

Our ambitions for peer support

Peer support sector stories

Karen & Marissa, the directors of With-you Consultancy have been involved for over 14 years in supporting organisations with their introduction and implementation of peer support. Recognised as leaders in the field, their expertise led to the organisation being the only training provider to be commissioned by HEE across all 7 English regions to provide peer support worker and supervision training. Here, they share their ambitions for being involved in peer support.

The Peer support worker training is based on the HEE peer support worker competency framework and is delivered over 8 training days. This experiential training supports learners to develop core skills such as active listening and reflective practice within the context of the values, principles and history of peer support. It is suitable for any person working from a perspective of lived experience. The supervision training uses a model of Resilience Based Supervision, with training delivered over four half days. Both sets of training are delivered online, with a range of cohorts running throughout the year.

This programme of work has more than met our expectations. After over ten years of investing time in supporting pioneering individuals within individual organisations by influencing their senior managers, developing business cases, and establishing working groups, it has been reassuring to witness the rapid and eager take up of peer support training in line with the NHS Long Term Plan.

Since March 2021, we have trained hundreds of peer supporters and supervisors across the country from a range of organisations, including established large NHS Trusts and tiny voluntary sector organisations with specialist interests related to health conditions or demographic characteristics, or interests such as gardening or creative practice. We have enjoyed hearing about the passion and commitment that the learners and their organisations are bringing to ensure that lived expertise is valued across mental health care and support. Our own organisation has grown, with an increasing number of Associates to deliver and support the training, and we have now established three specific networks (for peer supporters, for peer supporters who identify as Black or Asian, and for carers peer supporters), as well as our industry magazine.

Peer support is all about relational working and we take this into everything we do at With-you: from our relationships with our colleagues through to our relationships with learners and with external organisations and commissioners. Our network of associates

have a range of backgrounds and expertise, ensuring that we remain alert and curious about the meaning of difference in relation to the mutuality of peer support.

Challenges

With training starting in March 2021, when there was still uncertainty about the progress of the pandemic, we had to ensure we could deliver the courses online. While our established mode of delivery had always been in-person, we were in a good position to shift online having already tested online working as part of a national programme for the development of peer-based approaches in secure care for NHSE. This experience had given us the confidence to deliver training online at scale: we knew that learners valued meeting people from other organisations, including across the country.

No training will ever suit 100% of all learners. At With-you, we recognise that everyone has individual needs and learning styles and we aim to be inclusive, responsive and supportive. In the course feedback there is always a mix of views: for example, some people value being able to take a full day to concentrate on their learning while others don't like being online all day. We respond to feedback: for example by providing the choice of a part time offer.

What went well? What went not so well?

While the training delivery has been successful, we are still concerned about the culture of teams that peer supporters are working in. Previously, we had experience of the importance of ensuring that teams were offered development days to establish the groundwork for success. However, where funding is solely allocated to training delivery, organisations skip this important initial step, assuming that everyone is on board with peer support. But working alongside people with lived experience, and the shift from a relationship of service user and service provider to one of colleagues can raise concerns and anxieties which are expressed with discriminatory remarks and thoughtless comments. We recommend team development days to demonstrate that the team is valued and provide an opportunity for concerns to be heard and considered without judgement.

Where organisations have commissioned team development days, we have witnessed their change in outlook towards peer support. One instance that stands out is where the team moved within six months from a position of wanting additional nurses not peer supporters through to recognising the positive impact of the new peer supporters on their own practice.

Our approach to supervision has also proved to be successful. One psychologist was well versed in Supervision and Compassion-focussed therapy, although they were new to, and unsure about, supervision of peer supporters. Our approach made all the

difference: they were excited to see how it would land within their future practice alongside the peer supporters.

Peer support is not only bringing new roles into teams, but a new way of working that focusses on valuing lived expertise. We encourage regular development days so that teams are able to discuss this change in culture and what it means for everyone, so that the roles can be further developed.

3 things we've learnt

- Be ambitious about peer support and the difference it can make everywhere – we've worked with schools, construction companies and police forces – it's not just for mental health organisations.
- Leadership at all levels recognises the responsibility of everyone to understand peer support and offers opportunities for true co-production
- It's still early days for the growth of peer support. Development days, peer support networks, and information exchange events are all an essential part of ongoing training opportunities to ensure you remain up-to-date with current national developments.