



Guidelines for Peer Support

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well, can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.

~ Pema Chödrön ~

Peer support happens when people share knowledge, experience, or emotional, social or practical help with each other. It's a reciprocal relationship between two people who have had shared lived experience of sexual abuse and/or violence and can therefore relate to others in a similar situation. It allows people to connect and meet the other where they're at with a willingness to share authentically and provide help and support.

We believe that ~

- ✚ Peer support is important and deserves to be valued and respected,
- ✚ Stepping into a peer support role should be a deliberate, conscious decision that carries responsibilities, principles and expectations,
- ✚ Self-care is critical for peer supporters – in order to help others you need to look after yourself first.

Peer Support Can:

- ❖ Positively change lives and have a profound impact on both you and the person you're supporting.
- ❖ Help both of you feel like you're in this together.
- ❖ Help people heal in community and in relationships with others.
- ❖ Be a reciprocal relationship that supports and empowers both of you.
- ❖ Help to address the isolation of being a survivor of abuse and/or violence.
- ❖ Help you to feel like you belong, that you're not alone, and that you are safe.
- ❖ Break down the walls and provide you an opportunity to ask questions that you can't of anyone else and to know that the other person understands because they've lived it too.
- ❖ Work as a complement to traditional or alternative services but also for those who choose not to engage services at all.
- ❖ Help you to feel that you're not crazy, and that what you're thinking and feeling is normal given what you've lived through. There is hope.
- ❖ Provide an emotional and spiritual connection that isn't possible on a professional level.
- ❖ Provide ongoing support unlike community services that are time-limited.
- ❖ Break down the *us vs them* mentality. Peer support is a reciprocal relationship of two people helping each other. It can provide a chance for both people to share strategies and allow for new healing milestones.
- ❖ Build community and change the way that we can see ourselves and our inherent value. This has exponential possibilities when we – in turn – support another person. It allows us to pay it forward...

Key Principles of Peer Support

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- Strengths-based empowerment and support. All survivors inherently have what they need inside and the role of the peer supporter is to tap into those resources and strengths and help them grow and heal on their journey;
- Seek excellence in peer support and operate with the highest ethical principles;
- Suspend expectations and judgments and help the person make good decisions and to know that they are not alone;
- Recognize that survivors are not broken and don't need to be fixed;
- Support both survivors who are part of successful clinical relationships and those who aren't;
- Meet people where they are and support them in any way needed;
- Understand that we don't have all the answers but we can walk beside a survivor and empower them to find answers for themselves.

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Guidelines for Peer Support

Peer support is not a replacement to psychotherapy which involves therapeutic treatment provided by a mental health professional. However it is a unique and powerful relationship that can foster increased resiliency and healing, and support people to tap into their creativity, resourcefulness and wholeness. It can enhance professional treatment, or may be an alternative for some people. Peer supports have been down the road of sexual abuse and violence. We can listen empathetically and without judgement, share parts of our healing journey, assist other survivors navigate the system, and help them advocate to get their needs met. More than anything else we are there for people when they need us most.

It's a JOURNEY with a focus on learning, helping and healing

- For personal development in order to be a more supportive peer to friends and family and for individuals who would like to become peer supporters
- Peer support could include survivors helping other survivors, and family members & intimate partners helping others in similar situations
- Peer support has a whole health goal – *I want to be treated as a whole person*

For those interested in peer support they will be:

- Survivors of sexual violence or sexual abuse
- Family members or intimate partners of someone who has experienced this
- Have awareness of, and have made a commitment to, trauma healing and enjoy their own improved health and wellbeing

Improved health and well-being means being at a point where our past doesn't negatively impact our ability to support another person in the present. This means:

- Restored self-esteem and enhanced coping skills with an absence of self-harm
- Being able to manage triggers through increased ability for self-care
- Increased self-awareness and insight to know when to step away or use supports
- Being able to listen empathetically and to share your own story when appropriate without being overwhelmed by it, or overwhelming the other person
- Having no need to "compare" stories

Peer support relationships:

- Are fluid and trusting
- Are about meeting people where they are at and walking the journey with them
- Involve reciprocity and give and take – it's not a one way relationship
- Allow people to speak freely without fear of repercussions or being judged
- Are courageous – this can be challenging and difficult work
- Are ethical and respectful

Foundational Skills & Abilities

- ✚ Are an optimistic ambassador of hope and believe that people can begin a healing journey from sexual abuse
 - Healing from sexual abuse is a lifelong journey but survivors can reach a point where hope shines brighter and they are able to share their experience and strength to help someone else.
- ✚ Feel that you have something to share and that your experience can benefit others
 - Many survivors and family members have struggled to find meaningful support in dealing with the aftermath of abuse. Your life experiences and everything you've learned in your healing journey can benefit others who are going through similar things
- ✚ Have a desire to share your experience in a way that can benefit others
- ✚ Are able to support individuals without taking ownership for their success or failures
 - One of the hardest things for many people to accept is that we can't save someone else and we can't fix their problems. We can only guide and support them to go through the situation and help them make the choices that are right for them. Detaching from the outcome helps us to walk with someone else without taking things personally if someone relapses or makes self-destructive choices. This is easier said than done but it's important for setting healthy boundaries. It also gives us space to try different ways of helping another person see what next steps they could take and to make their own choices.
 - Understanding our role and its limitations is critical for making sure that we don't harm ourselves or the people we're trying to help. It's important to be aware of what stuff is ours and what belongs to the other person. Debriefing with another peer support person can be really helpful to gain perspective or to ask questions if we're unsure about a situation.

