

PEER SUPPORT AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS INJURIES

Peer support can be a helpful tool for navigating post-traumatic stress injuries (PTSI). This resource provides information on what peer support is, what it looks like, what to expect (and not to expect), how it can help, as well as key considerations when accessing peer support.

What is peer support?

Peer support can be described as having someone meet you where you are and walk alongside you in your journey.

Peer support involves a supportive relationship between two or more people who share a common lived and living experience. Shared experiences can create a sense of understanding and connection between people, which may be difficult to find elsewhere, depending on your specific circumstances.



What does peer support look like?

On the surface, peer support can look different for different people and in different places. There are a variety of formats offered, not all of which may be available to you. You may prefer certain formats to others, depending on your unique needs and experiences. Peer support may be:

- Offered inside or outside your workplace
- One-on-one or group-based
- Online, in person, over the phone, via mobile app, or hybrid
- Talk-based or activity-based
- Offered by peers only (people with lived and living experience) or alongside a mental health professional
- Informal (e.g. drop-in, naturally occurring) or formal (e.g. structured setting)
- Role-specific (e.g. for police officers or paramedics) or general (for public safety personnel [PSP] or former/current military members in general, or PTSIs in general)
- Frequent (e.g. weekly or monthly) or infrequent (e.g. ad hoc)
- Short-term (e.g. one month) or long-term (e.g. over one year)
- Accessible immediately after a potentially psychologically traumatic event or after a period of time

What can you expect from peer support?

Your experience of peer support may vary, but there are some common things to expect (and that you should not expect) when receiving peer support.

Peer support involves:

- ✓ **Voluntary participation:** Receiving peer support is entirely voluntary and you can step away at any time if your needs or preferences change.
- ✓ **Support and encouragement:** Peers can offer emotional, social and spiritual support, as well as practical support to help find other resources.
- ✓ **Active listening:** Peers can help each other feel heard and valued.
- ✓ **Validation:** Since they may have had similar experiences, peers can validate your thoughts and feelings.
- ✓ **Safe environment:** With confidentiality and trust being paramount, peer support can provide a safe place to vent about challenges and share your triumphs.
- ✓ **Shared power:** There is no power differential between peers. Peers walk beside one another.
- ✓ **Mutual respect:** Conversations are grounded in respect. There is no pressure to disclose personal or sensitive information about yourself.
- ✓ **Hope:** Conversations focus on the notion that recovery is possible for everyone.

Peer support does not involve:

- ✗ **Therapy, friendship or caregiving:** Peers guide people on their recovery journey. Peers are not there to provide therapeutic support, friendship or assistance with day-to-day tasks such as giving rides or making calls. Peer support does not replace other therapeutic services and supports.
- ✗ **Sharing details of trauma:** Peer support is not based on sharing details of stressors or potentially psychologically traumatic events. It is not about swapping “war stories.” Instead, the focus should be on the impact of events and how best to move forward.
- ✗ **Diagnosis:** Peers are not licensed health care providers and therefore cannot give you a diagnosis.
- ✗ **Crisis intervention:** It is not the role of peers to provide crisis intervention. However, some peers may have training in crisis intervention, and groups may have protocols or a list of supports available in case someone goes into crisis.

How can peer support help?

Peer support can offer various benefits for overall well-being and recovery related to PTSIs.

Peer support can help you:



Improve your self-esteem and sense of empowerment

Experiencing a PTSD can impact how you live your life and can contribute towards a negative view of yourself. Sharing experiences and learning from others through peer support can help improve self-esteem. This can in turn promote empowerment.



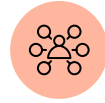
Lessen stigma and feel understood

Experiencing a PTSD may feel like a sign of weakness or that there is something wrong with *you*. Having access to peer support can help normalize and destigmatize your experiences by offering opportunities to interact with others who have experienced something similar. Having your feelings and experiences validated by others can help reinforce the fact that this happens to many others, and is not a personal weakness.



