

CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN PEER SUPPORT

Empathetic Communication Toolkit

Version 2

**Support
House**



Centre for
Innovation in
Peer Support

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Acknowledgements

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Previous Versions
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About the Centre

The Centre for Innovation in Peer Support provides both direct service and system focused supports across Ontario. The Centre for Innovation in Peer Support team has a robust expertise in the application of the *Guiding Standards of Peer Support*.

The Centre has been recognized as a “benchmark of excellence” in peer support, and meaningful co-design and engagement of people with lived/living experience and family & caregivers.

The Centre’s Focus: Professional Peer Support

The Centre focuses on providing, and supporting the practice of *professional peer support*.

The practice of professional peer support is emotional, social and/or practical support delivered by mutual agreement by persons who self-identify as having lived/living with similar circumstances and/or challenges. Professional peer support workers have engaged in training and skill development to enhance their ability to support empowering and empathetic relationships with others in their pursuit of self-determined wellness and/or change (Hopkins & Gremmen, 2022).

Professional peer support is when those with personal lived/living experiences work or volunteer in designated roles in mainstream/traditional services while ensuring that the critical aspects of hopefulness, recovery-orientation, empowerment, non-judgmental acceptance, and trust are promoted within the peer support relationship. Professional peer support is an intentional service provided where there is an identifiable ‘giver’ and ‘receiver’ of care. Professional peer support workers uphold the fidelity of peer support, while also honouring the responsibilities of their workplace (Hopkins & Gremmen, 2022).

[For more information on professional peer support, we invite you to read *Understanding Peer Support: A Proposed Core Service in Ontario* on our Resource Hub](#)

Supporting Provincial Systems & Partners

The **Centre’s Provincial, Systems & Partner** stream works within the mental health and substance use/addictions system to support peer staff, supervisors, and organizations from the approach of the *Guiding Standards of Peer Support* with a focus on professional peer support. The Centre also supports organisations to empower people with lived experience and/or family/caregiver experience through meaningful engagement and co-design.

Our full programming is offered through our **Virtual Learning Centre & Resource Hub** which supports the most current, best practices in Peer Support. Through our **Virtual Learning Centre**, we offer trainings, consultation, our peer professional development webinars, and provincial communities of practice. Our **Resource Hub** is home to our toolkits, models, and resources. All of these offerings support the implementation and practice of peer support within Ontario.

We continue to evolve, listening to input from our stakeholders across the province to identify gaps and needs within the system, and using quality improvement processes to pivot, pilot, evaluate and then scale and spread new innovations in peer support.

Supporting People Engaging in Services

The **Centre's Peer Programming** stream began as a consumer survivor initiative under the name TEACH (Teach, Empower, Advocate for Community Health) in 1999. TEACH later came to be housed at Support & Housing Halton (now Support House) and continued to evolve in order to meet the needs of our community, eventually amalgamating with Support House's peer support provincial systems & partner support program, the Centre for Innovation in Peer Support.

Today, the Centre's Peer Programming utilizes its expertise from having provided peer support services for over 23 years in the Halton-Mississauga region to offer quality programs that are designed, developed, implemented, and evaluated by people with lived experience. This stream is focused on peer-led psychosocial and rehabilitative programming. Together, we build community and connection through creating safe spaces to heal and grow for people navigating mental health and substance use/addiction challenges, as well as supporters/families.

Our History

In 2014, the Mississauga Halton LHIN Mental Health & Addictions Leadership Table began discussing future funding priorities. Peer support was identified as the main priority. After consultations and research, the Mississauga Halton LHIN created the Enhancing and Sustaining Peer Support Initiative in 2015. This initiative created peer support positions, supported service coordination, and supported the training and development of these positions across the region.

Support & Housing Halton (now Support House) became the lead agency that hired and housed the Peer Support Systems Lead and the Substance Use & Provincial Systems Lead in a program that would become the Centre for Innovation in Peer Support (Centre). This team worked to sustain the new peer support positions that had been funded, build infrastructure, and bridge the many stakeholders impacted by this initiative.

In January of 2020, the Centre amalgamated with Support House's direct-service-facing peer support program, TEACH. The Centre now has a direct service stream of peer support programming as well as a system and partners stream, which has grown beyond the Mississauga/Halton area to include the entire province of Ontario.