- Peer support is hard work and not for everyone. The stakes are often high so the more we understand our role and its limits, the better we can support someone else in a way that's healthy for them and you.
- ✚ Are able to address the stigmas, myths and stereotypes of sexual abuse and how they impact different people
 - There are many myths and stereotypes about sexual abuse that survivors can internalize. This can be very harmful to survivors in a range of ways including:
 - Loss of self-esteem and self-worth
 - Self-blame and guilt
 - Doubts and questioning of sexual identity
 - Feelings of shame, disgust, powerlessness
 - Self-harming including cutting, drugs, alcohol, suicide attempts
 - Intimacy issues
 - Fear of being judged, losing family and friends
 - Stereotypes often stem from a distorted belief system and lack of awareness. Peer supports can help provide perspective to survivors about any fears that individuals may have. Those fears are very real for survivors. A young man who was abused as a child might question his masculinity or may worry that he will become a perpetrator himself. Acknowledging and honouring his fears rather than dismissing them is critical. Sharing statistics and information can be helpful to understand that while some survivors might go on to harm others, most do not.
 - Survivors cope in many different ways. Some people engage in risky sexual behaviour, participate in crime, use drugs or alcohol, or hurt themselves or others. This is normal for people who have experienced trauma. Acknowledging and helping people forgive themselves for the ways that they've coped can be very empowering for survivors.
 - Sharing information on myths and stereotypes can allow survivors to see where they are stuck and enable them to make different kinds of choices about their lives and to believe that they are worthy of help, support, love and forgiveness.
- ✚ Accept the importance of, and actively practice, self-care
 - Trauma work is hard. Listening to and experiencing someone else's trauma, including sexual abuse, can take a huge toll. Acknowledging the impact of working with survivors and creating space to heal and replenish ourselves is absolutely critical to being an effective peer support. Understanding self-care and actively practicing it regularly is important. We need to care for ourselves in order to care for others. Self-care is different for everyone. Figuring out what the signs are that we're stressed and overloaded is an important first step. Then finding ways of relaxing

and letting go help us to replenish our spirit and continue our work. This could be walking in the woods, taking a hot bath, journaling, knitting, playing sports, working out, going fishing, or anything else that helps to ground and strengthen you. Trying different things is a good way to see what works best for you.

- As a result of the abuse they've suffered, many survivors struggle with a lack of self-esteem so believing that they are worthy of self-care may be challenging. With help of a peer the person can move past simply surviving to thriving by giving permission to practice self-care and to receive what they need.
- Sometimes our usual means of grounding aren't enough and we need to talk to another peer support person to debrief. You may also be able to talk to friends or family but should ask permission to share your trauma. Some people may be able to handle it, while others may not. You may also want to consider whether the details of what you want to share will be harmful to them. It's also really important to know your limits and when to consult a professional who can help you so that you can remain compassionate, open and available to those you want to support.

✚ Are flexible and adaptable

✚ Understand and recognize your own triggers, and manage them by using personal healthy strategies that help you regain equilibrium and balance.

- This means understanding what our triggers are and being able to recognize them when they bubble up. This allows us to be able to respond rather than react. Some people may need to allow extra time to adjust and become grounded again. Eventually most people come to understand some of their more obvious triggers, but even seasoned peer support people can still be taken by surprise in a situation and may begin to feel overwhelmed or out of control and don't always immediately recognize that they're being triggered. It's important for you to be able to learn to judge which situations are ok and which will trigger you, as well as recognizing what your limits are. As a peer support person you also have to know when you need outside help whether by talking with another peer or a professional. It's easy to get caught in the emotional labyrinth of survivors. Listening to the stories of others can have a very damaging impact. This is sometimes called vicarious trauma and is common among people who work with others who have experienced trauma. Trauma stewardship is about learning to recognize when you're feeling disconnected or overwhelmed, when your world view shifts and you begin to feel unsafe, or when you can't cope effectively with hearing traumatic details anymore. Protecting yourself and the relationship between yourself and the person you support is critical.

- ✚ Everyone needs to develop their own healthy strategies to manage their triggers and to help with vicarious trauma. Some of the things that may work are taking a walk, spending time in nature, stroking a cat or dog, taking deep cleansing breaths, holding sacred objects, counting backwards, journaling, exercising, and mindfulness among many other things. Acknowledging triggers as they come and using your strategies to contain them before they get unmanageable helps you to be able to move through them as you are supporting another person.

