



Summary

Peer support in practice: what works best to make peer support projects successful

About the DRILL Programme

DRILL (Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning) was an innovative 5 year, UK wide programme led by disabled people, for disabled people and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Launched in 2015, the programme was managed by a partnership of Disability Action Northern Ireland, Disability Rights UK, Disability Wales and Inclusion Scotland.

The aim of the programme was to build better evidence about approaches which enable disabled people to achieve independent living. The findings from the projects it funded can be used to inform future provision across a wide range of policy areas and give a greater voice to disabled people in decisions which affect them.

This is one of a series of summaries of the projects supported by DRILL. Final reports, toolkits and summaries of all the projects are available from the DRILL website at www.drilluk.org.uk.

Overview of the project

This project researched the experiences of peer support workers with mental health problems. It identified both good practice and opportunities for improvement.

Approach

The project conducted a qualitative study, with 36 participants across six organisations. The research team all had lived experience of mental health issues and providing peer support.

Semi-structured interviews, ranging from 30 minutes to 2 hours, took place with staff from the various organisations. Participants were asked open questions about their experiences in delivering peer support and their relationship to their work.

Findings

The project found that there is no one way to define peer support, or a universal technique. The interviews showed that it most commonly depends on the needs of the person receiving the support, the service peers are working within and the personality of the individual peers.

Peer support workers using their lived experiences, where purposeful, created empathy and allowed them to relate to those receiving the support. This encourages equality in relationships as the peer support workers have been in similar situations.

Managers of peer staff often felt that peers were able to be more sensitive to the emotional needs of the people they work with. The process of training, with lived and work experience, made peers more empathetic than their non-peer counterparts.

One of the key aspects of peer support roles is that it often allows peers to prioritise spending time with people. The ability to listen well as part of their job was deemed to be of central importance.

Peer support workers were in strong opposition to a 'disorder based' approach to mental health. This is where mental health issues are seen in isolation from the trauma and inequality that produce or exacerbate them. They promoted an approach which seeks to understand and know the whole individual, rather than reducing them to a single experience, situation or label. Those who are struggling with their mental health should not be defined by those struggles.

Findings (continued)

The way peer support workers treat individuals is important. Interactions with staff can often define people's expectations of how it is acceptable to be treated.

Progress within peer support relationships can be slow. Individuals must be ready, and it is sometimes difficult to feel like workers are making a difference. Peer support is about positive interactions and believing that, over time, those interactions will make a difference.

Recommendations

The project outlined many recommendations, some of which are listed here. All recommendations are included in the full report which is linked below.

- Intentional planning and strategic thinking must be used to incorporate peer support into organisations. Making it work is the responsibility of the entire team
- Time must be given to process the introduction of peer support as it requires a culture change
- Programmes which involved experienced peers worked better. It is possible for non-peers to manage successful programmes as long as their values align with the principles of peer support
- It is important that senior level staff who are making strategy decisions understand why they want to introduce peer support
- Team members must be enthusiastic about peer support, with an understanding of what peer workers do and how that fits with their work
- Recruitment practices must be altered to ensure that the right people are hired. Adapting job descriptions and interview processes can allow for an evaluation of an individual's ability to action their values into practice
- Training should be delivered by peers who are experienced in delivering peer support
- Using wellness plans help teams to understand what their staff and colleagues struggle with, and ways to support them
- Managers must understand what supportive practice means to each individual member of staff.

Final report

Peer Support in Practice: What Works Best to Make Peer Support Projects Successful

Please click on report name to read the full report.

Project Partners

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