About Support House:

Support House is directed by our core values. They guide our agency's decisions and actions, unite our staff, define our brand, and inspire our culture. We put people first – our supports are **person directed**. We **connect and engage** and start conversations to build and maintain relationships. We focus on **health and wellness** practices to inspire our culture. All employees are required to adhere to our values-based Oath of conduct.

Preface

Empathy

A common reflection is that... “empathy is standing in someone else’s shoes, seeing the world through their eyes, and feeling what they’re feeling.” (Parkin, 2015; TEDxTalks, 2015).

Paul Parkin, an adjunct professor at Utah Valley University wrote his dissertation on empathy and communication and he suggests that:

- a. that’s not possible;
- b. and when we think we can do that, we actually start making assumptions about what other people have experienced, assumptions that can lead to disconnection, or misunderstandings (TEDxTalks, 2015).

It’s important that we recognize we have never had the exact same experience as someone else, we have never been in the exact same shoes as another person.

Example

Consider two people moving homes. While we may say we have “had the same experience” that isn’t quite true.

One of us may have had help moving, while the other did not. Maybe it was raining the day one of us moved and sunny for the other. Our moving boxes would not have been the same weight and we would have been moving from and to different homes with different features. One of us may have more experience with moving and feel more confident and comfortable throughout the process.

This is a basic example. In practice we would also consider aspects of ourselves such as social location, experiences with trauma, and more.

Understanding that our lives and experiences are different is embedded within the *Guiding Standards of Peer Support*, as one of the *Peer Support Values in Action* are, “The peer support worker reminds me that my health and wellness is unique to me” (Support House: Centre for Innovation in Peer Support, 2018).

So, then what is Empathy?

If we can’t stand in someone else’s shoes, then what is empathy?

“Empathy is the is the righteous struggle to try, to try to understand what it’s like to be in their shoes, to try to understand what they’re feeling; and that’s a process that happens through communication ... empathy forges communication that is inquisitive, non-judgemental, validating and compassionate” (Parkin, 2015; TEDxTalks, 2015).

Paul Parkin’s work is in very close alignment with earlier work done by Teresa Wiseman, a nursing scholar who published a concept analysis which concluded that there are four qualities of empathy; **perspective taking, staying out of judgement, recognising emotion in other people**, and then **communicating** that recognition (Wiseman, 1996; Brené Brown on Empathy, 2017).

Values in Action

Through a research process the Centre for Innovation in Peer Support concluded that peer support is made up of values-based actions and is not necessarily defined by task-oriented work.

Using the Mental Health Commission of Canada's *Values of Peer Support*, the Centre facilitated this research with people engaging in services to identify the following 17 statements as integral actions of peer support services, these are known as the *Peer Support Values in Action*.

These statements are validated, and reliability tested, the items cannot be changed or altered.

1. **The peer support worker** reminds me that my health and wellness is unique to me.
2. **The peer support worker** tells me about their experience in a way that is meaningful to me.
3. **The peer support worker** gives me encouragement.
4. **The peer support worker** shares information with me, e.g., community resources that are available, different learning opportunities.
5. **The peer support worker** helps me explore options open to me when I have a decision to make.
6. **The peer support worker** does not express disapproval of me or the choices I make.
7. **The peer support worker** tells me they believe in me.
8. **The peer support worker** tells me my feelings and opinions are worthwhile.
9. **The peer support worker** genuinely listens to me.
10. **The peer support worker** follows through on commitments they make.
11. **The peer support worker** discusses confidentiality with me.
12. **The peer support worker** tells me that I am not alone in my experiences and struggles.
13. **The peer support worker** encourages me to do things for myself instead of doing things for me.
14. **The peer support worker** learns from me and I learn from them.
15. **The peer support worker** reminds me that I have the right to express my needs.
16. **The peer support worker** demonstrates ways they take care of themselves.
17. When I meet with others in a group, **the peer support worker** tells me that I can participate in a way that is comfortable for me and the group.