- ✚ Sensitive, authentic and non-judgmental
 - Being non-judgmental means accepting people where they are and not judging what they've done or how they've lived. It also means overcoming biases and being aware of where we're resistant to others. Managing our reactions when we're listening to the person we're supporting is really important even if you hear something shocking. This may also include survivors who have victimized others. This can be really hard. Survivors are often very fragile. Trusting you with their story is a huge leap of faith. Suspending judgements enables you to actively listen without condoning or endorsing any experiences or behaviour. Doing this respects and honours the person and makes it less likely that they'll retreat. It's really important to make sure that everyone – no matter what they've done or how they've lived – has the chance to reach out in safety even if the details are unsavoury or stretch us as support people. Especially if it's a survivor who has or may victimize another person, creating a safe space to talk may create the opportunity to do an intervention *before* the abuse happens. Shame can be debilitating and may prevent someone from talking about what's *really* going on in their life. Creating openness, trust and dialogue allows survivors to share where they are and what they need. It can also allow the person to put healthy boundaries in place so that they don't hurt someone else. As well it allows you to support the person to do the right thing, which may include reporting the abuse to the authorities. Situations with a survivor can be painful, awkward or a bit embarrassing. It's ok to be honest and let them know that you don't really know how to react. Whatever arises, it's important to be able to be present with the hard stuff, try not to take things personally, and to forgive yourself if you feel like you're struggling. There's no perfect peer support response just a human one that allows for honesty, vulnerability and authenticity. Don't be afraid to debrief with another peer support after a challenging conversation, or to reach out if you're struggling with the ability to remain non-judgmental. In the end, you may need to transition the survivor along to another peer support if you're feeling compromised in your ability to effectively support them.

- ✚ Must respect and honour confidentiality as well as its limits
 - It's essential to keep everything you hear in complete confidence. Knowing that you won't share any details of what the person tells you helps to build trust and create safety within the relationship.

But there are a couple of really important exceptions including:

- If the person has abused or may abuse a child. In this case you have a legal and a moral responsibility to report this to the Children's Aid Society and the Police.
- If you are a danger to yourself or to another person. In this case you need to call 911 and/or the Police.

- ✚ Have a broad understanding about the impact of sexual abuse in all aspects of a person's life
 - Peer support, whether survivor to survivor or family member to family member, is about sharing your experience and walking the path with another person who is struggling.

- ✚ Have the ability to engage others in conversation
 - This means meeting another person where they are, putting them at ease, and being versatile enough to be able to adapt to the person's language and style of communicating.
 - This can be as simple as simply asking how the person is doing, not telling them what they should do but just listening, empathizing, being honest, and earning their trust by creating a safe space for them to talk. You don't always have to do something. You can just be present with someone over coffee or on a walk. When the person is ready to talk they will. Just letting them know you care goes a long way.
 - Sometimes we may feel at a loss to know how to engage someone. Or our stuff may be coming up. It's ok to simply sit together and be present for each other. While one person may be a bit further down the path in their healing, ideally peer support is a reciprocal relationship with give and take on both sides. It's all right to acknowledge that we're at a loss or don't know what to do with someone else. That's an honest response that enables you to be authentic and allows the other person to do the same.

- ✚ Have good communication skills that create openness and safety
 - This includes being able to:
 - make eye contact
 - read body language and interpret emotions
 - actively and attentively listen
 - reflect and paraphrase what the person says

- ask questions if you're unsure of what the person means
- ask probing and open-ended questions
- validate that the person has been heard by head nods or affirmative comments. Sometimes listening intently is enough.
- Know when it is time to be quiet and let things sit

✚ Know how to set healthy boundaries and create safety for both people

○ This means:

- Letting people know that you can't fix things. We can only walk beside another person and support him or her on their journey. Walking together means learning how to detach from the outcome. We can be invested in the person but not attached to a specific outcome for them. We can't take ownership of that. If you're invested in someone else *succeeding*, and they do things like start using or drinking, engage in risky behaviour, or threaten to kill themselves, it can be devastating for a peer supporter. You might internalize this and see it as a failure on your part. It's not. It's the individual making choices of their own. The healing journey isn't a straight line – it's more of a dance. And we often step back before we can really move forward. We may do this many times in the healing continuum. So it's important not to take things personally when we're working with another person. It's their journey and we're just walking beside them.
- Understand that within a trusting relationship where someone feels safe he or she may occasionally lash out at you. It might not have anything to do with you. It could be about their kids or parents, or something that happened at work that day. It's important not to be offended but to see it for what it is.
- Setting some basic ground rules at the beginning of the relationship to set up healthy dynamics. This helps to lay the foundation for a respectful relationship that honours both of you. And you may need to revise and reassess the ground rules on an ongoing basis.
- Being aware of the need for a continuum of healing. Even as we are helping another person we not only need to continue to heal ourselves but also be aware of how we are being impacted by what we hear.
- Knowing when to debrief or hand things off to another peer support or a professional. Good peer support is symbiotic. Both people get something positive from the relationship. But sometimes the person needs more help that we are able to give. Or they might be treating you disrespectfully or you don't feel safe when you're with them. Trusting your instincts and honouring your limitations is essential and isn't a judgment on your abilities as a peer supporter.

Instead it might just mean that it's not a good fit between the two of you, or that they need different or more intensive support.

