



Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and
Occupational Health Professionals, Program
Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



Peer Support: Building Connection, Trust, and Everyday Strength at Work

Workplaces are made up of people carrying a wide range of experiences—some visible, many not. Stress, life transitions, health issues, relationship challenges, loss, pressure, and uncertainty can all shape how someone moves through their day. In that context, connection matters. Being able to talk to someone who understands, without needing to explain everything from the beginning, can make a meaningful difference.

Across Canada and the United States, research and lived experience continue to point in the same direction. Hundreds of individuals from different backgrounds—including youth, Indigenous communities, and people navigating a range of mental health experiences—have shared how peer support has shaped their recovery journeys. These insights, alongside international research, show that peer support can strengthen self-confidence, improve quality of life, and expand social support.

In many cases, peer support has also been linked to lower levels of distress and reduced reliance on more intensive services. Even small, well-supported programs can have a meaningful impact—both for individuals and across the workplace—when they stay grounded in the core values of connection, mutual respect, and shared experience.

In this article, we explore what peer support can look like in a workplace setting, why it matters, and how these conversations can shape everyday experiences at work—for both those offering support and those reaching out.

What Is Peer Support?

Peer support brings people together through shared experience. In a workplace setting, it often takes the form of structured programs where trained peers offer emotional and practical support to colleagues. These peers are not counsellors, they are individuals who have navigated their own challenges and are prepared to listen, reflect, and support others in a respectful and thoughtful way.

While counselling is provided by licensed professionals and may involve assessment, diagnosis, or structured therapeutic approaches, peer support is rooted in shared experience and mutual understanding. It focuses on connection, listening, and offering support from a place of lived experience, rather than clinical expertise.

At the same time, peer support is guided by clear structure and intention. Unlike informal conversations that happen in passing, peer support follows clear principles. There are guidelines around confidentiality, boundaries, and role clarity. Training helps peer support volunteers understand how to listen without judgment, how to respond when someone is struggling, and when to encourage additional support.

Some organizations offer one-on-one conversations, while others include group spaces, drop-in sessions, or a mix of options. What stays consistent is the intention: creating a space where people feel heard, respected, and not alone in what they're going through.

At its core, peer support is built on shared understanding. When someone speaks with a peer who has faced similar challenges, there is often less pressure to explain or justify their experience. That sense of recognition can help conversations feel more natural and less guarded.

Why Peer Support Matters

In many workplaces, people hesitate to reach out for help. Concerns about privacy, stigma, or how they might be perceived can create distance. This can be especially true in environments where expectations are high, roles are demanding, or emotional strain is part of the job.

Peer support helps close that gap. It offers a form of support that feels familiar and accessible. Speaking with someone who understands the realities of the role, the pace of the work, or the culture of the workplace can make it easier to open up.

In roles like healthcare and public safety, some experiences are harder to put into words—especially for someone who hasn't been there. Long shifts, critical incidents, and the emotional weight that can follow don't always translate easily outside that context. Talking with someone who understands that environment

firsthand can make it easier to speak openly, without having to explain or simplify what it feels like.

At the same time, peer support is valuable across all types of workplaces. Whether someone works in an office, in the field, in operations, or in a leadership role, shared experience can create a strong foundation for connection. When support feels visible and accessible, conversations tend to open up and teams may feel more at ease checking in with one another. As a leader, peer support programs can help strengthen that sense of connection across your team.

Peer support also plays a role in shaping workplace culture. When people see that it's safe to talk about challenges and that support is available, it can shift how teams communicate and relate to one another. Over time, this can contribute to a more open, respectful, and supportive environment.

How Peer Support Works in Practice

Peer support is grounded in a few key principles that guide how conversations take place, such as:

- **Mutuality.** Even though one person may be in the role of a volunteer, the connection is still based on shared humanity. The goal is not to “fix” or direct someone, but to listen and understand.
- **Choice.** Participation in peer support is always voluntary. People can decide if, when, and how they want to engage. This sense of control helps create emotional safety.
- **Confidentiality.** Clear guidelines help ensure that conversations remain private, with specific exceptions when there is a risk of harm. Knowing that what is shared will be respected can make it easier for people to speak openly.
- **Strength-based approach.** Rather than focusing only on what is difficult, conversations can include what has helped in the past, what feels manageable right now, and what support might look like moving forward.
- **Defined boundaries.** They don't provide clinical advice or diagnosis. When someone needs additional care, peer support volunteers can help guide them toward appropriate resources.