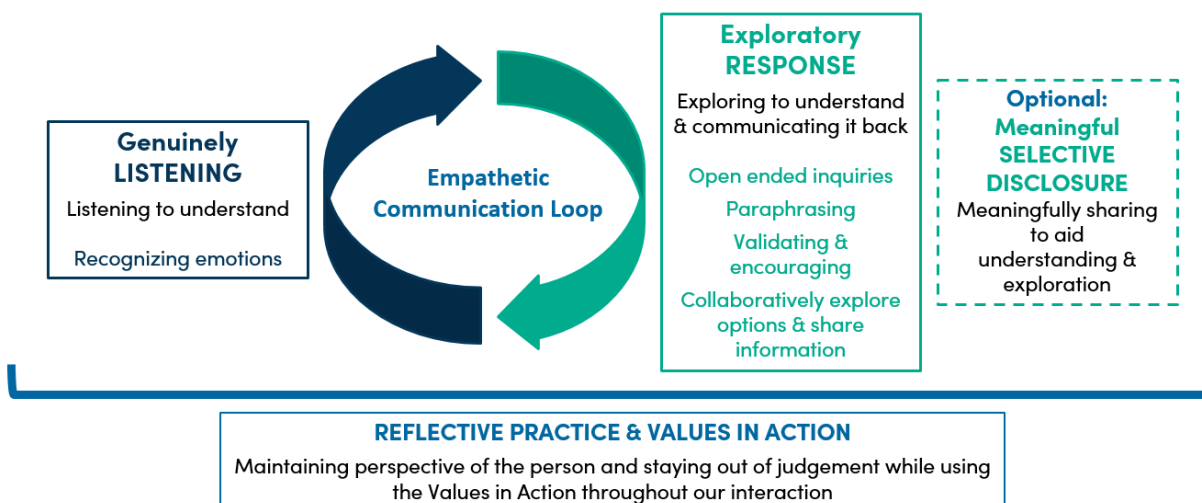
Empathetic Communication

The Centre for Innovation in Peer Support created the *Empathetic Communication Model* to illustrate how empathy, and *Values in Action* are present and intertwined in the delivery of peer support.

Peer support workers approach their work with compassion; concern for the wellbeing of others and a desire to be of support (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). This compassion drives our desire to utilize empathy and the *Peer Support Values in Action* through genuinely listening, exploratory response, meaningful selective disclosure, and reflective practice. Throughout our connections we continuously listen and collaboratively explore to be of support.

Empathetic Communication Model

The “Empathetic Communication Model” was created by Alyssa Gremmen & Ethan Hopkins at the Centre for Innovation in Peer Support (2022).



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The **Empathetic Communication Model** is a loop. You will engage with the different parts of this model multiple times, continuously throughout every interaction. Every time a peer supporter offers an exploratory response, it is important to do so with the intention of listening again.

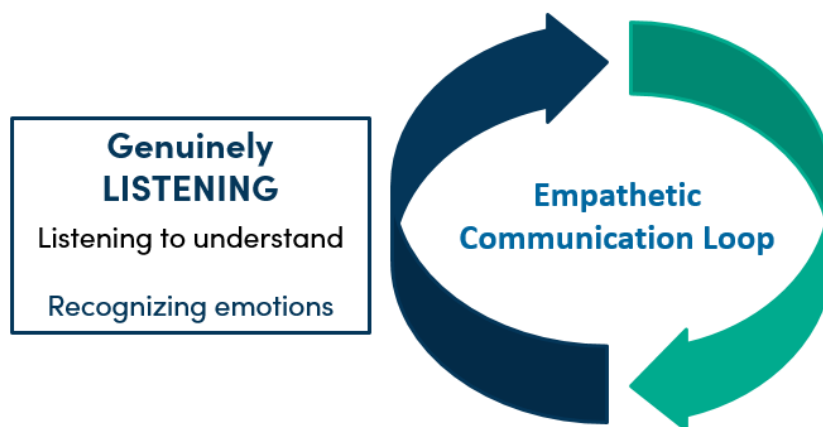
Reflective Practice and Values in Action

Engaging in regular self-reflection before, during and after interactions is a practice that enhances our support through continuous learning and personal growth. All throughout the interaction, we are **reflecting** on what is being shared, then aligning our actions to the **Values in Action**. This allows us to **maintain the perspective of the person** and **stay out of judgement**, two qualities of empathy.