- Don't make promises you can't keep. If you say you're going to call, do it. Building trust means following through on what we've said we're going to do and setting reasonable goals for yourself. And if you mess up own it right away.

- ✚ Respect and support your peer's ability to make decisions that are right for them
 - You may not agree with the decisions that the person makes but you need to be able to respect their choice and ability to make those decisions
- ✚ Ability to empower the person to explore the options that are right for them rather than providing direction
 - Our job isn't to tell people what to do, but rather to listen and provide direction if requested. Sometimes that means guiding the person to a range of options so that they can make the decision that's right for them. Then it's up to us to support their choice even if we don't agree with it.
- ✚ Operate ethically with a high level of respect for the peer's wellbeing
 - This means working from a position of honesty and integrity, being willing to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. It's also about having understanding for what the person is going through, and supporting them with compassion and empathy. But more than anything else it means maintaining and not crossing boundaries that could be detrimental to the person's healing. This includes things like not starting an intimate relationship with someone you're supporting even if the feelings are mutual. The person is coming to you because they're vulnerable. And while this is a relationship of peers, there is an imbalance of power and control, which puts the other person at a disadvantage, one that could be harmful to him or her.
 - If you really don't feel that you can maintain healthy boundaries then you may need to talk to another peer supporter, or transition the person to someone else.
- ✚ Understand appropriate sharing of your lived experience in a way that is helpful
 - It's important to remember that this isn't about us but the person that we're supporting. You will likely find that the amount that you share about your own experiences will vary from person to person, and sometimes from day to day. Sometimes you might just share a coffee with little in-depth conversation. Other times you may share deeply in order to help the person understand that they're not alone, that you understand what they are experiencing, and that what they are thinking or feeling is completely normal in the circumstances.

- Sharing in an appropriate way when it's of value can be very helpful to the person you're supporting. But what's really important is to know when to be quiet and listen. As you get to know the person and their needs better, you will be able to sensitively respond in the way that's appropriate in the moment. And being aware of the impact of your story on the other person is critical. Some people may not be able to cope with hearing certain graphic details.
 - Ask yourself the question – what is my intention in sharing my story? Is this just for my benefit or for theirs? If you can't answer that question with confidence then you may want to keep your experiences to yourself. But sometimes sharing your story can help the other person and also bring you to new levels of healing. It's important to ask permission though because the person you're supporting may not be able to handle graphic details or they may need to focus on their own story in the moment. Asking *would it be helpful to you if I told you what my experience was like?* gives the other person the power to make the decision that's right for them.
 - A big part of good peer support is the ability to be honest, genuine and open. By being authentic and real – sharing the truth of our experience and where we are even if that's vulnerable or uncertain – empowers the other person to do the same.
- ✚ Have effective coping skills and strategies that you can share
- This is about sharing the coping strategies that have helped you in your healing journey. But it also means empowering and encouraging the other person to honour the coping skills that are working for them even if they seem silly or embarrassing like hugging a stuffed animal, counting, going through a happy list, deep breathing, walking, running, grounding skills, re-framing etc.
- ✚ Knowing when a peer is approaching crisis and how to effectively support them or refer them to a professional
- It's important to be able to recognize if the person you are supporting is feeling that life is unbearable and that they are hopeless and desperate. Most people who attempt suicide show warning signs that are invitations for others to offer help. These can be direct statements, physical signs like a change in appearance, emotional reactions or behaviour cues. It's not only ok but really important to ask the person directly if they're thinking of harming themselves. Being able to respond effectively is critical as most people who attempt suicide don't want to die but are overwhelmed and don't see a way out. With help, this can become a turning point in the person's life if they are provided with the right supports. By asking directly and being open to the response, you then have the opportunity to give the person information, help him or her explore their options, and make their own decisions. You might need the assistance of another peer supporter, or, if appropriate you can help the person to seek professional help.

- ✚ Committed to learning new information, tools and skills through ongoing training
- ✚ Are committed to working through your own challenges
 - This means learning how to continue to do your own ongoing personal healing in addition to working through any challenges that may arise in working with another survivor.
- ✚ Understand that peer mentoring can enhance and support professional treatment
 - It's important to understand that while some survivors will seek professional help in the course of their healing journey, others may not. There's no one road to healing. Survivors may encounter counsellors that really enable their healing, and others that don't. When you're supporting a survivor, help them learn how to pay attention to how they're feeling during therapy sessions and to trust their instincts. Red flags include a counsellor trying to dictate their healing or making decisions for them, undermining their confidence or minimizing their experiences. Survivors have the right to *shop around* for a therapist that's right for them. And if the person has a negative experience with one therapist they should feel free to look for someone else. Your job as a peer support is to empower the person you're working with to trust him or herself and not to put all their power in professionals, though they can play a critical role.
 - Survivors that we're supporting may even look to us as experts. But we're really not. We're just a little farther along the path in healing. We don't have all the answers and that's ok. Our job is to guide survivors to honour themselves. We empower them to make the choices that are right for them and to recognize that they're experts in their own lives.
 - Survivors may choose different kinds of therapy at different stages of the healing journey. If someone has had a bad experience in the past, they may just not have connected with the right person. You might have the opportunity to support him or her to seek out and work with someone new. Helping someone understand that, while there might be some unhelpful therapists, there are also some excellent ones that can really support a survivor's healing, may be really important. However, if the person doesn't want to seek professional help, they need to be supported in that decision as well.
- ✚ Know personal limits especially for those in crisis and know when to call for assistance
 - Anything can happen when working with another person and you may find yourself in moments that you don't feel equipped for. Trusting your instincts and being able to problem-solve in the moment is really important. If you're unsure you may want to call another peer support for help and feedback.