Realize that recovery is possible

Living with a PTSD can leave you feeling hopeless and confused. Learning from and interacting with people who have been there (i.e. who have successfully navigated their own experience(s) and are on the “other side”) can alleviate your feelings of hopelessness and reinforce that recovery is possible.



Develop a support network and feel less isolated

Experiencing a PTSD can be isolating. PSP, military members and Veterans may be especially prone to feelings of isolation given the uniqueness of their trauma experiences and work culture. Peer support can provide a valuable network and opportunities to engage with people who truly understand, which can help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.



Identify and develop coping skills and tools

Seeking help for a PTSD can be overwhelming. There are many different types of supports and you may not know where to start. Peer support can help guide you to resources and tools for managing your PTSD. This can be a crucial first step on the path of recovery.



Lessen your symptoms and feel less distressed

PTSDs can produce a wide range of symptoms, which can change in frequency and intensity over time. Peer support may directly and indirectly help to manage PTSD symptoms.

Things to keep in mind

There are some important considerations to keep in mind when accessing and receiving peer support.

Peer support is only one piece of the puzzle.

Peer support alone is generally not enough to manage a PTSD. Peer support may be a first step forward in help-seeking or as part of supporting other services you may be receiving, such as professional mental health care.

Peer support can offer therapeutic benefits but peer support IS NOT therapy.

Peer support involves working together and sharing experiences to support each other. In contrast, therapy involves the provision of specialized clinical interventions by a trained and registered mental health care professional.

Not all peer support is of the same quality.

Currently there is no accreditation that sets quality standards for peer support in Canada. Certain groups may or may not require peers to be at a specific point in their recovery journey in order to become a peer support provider. Similarly, certain groups may require peer supporters to undergo specialized training to enhance their knowledge, skills and attitudes, such as building trust and maintaining boundaries. It is important that you feel comfortable with where your peer supporter(s) are in their own recovery journey and their training. You can ask the group's leaders the following questions to help assess whether it is the right fit for you.

- Have the peer supporters undergone any form of training or certification related to peer support? If so, which ones?
- Are there any specifications for peer supporters in terms of where they are in their recovery journey?
- Are there any guidelines or rules for how peer support is provided (e.g. around language)?
- What processes are in place to maintain safety and confidentiality?

It may take time to find the best peer support for you and your needs.

Finding the best peer support for you and your needs can be a journey — try not to be discouraged if the first group you join does not work for you. Having other supports in place can help you manage symptoms while you go through the process of finding out what works best for you.

Take time to think through what sort of peer support environment would make you feel most comfortable. For example, you may feel more comfortable participating in a group specifically for PSP or military members, rather than a group with civilians. Specific peer support groups may include people with different ranks, which may also influence your comfort levels.

Many organizations or groups have more than one peer supporter to choose from, giving you a choice of who you'd like to speak to. Similar to finding a family physician or psychologist, you want to find a peer supporter with whom you are comfortable. This can take time. Keep in mind that peers might need to step away from time to time to maintain their own well-being. Don't take it personally if your preferred peer is no longer available.

Some peer support groups may have specific rules or barriers.

Certain elements of peer support may act as barriers to participation. Some groups may be language-specific (e.g. English-only or French-only). Other groups may require specific resources to participate (e.g. Internet or smartphone). There may also be financial considerations to keep in mind (e.g. the cost of transportation, time off work, family care). Some groups may also have specific restrictions or rules for members (e.g. zero-tolerance policies for alcohol or drugs, membership is reserved for specific gender identities or age groups).

Are you interested in checking out peer support?

If you are interested in checking out a peer support program, here is some information:

PSP Mental Health

The Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment has a tool that you can use to search for services, using the “peer support” filter. You can also filter by other options such as language, level of privacy or location.

[Access the tool here.](#)

Visit the website to learn more: atlasveterans.ca/PSP

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