

## Tips to Reduce Negative Attitudes Faced by Peer Support Staff

Peer support staff are individuals in recovery from a mental illness and/or substance use disorder who have leveraged their lived experience to assist others in recovery. One challenge peer support staff may face on the job is a lack of acceptance and underlying stigma from their colleagues. This document and accompanying [video](#) provides guidance for how to reduce these negative attitudes and effectively integrate peer support staff into your organization.

“Peer staff are hired to actually use their life experience to instill hope and to role model recovery. Now, we’re seeing much better outcomes: less demoralization, more hope. We’re seeing people become much more actively engaged in their own recovery and taking care of themselves. We’re seeing empowerment and we’re seeing decreases in all of the bad outcomes that we’ve gotten used to.”

- Larry Davidson, PhD, Professor of Psychiatry, Yale University

### Key Considerations

- **Recognize that people can be both clients and providers.** Being a provider and being a client are roles, not people. As providers, peer support staff can tell their own recovery stories and use strategies from their own experiences to help clients reach their recovery goals.
- **Identify stigma in your organization.** Peer support staff may face stereotypes and other negative attitudes, which may manifest in a number of different ways. Examples include, directing peer support staff to use the client restrooms instead of the staff restrooms; excluding peer support staff from team meetings; addressing non-peer colleagues as “Mr.” or “Mrs.” while addressing peer support staff by their first names; or referring to peer support staff as “addicts” or other terms that characterize the person by their disorder.
- **Prepare your organization.** Do your homework; consider how peer support staff will enhance your organization. Prior to integrating peer support staff, you should outline their roles and responsibilities, determine how they will be supported, and develop a plan for training and education, both for your peer support staff and their supervisors.
- **Develop a plan to train and educate peer support staff and supervisors.** Each organization will require different levels of training and education to prepare its supervisors and peer support staff for client interactions (see the “Additional Resources” below for training programs). Your organization may also tailor training and education to the needs of your staff. For example, you may provide staff with a list of words they should not use (e.g. “crazy”) because they are not conducive to a recovery culture.
- **Create an inclusive culture.** Leadership in the organization should include peer support staff in the organization’s decision-making processes, which empowers the peer support staff and helps to reduce stereotypes and other negative perceptions. Supervisors should encourage the peer support staff they supervise to attend staff meetings and other organizational events to promote integration and inclusiveness.
- **Ensure effective supervision.** Proper supervision is a key component to successfully integrating peer support staff. Supervisors should set an example for other staff on how to prevent and eliminate stigma by addressing stigma when it occurs. In addition, supervisors should actively demonstrate to the rest of the organization how peer support staff can have a positive impact on their clients.

## Additional Resources

These resources provide additional guidance to help you prevent and eliminate stigma as you integrate peer support staff into your organization:

- Missouri Department of Mental Health's [Five-Module Toolkit for Providers](#), produced by the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services
- ViaHope's [Organizational Transformation and Implementation Tools](#)
- Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services' [Peer Culture/Peer Support/Peer Leadership Transformation Tool](#)
- US Department of Veterans Affairs - Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Centers' [Peer Specialist Toolkit](#)
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration's [Expert Panel Recommendations for Behavioral Health Systems](#)
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration's [Supervisor Guide for Whole Health and Wellness Peer Support](#)
- University of North Carolina School of Social Work's [Online Training for Supervisors](#)
- Governors State University [Recovery Coach Training](#) for Peer Support Staff
- Georgia Certified Peer Specialist Project's [Certified Peer Specialist Training](#)
- Recovery Opportunity Center's [Recovery Trainings](#) for Peer Specialists, Facilitators, and Supervisors

The two videos that accompany this tip sheet, [integrating peer support staff into behavioral health](#) and [eliminating stigma faced by peer support staff](#), provide more information on integrating peer support staff into your organization.