- Sometimes you're doing the right thing and you just need the affirmation of talking it through with someone you trust.
- Taking extra time for self-care after supporting a survivor in crisis is really important. You may be effective in supporting the person through the crisis but then collapse afterwards. This is normal and a sign that you likely need to take care of your own needs in order to regain your equilibrium. As a survivor you may still have moments when you're triggered or feel vulnerable. It's ok to acknowledge this and to take the time that you need. But if you have to step back for a while, then you may want to ask another peer support to step up and provide assistance to the survivor in your absence.
 - In some cases for your own wellbeing, you may need to sever the relationship with the person you're supporting. This can be for a number of reasons including that boundaries have been compromised, you feel unsafe, or you just can't support them appropriately. But this needs to be done respectfully and with concern for the other person. It's important to connect with another peer support person to see if they can take over – even temporarily – so that the survivor isn't left without support. And it's ok when you first meet with a survivor to just see where things go and how the two of you connect. Sometimes you really click with someone and other times someone might be better served and supported by a different person. Both of you need to feel comfortable in order to build trust and safety.
 - Be clear about what your boundaries are. Maybe you don't want to be called before 6 am and not after 10 pm, or you don't like to be touched. Share these right at the beginning of the relationship, and pay attention to the other person's boundaries too. Sometimes our personal limits or boundaries can change too as can the other person's so there's a need for some flexibility and an openness to evolving and growing. Being clear about our personal limits helps both people feel respected and safe. And pay attention to red flags! If someone is continuously disregarding your boundaries even after they've been reminded talk to another peer support. In some cases you may need to transition the person on to another peer support or a community professional.

Advanced Skills

- ✚ Have a high level of knowledge of available services and how to access them, and are able to help peers navigate the system to get the help they need
- This includes both conventional and alternative therapies and services. Also there are some professionals and services that have a heightened understanding and sensitive practice for providing service to survivors of sexual abuse. Whether that's a chiropractor or even a salon professional, knowing about

services that are receptive to adapting what they do to create safety for survivors can be really important. We often find out about these services by word of mouth so talking with other survivors can be really helpful in knowing what you can confidently suggest to the person you're supporting.

- ✚ Trauma-informed – understanding trauma as a core life event that often underlies mental illness, substance abuse, incarceration etc. This is about what happened *to you* rather than what's wrong with you
 - A strong understanding and awareness of trauma is fundamental for good peer support. When survivors see themselves as damaged or broken, and that there's something wrong with them, it increases their vulnerability for future victimization. They may blame themselves for the abuse and internalize this and as a result engage in high risk behaviours like street level sex work, thrill seeking behaviours, excessive substance use, criminal activities and many other things. Without judging the person's behaviour, a peer support person can help the survivor recognize the behaviour and understand that it's coming from their past trauma. This allows the survivor to talk about their pain, grief and anger. It can also be liberating for many survivors as they are able to recognize and forgive themselves for the ways they've coped. It's important to remember that however negative and harmful certain coping strategies may have seemed, they can all be valuable parts of the healing journey. Often we are our own harshest critics. And letting go of judgment and accepting all of who we are and where we've been can allow us to recognize that we did the best we could with what we had at the time.

- ✚ Strength-based – Know how to empower peers by building on their strengths
 - This is about recognizing our own inherent strength and power, and the fact that we have internal resources that can help others on their healing journeys. When we embrace this in ourselves, it gives others permission to do the same. Sometimes we can help the person we're supporting by re-framing their negative thoughts and feelings. This could be helping them see how positive and courageous it was to seek out peer support, or how good things have come out of harm. Confirming and celebrating that the person is on a healing journey and that everyone is always learning and growing can be very empowering for a survivor.
 - Ideally peer supports provide mentorship to other survivors. Rather than being experts that tell them what to do, peer supports are guides to help the person navigate their own healing journey. We walk side by side with them. We encourage them to set goals and take measured steps forward in their growth and healing, and empower them to believe in themselves. We share our own experience and help the person to build his or her own toolkit of strategies and supports that are effective and healthy for them. Most importantly, we help them recognize and embrace their strengths, courage and resiliency and their own powerful potential and agency for change.

- ✚ Knowledge and competency in supporting peers in a range of situations including with doctors, through trial or sentencing, lawyers offices, specialists etc.
 - Providing support for a peer in a range of circumstances is really about being present for them in order to provide support and help them navigate circumstances that could otherwise be overwhelming. As a peer supporter it's not your job to make decisions for the survivor, but rather to help them get the information they need and make the decisions that are right for them. There may be situations when you may not know what to do. Having another peer support person that you can call can be helpful, in addition to debriefing afterwards to be better equipped to deal with a similar situation in the future. It's also important to practice good self-care if you're feeling stressed or emotionally depleted.
 - Providing the person with 24 hour emergency contact numbers may also be important so they have a few numbers they can call if they're feeling distressed when they are home alone later.