To take the perspective of those we support it is required that we be **non-judgmental** and meet people where they are at in their journey in that moment. As supporters we must check our biases and remember that everyone’s journey, **health and wellness is unique to them** and it is vital that we **do not express disapproval of people or the choices they make**.

Genuinely Listening

The goal of genuinely listening is to create space where we can truly **understand the person we are supporting**; their unique life context, needs, barriers, challenges, concerns, strengths, and goals. It is important that we remain curious to their perspectives and how they understand their lived and living experiences. While listening, we **recognize the emotions** of others as the impact to that person and what is true for them. This will help us determine how we can respond supportively.



While this may seem like a less significant part of our communication, it is actually the most crucial and important part of the model. Without listening to understand, we may risk a conversation deviating away from a person's needs.

Values in Action: Genuinely Listening

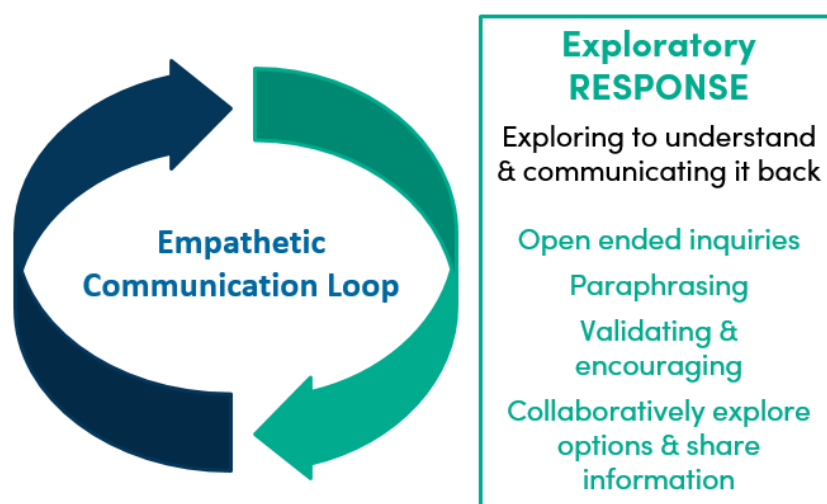
The peer support worker genuinely listens to me.

The peer support worker does not express disapproval of me or the choices I make.

Exploratory Response

The goal of exploratory **response** is to further explore in order to better understand a person's unique life context, needs, barriers, challenges, concerns, strengths, and goals, and communicate our understanding back to the person we are supporting, checking in to see if we understand correctly. This ensures that we provide support that is meaningful to them.

There are many ways we can engage in exploratory responses. Consistent with everyone's journey, health and wellness being unique to them, the **supports that are of benefit to someone will also be unique to them**. At different times and points in the conversation, we may choose to offer any of the options below when they are applicable. Once we have offered an exploratory response, we then return to genuinely listening.



Exploratory responses include:

Open-ended Inquiries/Questions

We can empathetically **explore their perspective and experiences** through the use of open-ended inquiries/questions. This **inquisitive** space not only supports our understanding but also creates a space for the other person to self-explore, and self-determine what is important to them, and what their needs and wants are.

Validating and Encouraging

As peer support workers, we **do not express disapproval of people or the choices they make**, we seek to be validating and encouraging in our response. We may validate the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of the person. This creates safety, while inviting the person to share more about their life with us.