These elements come together to create a space that feels supportive without being overwhelming, structured without feeling rigid.

What it can feel like on both sides of the conversation

Sitting down as a peer support volunteer or reaching out for support can feel different each time. Some conversations start easily, while others take a bit longer to settle. Both are part of the process.

For someone offering peer support, the role often comes down to being present. There isn't pressure to have the right words or to guide the conversation in a specific direction. Listening, allowing space, and staying open to what's being shared can be enough to help someone feel heard. Trust tends to build gradually through small moments—attention, respect, and consistency.

At times, the conversation may move into areas that call for additional support. When that happens, helping connect the person with resources such as your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) or other professional services becomes part of the role. In situations where there may be a risk of harm, confidentiality may need to be set aside to support safety, following established protocols. Stepping back can also be part of supporting the moment, especially if the conversation feels closely connected to one's own experiences or difficult to hold. Taking a pause, seeking guidance, or arranging follow-up support helps keep the experience steady for everyone involved.

For someone reaching out, the starting point can look very different. Some people come in with something clear they want to talk about. Others arrive with a general sense that something feels off, without knowing exactly how to describe it. A conversation can begin mid-thought, with hesitation, or with uncertainty about what to say. It doesn't need to be organized before it's shared.

What often helps is knowing the conversation can move at a comfortable pace. Nothing has to be explained perfectly, and it doesn't all need to come out at once. Over time, being on either side of these conversations can shape how support is experienced at work—steady, respectful, and available when it's needed.

What peer support can bring to the workplace

Peer support offers a range of benefits, both for individuals and for workplaces as a whole.

A sense of connection

Feeling understood can ease isolation. When people connect with someone who has been through something similar, it can reduce the sense of being alone in their experience.

Earlier conversations

Peer support often creates an entry point for discussing challenges before they become more difficult to manage. A simple conversation at the right time can help someone feel more steady and supported.

Reduced stigma

When peer support is part of workplace culture, it helps normalize conversations about mental health. Over time, this can make it easier for people to seek support in different ways.

Increased confidence in reaching out

Speaking with a peer can build comfort and trust. For some, it becomes a step toward accessing additional supports, such as counselling or other services.

Support during transitions

Peer support can be especially helpful during periods of change, such as returning to work after leave, adjusting to new roles, or moving through challenging projects or life events.

Strengthened teams

When people feel supported, it can influence how they show up at work. Communication can feel more open, and teams may develop a stronger sense of trust and cohesion.

Relevance for high-impact roles

For public safety personnel and healthcare workers, peer support can offer space to process experiences that are difficult to share elsewhere. Conversations with peers who understand the nature of the work can feel more grounded and validating.

Research continues to show that structured peer support programs can improve well-being, increase engagement, and encourage help-seeking behaviours.

Supporting the Peer Support Volunteers

Being there for others can be meaningful, and at times it can also take energy. Ongoing support makes a difference—whether that's training, regular check-ins, opportunities to debrief, or access to guidance when something feels harder to hold.

Clear boundaries are also part of this. Peer support volunteers are encouraged to recognize their limits, step back when needed, and seek support themselves. This helps maintain both their well-being and the quality of the support they offer.

Where Peer Support Fits Alongside Other Supports

Peer support works alongside other forms of care. It doesn't replace professional services, but it can complement them. For some people, peer support is the first step in reaching out. For others, it becomes an ongoing source of connection alongside other supports.

Having multiple options available allows individuals to choose what feels right for them. Some may prefer a conversation with a peer. Others may choose counselling or a combination of supports. The goal is not to direct people toward one path, but to make support more accessible in different ways.

Building a more supportive workplace

Creating space for peer support reflects a broader commitment to well-being. It signals that connection, understanding, and care are part of how people work together.

Over time, these spaces can shape workplace culture in meaningful ways. Conversations may feel more open, and checking in with one another can become more natural. Support becomes something that is shared, rather than something people feel they need to manage on their own.

If peer support is available in your workplace, it can be worth exploring what that looks like and how to access it. This might include one-on-one conversations, group spaces, or informal check-ins, depending on how the program is set up.

You can also reach out through your EFAP for confidential support. Speaking with a counsellor can offer additional space to talk things through, reflect on what you're experiencing, and consider what might help next—at your own pace.

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