- ✚ Dealing with confrontation or hostility
 - In a peer support relationship there may be times when the person you're supporting is confrontational or openly hostile. Laying the foundation at the beginning of the relationship about boundaries and basic expectations for behaviour may help to prevent problems down the road. But it's also really important to remember that as a survivor gets more comfortable with you and develops trust and safety that he or she may begin to honestly share their anger, agitation or despair. Being able to recognize that this is coming from a place of trauma rather than being a personal attack allows you to remain open and calm. Re-directing or helping the survivor re-frame the issue sometimes allows them to see the bigger picture and how far they've come in their healing journey. It's also an invitation to not only listen attentively to the survivor but also to share strategies for grounding and coping. Sometimes this also involves de-escalating highly emotionally charged moments, and helping the person remember that they are safe and that they can get their needs met in a healthy way. Survivors may not always be in touch with their emotions or may not be able to effectively articulate their feelings. Having the person rate – on a scale of 1-10 – how anxious or angry they're feeling can give you more information as well as allowing both of you to see when those feelings diminish and stabilize.
 - Ideally peer support is a reciprocal relationship that involves open communication. We walk beside and with the person we're supporting. As such, in most cases, it's ok to acknowledge if the person's behaviour is impacting you in a negative way. This allows for authenticity and the ability for you to take care of your own needs in the moment. And as we continue to heal – even as peer supporters - we become better able to resist getting lost in the vortex of our own story. We're also better able to recognize our own

- triggers and deal with them effectively through our personal toolkit of coping strategies.
- Safety for peer support people is critical and developing a safety plan is important so that you know what to do if you find yourself in a volatile or dangerous situation.
 - If the person that you're supporting is creating too much chaos and it's becoming an unhealthy relationship, you may decide that you need to step away. You may not be the right person to help them right now. Supporting him or her transition to another peer supporter ensures continuity and helps the person feel respected and cared for. Also, it's important to remember that peer support relationships may be long or very brief. This will depend on where the person is on their healing journey, how well the two of you connect, and what they need at the time. Don't take it personally if someone feels they need to move on. We work to support the person's highest good and if that means they're better served by someone else then we help them transition over.

✚ Have a level of understanding and ability to support peers around the following:

- Substance abuse, self-harm and other coping strategies
Survivors may use a range of coping strategies including self-medicating through drugs or alcohol, self-harming to cope with overwhelming feelings of pain, and other potentially damaging strategies. It's important not to judge the person as they may be doing the best they can in the moment. They may also not know how to cope in healthier ways. Acknowledging this can provide an opportunity to help the person build a range of coping strategies and allow them to manage their feelings and move forward in their healing. But healing isn't always a straight line. It's very common for people to spiral in and out and they may begin using drugs or alcohol or self-harm strategies again after a period without them. This is normal until someone is stabilized and has enough support to be able to let them go. We can help the survivor honour the ways that they coped and took care of themselves when they were at their most desperate. Eventually though, for many people, as they move along the healing continuum they may find that some of their coping strategies no longer serve them and they're ready to let them go.
- Suicide prevention
It's important to take the warning signs of suicide seriously and to talk honestly with the person. Talking about the potential for suicide doesn't make it happen but may in fact save someone's life.
- How trauma can manifest including triggering, PTSD, depression etc.
Survivors of sexual violence often experience dissociation and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other issues as a result of the trauma that they experienced. This means that they may re-live the events through

- intrusive and traumatic memories of the event through flashbacks, panic attacks, nightmares and trouble sleeping. They may also experience non-verbal body memories, feel emotionally numb, have memory loss, be hyper-vigilant, and feel depressed and isolated. This has an impact on the physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing of the survivor. Understanding how trauma can manifest allows us to respond compassionately and to share some of our own experiences. This may include supporting the survivor to seek professional help with a doctor or psychologist or to find relief through holistic practitioners or by practising yoga or mediation, among other things.
- Disclosures and how to respond compassionately

How we respond to disclosures of sexual abuse can have a huge impact on the survivor and their feelings about themselves and the assault or abuse. Remaining calm, actively listening, assuring the person that you believe them and that it wasn't their fault is critical. It's also important not to minimize the abuse or the impact on the survivor, and to empower them to get the information they need in order to make the choices that are right for them.
 - Understanding re-victimization (ie. through criminal justice system) and how to deal with this

The criminal justice process can be empowering and healing for some survivors, but incredibly damaging for others. Having to recount the intimate details about what happened to you, to face your abuser in court, and to have your credibility questioned through cross examination by the defense lawyer can be devastating. Most survivors are vulnerable already and going through the criminal justice system can increase feelings of self-blame and self-loathing in addition to isolation and depression. As a peer support person you can help the survivor know that they're not alone and that they're not responsible for what happened to them, no matter what defence council may say. You can also support and honour their courage in making the choice to go to court and to help them to see the process as part of their healing. Survivors may also choose to bring litigation against their abuser in a civil suit. Supporting their decisions and walking with them allows them to know that they are not alone.
 - Intimacy and life after sexual abuse for both survivors and partners

