

Human connection

What does this mean?

People involved in peer support actively acknowledge that they have a specific connection with each other based on their shared experiences. These common experiences may help peers feel that they understand each other better than other people in their lives. Previous negative experiences can be put to a positive use through this connection.

Peers work together to create a warm, friendly, welcoming environment for everyone, and act with intentional kindness towards each other online or face-to-face. Peers understand, emotionally support, and care for each other. This generates a culture of companionship and belonging. Through their connection with each other, people may come to feel less isolated and that they are part of a supportive community.

If it's not caring and warm then people aren't going to come; or if they do, you're going to lose them straightaway. It's hard sometimes to keep people coming because their lives are quite rocky at the time. So we want it to be somewhere they can come and actually feel, "Well I go there, I get support. I feel better once I've been and that enables me to carry on living my life the best I can".

I don't really have, in the real world, anyone who can empathise with me... I've got no one in the same position as me, that is close to me, who understands. For me, that's a big part of [why I use online forums]...

Why is it important?

The human connection people may find through peer support is important for a number of reasons. Many people experiencing mental health problems may feel isolated in their day-to-day lives. The sense of connection, empathy, and understanding found through peer support can ease that sense of isolation. Over time, these connections may develop into a sense of community that may be missing in other parts of a person's life. This can help them feel like they're no longer alone with their difficulties.

Human connections are built in an environment where peers feel safe and have choice and control over what happens to them. Over time, peers who interact with each other in an equal and two directional way will develop genuine human connections with each other.

For many people, the relationships they develop within peer support feel genuine and authentic. Where peers express care or empathy for each other, these feelings are genuine, and for some people this may be one of the things that makes peer support effective. Because peers have experienced similar things, they feel they are understood when they speak and do not need to justify their feelings or experiences.

For some peers, this is a contrast to experiences they may have had in clinical environments, where the relationships are often conducted within rigid professional boundaries. In these clinical situations, some people find it difficult to fully explain their experiences, or may feel that they are not listened to carefully, understood, or taken seriously.

Relationships may develop into genuine friendships, which may involve people socialising outside the boundaries of the peer support space and exchanging personal details. Where this happens, it is important that there are guidelines about what peer friends may discuss outside of peer support, in order to remain safe and respect the privacy and confidentiality of other peers.

What can it look like in practice?

Peer support thrives in environments that are warm, friendly, and supportive. This does not happen by accident and is a great achievement by the people involved. It is often based on lots of little actions, such as:

- welcoming each other as they arrive
- making each other tea or sitting with each other over refreshments
- being kind to each other (and to themselves)

- being patient when someone is having difficulty expressing themselves
- offering each other practical help or support
- having everyday conversations about things that aren't necessarily peer support-related, where appropriate
- sharing jokes and funny stories
- getting to know each other's hobbies and interests.

Reflection questions



- Does everyone feel respected when they take part in peer support?
- How do relationships with other members change over time?
- What support is available to help people share difficult experiences, if they want to?
- Do people feel comfortable saying no?
- How can members show that they understand or are inspired when someone is sharing their experiences?
- Do we need training or discussion to develop our skills in helping others to speak openly and listen fully?