Collaboratively Exploring Options and Sharing Information

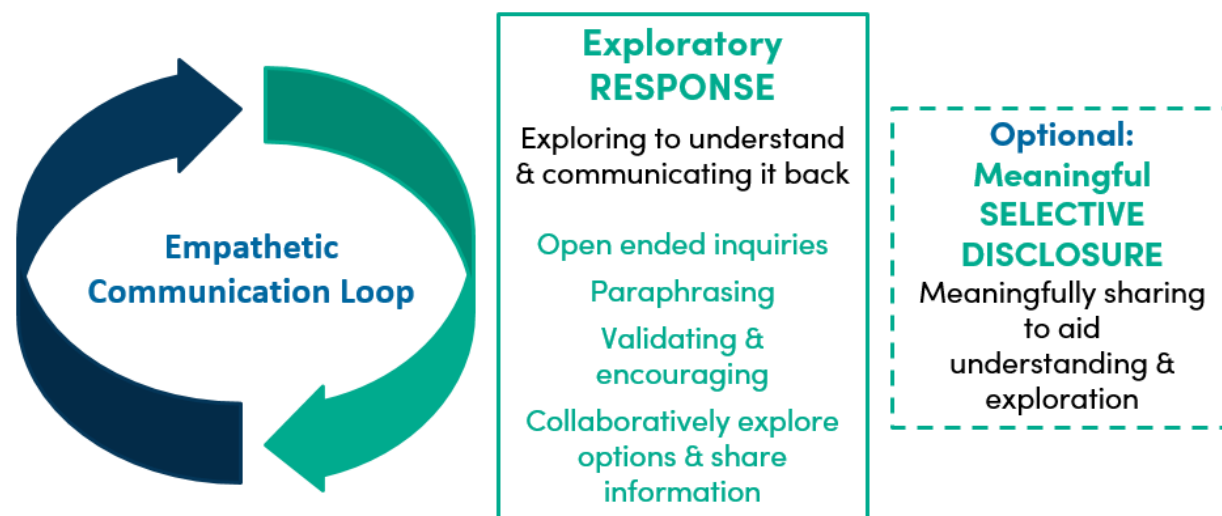
For those who wish to explore further supports we can **collaboratively explore options open to the person when they have a decision to make**. This can include creating goals, **sharing information and resources with the person**, further exploring the impact of experiences, and/or brainstorming next steps. It is important that options, goals, resources, and next steps are directed by the person rather than ourselves.

Communicating Back

Communicating back our understanding of what has been shared often involves **summarizing, and paraphrasing** what we have heard and understood. This is also an opportunity to ask if we have understood correctly, providing the person we are supporting with the opportunity to either affirm our understanding or clarify.

Exploratory Response: [Optional] Meaningful Selective Disclosure

Throughout our interactions we may **tell those we support about our experiences in a way that is meaningful to them**. Meaningful selective disclosure is when we share from our personal lived experiences in support of exploratory response. The purpose of sharing from our journey is to aid in the other person's self-determined exploration, not to direct people to take steps, or support themselves the same way that we have.



Meaningful selective disclosure requires us to reflect on points of connection between our experience and the experience of others. Even with differences in our journeys, we can look within ourselves and seek points of connection with emotions, impacts, and experiences of others as similar to our own.

Sharing our experiences in a way that is meaningful to the person can **convey that people are not alone in their experiences and struggles**, inspire hope, provide **validation**, and aid in their exploration of choices and options available to them, including **sharing the ways that we take care of ourselves**.

We share meaningfully using *Resilience Stories*. This way of sharing from our journey addresses the pain or struggle of an experience but focuses on the impact of our experiences, the learnings we've had, the actions we took and supports we found helpful. Resilience stories are brief, as the interaction is not about us, but rather to be of support to others.

We can engage in exploratory response without selective disclosure, but we avoid disclosing/sharing without having the purpose of **conveying that people are not alone in their experiences and struggles**, inspiring hope, providing **validation**, and/or aiding in their exploration of choices and options available to them. If the conversation becomes about our journey and experiences instead of being in service of the other person's experience we have shifted away from a supportive interaction. Skillfully and mindfully sharing from our journey requires practice, and training may be helpful.

Values in Action: Exploratory Response

The peer support worker genuinely listens to me.

The peer support worker reminds me that my health and wellness is unique to me.

The peer support worker gives me encouragement.

The peer support worker shares information with me, e.g., community resources that are available, different learning opportunities.

The peer support worker helps me explore options open to me when I have a decision to make.

The peer support worker does not express disapproval of me or the choices I make.

The peer support worker tells me they believe in me.

The peer support worker tells me my feelings and opinions are worthwhile.

The peer support worker follows through on commitments they make.

The peer support worker tells me that I am not alone in my experiences and struggles.

The peer support worker encourages me to do things for myself instead of doing things for me.