Sexual abuse can profoundly impact a survivor's ability to experience deep intimacy with another person. Sometimes it may feel as though there's always someone else in bed with you, and survivors may experience flashbacks, anxiety and panic in sexual situations. As well, men may experience problems with erections or ejaculation. Many survivors also have difficulty receiving pleasure from someone else and may prefer to avoid sex completely or may choose to masturbate rather than engage in intercourse. They may also equate sex with love and believe that they don't really deserve love. Instead they may use sex to get their needs for touch, closeness and affection met. Intimate partners can be strong supports for a survivor but

many feel overwhelmed with what their loved one is experiencing and at a loss to know how to help them. As a peer support person you may be able to talk to the survivor's partner to help them better understand what he or she is going through. This can include how to deal with triggers and flashbacks, emotional numbing, aversion to sex or the opposite – promiscuity - as well as trust, and power and control. Patience, compassion and a willingness to ride difficult moments out, can help to create safety between the survivor and his or her partner. And you can work with the survivor to help them understand what they need in order to feel safe and how to deal with the tidal wave of emotions that may emerge.

➤ How to build trust and safety

Building trust and safety in a peer relationship means being authentic and honest. It also means sharing your story responsibly and when it can benefit the survivor, setting boundaries that are healthy for both of you, being non-judgmental and respectful, actively listening, and empowering the survivor to make the choices that are right for them. And in a mutually beneficial reciprocal relationship this goes both ways. Peer support has the ability to help both survivor and peer supporter deepen their healing and continue to grow.

➤ Vicarious trauma

Peer supporters, as well as others who regularly come in contact with trauma and suffering over time may experience the cumulative impact and toll that supporting survivors of sexual abuse and trauma can have on their health and wellbeing. Regularly hearing stories of abuse can deplete peer supporters and negatively shift their world view. This can result in burnout, compassion fatigue, anxiety, increased fear for safety, emotional numbing, in addition to being triggered about their own abuse. Sometimes vicarious trauma is slow and cumulative and other times it is more sudden. Either way it can sneak up on you and you suddenly realize that you're really not ok. Developing healthy strategies for combatting vicarious trauma is essential. These can vary from person to person but might include debriefing with other peers, physical activity, grounding exercises, laughter, spending time in nature, limiting trauma by reducing the number of survivors you support, or seeking professional help, among others. Finding a balance between work and life, having a good support system, and practicing good self-care can help to increase a peer supporter's resiliency and enable them to continue to provide compassionate and attentive support.

➤ Advocating with/for peers

As a peer support person we don't make decisions for the survivor that we're supporting. Instead we help them get the information they need so they can make the informed choices that are right for them. But there may be times when the survivor asks you to advocate on their behalf. This could be in a doctor's appointment or with another professional. Sometimes this is about

seeking clarity for the other person, asking questions on their behalf, or – with their permission – advocating for them when they are unable to do so for themselves. Whenever we are called to do so, we do it with respect and with the highest good of the survivor in mind.

➤ Power and control

This means when one person has power and control over another resulting in the increasing diminishment of the person's ability to act in their own best interests. It can involve subtly controlling things like ingratiating behaviour that creates a sense of guilt or obligation, the silent treatment, saying that no one understands them, constantly correcting, blaming or shaming, a sense of entitlement, belittling, minimization and justification of controlling and abusive behaviours among others. In some cases the person you are supporting may exhibit some of these behaviours. While we may understand that survivors who have felt powerless at the hands of their abuser, may try to regain a sense of power, using controlling and abusive behaviour is not ok. If this happens it's important to remain calm and try not to react. Name the behaviour for what it is. Sometimes it's possible to re-frame things for the survivor to help them see where their need to control is coming from. It also allows you to help them figure out what they need and how to ask for it in a respectful way. Survivors have had their boundaries and trust so grossly violated, and may not understand how to set healthy boundaries. They may test a peer supporter to see if they can trust them. And they may not know other ways to cope besides trying to control and manipulate those around them in order to get their needs met. In some cases, if the controlling and abusive behaviour is intentional and prolonged and the peer supporter feels threatened or compromised in their ability to provide effective support it may be time to consider transitioning the survivor along to another peer support and/or professional help.

As a peer supporter you may encounter different kinds of challenges. Among others, these can include:

○ Co-dependency or hero worship

In the course of your relationship, a survivor may develop unhealthy feelings for you and try to place you on a pedestal. They might believe that you've got it all figured out or that you've *made it*. It's ok to be respected and liked. But as peer supports we don't want to foster co-dependency or hero worship. And we don't let our egos take over or encourage anything other than genuine authentic reciprocal relationships. Our job isn't to fix the other person but to support and empower them to believe in their own strength, resiliency, capacity, and what is possible. If you find that the survivor is developing these kinds of ideas and feelings, it's important to remind him or her that you're there for them, that you're

both survivors, and that everyone's journey is different. One isn't better than another, and no one is perfect. Our healing journey is ongoing. And when we truly walk the path *with* another person on our shared path, we learn and receive as much as they do. It is a privilege and a sacred duty.

