?” rather than “What are we trying to avoid?” (e.g. hospitalization). If we identify ourselves by what we are not, rather than what we want to accomplish we run the risk of simply becoming a cheaper form of institutionalization. Paying attention to what we are there to do allows us to understand potentially new “outcomes,” and challenges us to keep the work in relationship rather than in roles. Following are some concepts that I put together years ago, but think still apply:

- **Building Mutual Relationships.** It is only in relationships that are constantly negotiated that we build mutual respect and trust. When we consider that both of us have needs and

expertise, we learn from each other while taking chances in becoming more vulnerable and consequently more “whole.” As we take new risks in relationship, we find ourselves breaking out of old roles and assumptions, opening doors to self and relational discoveries that we never before knew existed.

- **Being with “big” feelings.** We are not a culture that has a lot of tolerance for intensity or “big” feelings.’ We tend to want to calm people down or make it stop because we are uncomfortable. In peer support we can recognize that people have a lot of big feelings and they aren’t all dangerous, they are in fact, rich with information.
- **Understanding people’s worldview.** Can we understand the ways in which people’s worldview impact the way they make meaning of their experiences now?
- **Challenging the current worldview.** When trusting relationships develop and when both people are in control of the relationship, we can gently begin to challenge the ways each of us have learned to make meaning of our experiences. We can let each other know what works for us and what doesn’t. Perhaps we are not de-compensating...maybe we’re justifiably angry and we don’t know ways to express it. Perhaps we’re not in suicidal depression; maybe we just feel tremendous shame and guilt for things we learned to believe were “our fault.” When people compare and share, inevitably new understandings are created and relationships deepen.
- **Creating a new, shared worldview.** As relationships deepen we tend to take more risks, share our vulnerabilities and try on ways of “seeing” that were not previously available to us. We find ourselves in the process of examining our own beliefs and assumptions and we continuously try these out in relationship. We find that we are growing through the context of relationship. There are no limits to the possibilities because there are no static roles. We have the opportunity to be vulnerable and strong, helper and helped. We find that others are finding hope through our successes and that they are taking new risks.

Peer support is a culture of healing. As people practice new ways of “being” together through even the most difficult times, possibilities for breaking old patterns and creating new opportunities are endless. Crisis then just becomes another word for re-defining our experience and ourselves and instead of needing to be locked up we can begin to break free.