The peer support worker reminds me that I have the right to express my needs.

The peer support worker tells me about their experience in a way that is meaningful to me.

The peer support worker tells me that I am not alone in my experiences and struggles.

The peer support worker demonstrates ways they take care of themselves.

Questions to Support Reflective Practice

Before

- Why do I want to support others today?
- Am I grounded?
- What gifts do I bring to the interaction/experiences I am going to have today?
- How will I support myself throughout these conversations?
- Do I have my additional resources ready and available?

During

- Am I honouring the Values of Peer Support and using the Values in Action?
- What are the choices and possibilities of this interaction?
- Am I sharing for the benefit of my peer (W.A.I.T. – Why Am I Talking & The Sharing Spectrum)?
- What are my personal views/biases?
- How do I feel during this interaction?

After

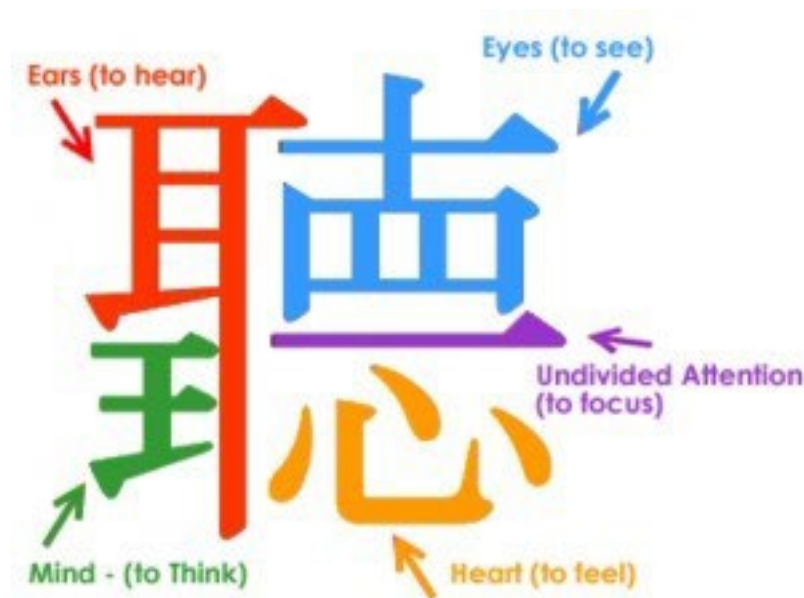
- Did I honour the Values of Peer Support and use the Values in Action?
- What did I learn from this interaction?
- Would I do anything differently next time?
- What do I need to do to support myself (self-care, break, debrief)?
- What was my biggest take away from today's interaction?

A Tool for Genuinely Listening

Aspects of Listening

This section is taken from (SkillPacks, 2020).

This is the Chinese character for listen (pronounced “TING”).



The Chinese character for listening, as you can see to the left, is the traditional character. This traditional character is used in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other overseas Chinese communities. In the People’s Republic of China (or ‘mainland China’) the simplified Chinese character, “听”, is used.

We use our ears to listen by paying attention not just to the words spoken but also to the tone, pace and emphasis, to help understand the person’s relationship to the words.

We use our eyes to connect with the person we are listening to and reassure them that they have our attention. We also use our eyes to check the body language of the person to gain insights into their thoughts.

We use our mind as we’re listening to consider the words and ideas shared. We may choose to take an ‘open-minded’ approach to what we’re hearing, suspending judgement and being open to all that we hear.

We use our heart to listen as we empathize with the person we’re listening to, as we experience the emotions being shared and as we care for the person and their opinions. Using our heart allows us to listen more deeply and connect with the person we’re listening to at an emotional level, not just rationally.

We use undivided attention and focus as we listen. We can think much quicker than a person can talk and as a result we tend to fill in the gaps, sometimes with unnecessary chatter. To listen most effectively we need to calm this chatter, and completely focus.

Tools for Exploratory Response

O.A.R.S.

This section is taken from: (Hall et al., 2012).

Open-ended Questions

- Let the other person explore their experience
 - How can I support you?
 - Would you like to explore ____ a little more?
 - What does ____ mean for you?
 - Can you tell me more about ____?