- Staying grounded in self
Sometimes we get caught up in the vortex of emotions of the person we're supporting or through our own triggers. When this happens we need to rely on our toolkit of self-care strategies, as well as honouring our needs including taking time out when we necessary. As well, sometimes we need to check in with another peer if feel like we need some support to regain our equilibrium. We also need to be able to manage our own expectations about what we're capable of and be able to say no when necessary. We can't help everyone. But by being realistic about what we *can* do we're more effective and have a greater impact on the people that we support.
- Remaining open
As peer supports we have to be open to whatever is going to happen. We need to meet people where they're at with empathy, supporting their choices without judgment and not imposing our own thoughts and feelings on them. It helps to check in with the survivor regularly. How are you doing? Are you ok with what's happening here? We help them set goals and support them to move forward. Sometimes they might fall down or regress, starting drinking or using when they'd been clean, engage in reckless behaviour or struggle with feelings of depression or self-loathing. We need to be ok with this and to continue to support and encourage them. We don't judge or critique, nor do we see this as a failure. It's all part of the path.
- Overcoming biases
We need to be able to support people we may not especially like or agree with without being a martyr. Not every relationship is a comfortable fit but that doesn't mean it can't work. If a survivor is struggling with grief and anger, they may lash out from pain or because they don't know how to handle their feelings and the fallout from their abuse. Being able to recognize where the core issues and behaviour are coming from helps us to keep our hearts open to the person we're supporting. Even if – in moments – we are challenged by the survivor we can always care for and respect them. Reminding yourself that you have faults and flaws and have struggled in our own healing journey sometimes helps to keep the person's behaviour in perspective. Supporting another survivor is a choice and a commitment to care. It's ok not to know what to do. If you're feeling overwhelmed, debriefing and problem-solving with other peer supporters is critical. You also don't need to do this alone.

- Holding on when things get tough
 Staying with the hard stuff and not just shifting people along when things get difficult is one of the most challenging parts of peer support. Staying in the moment, de-escalating and releasing tension, and learning how to dance through the difficult moments is critical. Because it's sometimes in those moments when the survivor begins to share their deepest and rawest trauma and grief. That's when we realize that we've built enough trust and safety for them to be able to let go. This is a good thing. When we can re-frame things to see just how far the survivor has come it helps us to celebrate small successes and breakthroughs. Knee-jerk reactions just shut people down and undermine feelings of safety. Instead helping the survivor to dig into and express the real problem enables them to begin to unpack what's at the core of their feelings and transition through the moment. Keeping things in perspective and trying not to take things personally helps us to remain open. But if someone is acting in an abusive way on an ongoing basis, if you've tried to set boundaries and that's not working it might be time to talk to another peer support person or to transition them along to another person or a professional as needed.

- Need to debrief with someone who understands and take appropriate measures
 Peer support is hard work. It's challenging enough to support another person, but to do so as a survivor too navigating through the minefields of trauma and grief from sexual abuse can really test your limits and thresholds. And sometimes you may not know what to do. That's why being connected to a broader network of peer supporters is really critical to ensure that you're never working in an isolated vacuum. You're part of a larger and caring community. Take advantage of that. Debrief when you need to. Call another peer supporter when you're not sure about a situation and want to talk it through. Hand in hand with this is regular self-care. Whether it's meditation, walking in nature, art, fishing or hunting, knitting, a hot bath or anything else that helps you to regain your equilibrium, make sure that you're taking care of yourself regularly and not just after a crisis. Develop supports. Manage your expectations, be realistic about what you can do, and know your limits. Try to let go of the things that you have no power over. When we're constantly engaged in our own healing journey we continue to build strength, resiliency and compassion for ourselves and others.

- Hearing challenging disclosures
 In the course of supporting a survivor they may disclose not only their own victimization but also ways in which they have harmed others. This can be very difficult to hear. In the case of harm to children, there's a clear duty to report to Children's Aid Society. Also, if the survivor is a threat to him or herself or to someone else then you also have a responsibility to contact police and other

crisis services. The best way to lay the foundation for this is to be very clear up front when you begin working with someone and do a verbal disclaimer about the limits of confidentiality. Let them know that you will respect their confidentiality with the exception of those two situations. You may need to remind the person periodically too.

One of the most challenging situations for survivors can be the disclosure by another person that they have victimized someone else in one way or another. The reality is that some people who perpetrate sexual abuse or violence have also been victims themselves. That doesn't excuse the behaviour as everyone needs to be held accountable for their actions. But it does underscore the fact that things don't always fit into a neat box, nor are they always black and white. Sometimes in a trusting relationship you may be able to support the survivor to do the right thing and report the abuse, make amends to the victim, and/or seek counselling so that they can stop the cycle of violence. It's an opportunity to be compassionate even when you hear things that are upsetting. Separating the behaviour from the person is one way of holding the person accountable while at the same time recognizing the grief, trauma and pain that lead to the abuse.