Affirmations

- Statements of appreciation and understanding
 - I appreciate that you are willing to meet with me today
 - You handled yourself really well in that situation
 - That's a good suggestion
 - I've enjoyed talking with you today

Reflective Listening

- Rephrasing a statement to capture meaning and feeling
 - Repeating or rephrasing: Stay close to what the speaker has said
 - Paraphrasing: Restatement in which the speaker's meaning is inferred
 - Reflection of feeling: Listener emphasizes emotional aspects of communication through feeling statements. This is the deepest form of listening.

Summarizing

- Summarize what has been shared – “check in” for mutual understanding and demonstrates listening
 - Let me see if I understand so far...
 - Here is what I've heard. Tell me if I've missed anything

W.A.I.T. - Why Am I Talking?

This acronym is taken from: (TED - The Empowerment Dynamic, 2017).

What will I share?

- Does my share connect with an aspect of the other person's journey?
- How much detail will I share?

What's my purpose in sharing?

- To share for exploration? To validate? To inspire?
- Is it in service of the listener(s) and not just about me?

What's the risk to others?

- Will this enhance or hinder the conversation?
- Will I cause harm? – shame, blame, create comparison, re-traumatize

What's the risk to myself?

- Am I ready to share?
- Will this have a negative impact on me?

RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT:
DEVELOPING YOUR RESILIENCE STORIES

[Visit our Resource Hub to explore how you can develop your resilience stories](#)

Communication Discouragers

“Discouragers” create barriers to communication and diminish trust. They convey judgement or the idea that we have an agenda that a person should be following. It is important to recognize that these are discouragers in the context of a Peer Support Relationship and that some of the actions may be applicable in other roles of our lives or be more appropriate in certain cultural contexts.

- **Advice/persuasion:** being parental, does not honour self-determination and choice
- **Arguing:** for your own point, being motivated to be RIGHT
- **Assuming:** misses the opportunity for true meaning and exploration
- **“But” statements:** can be dismissive
- **Shaming and Blaming:** degrading, does not honour self-determination or respect and dignity (I.e. “You knew this would happen” “What were you thinking?!”)
- **Minimizing:** does not honour that person’s experience, dismisses them (I.e., “that is not so bad”)
- **Patronizing:** condescending, not supportive of equal and empathetic relationships (I.e., “You poor thing...”)
- **Sarcastic responses:** can cause disconnection and missed opportunities to explore, keeps things on the surface
- **Ultimatums:** threatening and controlling, does not support lifelong learning and personal growth (I.e., “Smarten up or else you will lose your housing”)
- **Abruptness:** Interrupting or startling someone can reduce the opportunity to explore and understand each other
- **Being distracted:** shows we are not present, listening or interested
- **Judgement:** shows disapproval (I.e “Shoulds” and negative tones of voice “You should do _____”)
- **Oversharing from your journey:** may cause harm or make the conversation about you instead of your peer

Communication Encouragers

- Trust, empathy, and compassion
- Calm tone of voice
- Open body language
- Let them lead
- Listen attentively and actively
- Be curious
- Ask open ended questions
- Summarize/paraphrase
- Seek clarification
- Silences and pauses
- Highlighting successes
- Reciprocity and sharing from our experiences

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Centre for Innovation in Peer Support's

Provincial Systems Virtual Learning Centre & Resource Hub for Peer Supporters & Organizations

Support House's Centre for Innovation in Peer Support's full programming is offered through our Virtual Learning Centre & Resource Hub which supports the most current, best practices in Peer Support.

Through our Virtual Learning Centre, we offer trainings, consultation, our Peer Professional Development Webinar Series, and provincial communities of practice. Our Resource Hub is home to our educational toolkits, documents and videos. These offerings support the practice and implementation of Peer Support within Ontario.

Products on our Resource Hub:

- ***Guiding Standards of Peer Support*** (from Mental Health Commission of Canada, Peer Support Canada & Centre for Innovation in Peer Support)
- ***Developing Your Resilience Stories Toolkit***
- ***The Relationship to Experience Spectrum***

[CLICK HERE TO VISIT OUR VIRTUAL LEARNING CENTRE & RESOURCE HUB](#)

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