



CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN PEER SUPPORT

Peer Support Examining Bias Toolkit

How to Use This Resource

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About this Resource

This resource has been created by people with lived/living experience working in the mental health and addiction field. We recognize that the realm of mental health and addiction support intersects with all parts of identity and experience. We encourage you to seek out learning and growth opportunities that can inform your language and practice regarding these intersections.

If you have questions about this resource, please contact
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About the Centre

Recognized provincially for its award-winning services, Support House Centre for Innovation in Peer Support (the Centre) has evolved into a "Benchmark of Excellence" in peer support and experience-based engagement and co-design. The Centre is dedicated to implementing innovative best practices for meaningful and equitable engagement and partnerships with individuals who have lived/living experience, as well as their family/caregivers, across Ontario.

Our History

Originally established as a Consumer Survivor Initiative in 1999 under the name TEACH (Teach, Empower, Advocate for Community Health), the need for support and training for agencies providing authentic peer support was identified. As a result, in 2015, the Centre received new base funding from the legacy Mississauga Halton LHIN to offer regional and provincial system support for Health Service Providers (HSPs). This support includes hospital psychiatric inpatient units, addiction residential treatment, supportive housing programs, central access, employment support programs, justice, community mental health and addiction providers, and self-help education and support groups. This scope has since expanded to encompass regional, provincial, national, and international collaborations.

Supporting People Engaging in Services

Our service offerings include wellness-based, peer-led self-help and social connection programs for community members. These programs are designed, developed, implemented, and evaluated by individuals with lived/living experience. We work together to foster community and connection by creating safe spaces where people navigating mental health and substance use/addiction challenges, can heal and grow.

Supporting Provincial Systems & Partners

The Centre's Provincial, Systems & Partner stream is continually evolving to support organizations that provide peer support services and to foster meaningful, equitable engagement, co-design, and partnership with individuals who have lived/living experience, as well as family/caregivers for roles on advisory tables, working groups, committees, and government boards. We create learning opportunities through co-design, education and training, consultations, capacity building, collaborations and partnerships, and the development of resources and toolkits, drawing on our expertise in engagement stewardship.

Additional learning resources are available in our Virtual Learning Centre and Resource Hub, where you can explore information about our provincial communities of practice, toolkits, models, and other resources. The Centre is committed to enhancing the capacity of individuals with lived/living experience, family/caregivers, peer support workers, supervisors, health service providers, and regional and provincial healthcare systems. We aspire to co-design and co-create an inclusive and equitable healthcare response, regardless of complexity.

About Support House

Support House is guided by our core values, which shape 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, starting 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.

Examining Bias

As we navigate experiences in our daily lives, memories are consciously and unconsciously formed. In processing these experiences, we attribute meaning to them which can later influence decision making, the way we perceive different situations, and our worldview. Bias describes the associations or attitudes that reflexively alter our perceptions, thereby affecting behavior, interactions, and decision-making (Marcelin et al., 2019). This is a natural process that cannot be turned off (Dee, 2017). It is important to be aware of this process as it relates to the support we provide as peer workers. A lack of awareness may negatively impact our professional capacity to meet people where they are, be open to the unique meaning that individuals derive from their experiences and engage in non-judgemental exploration of choices and options open to those engaging in services.

When we have an awareness of our biases we can choose to align our responses with the authentic, values-based, best practices that uphold the fidelity of peer support. The Centre for Innovation in Peer Support identifies five widely recognized guiding works as the Guiding Standards of Peer Support.

These include:

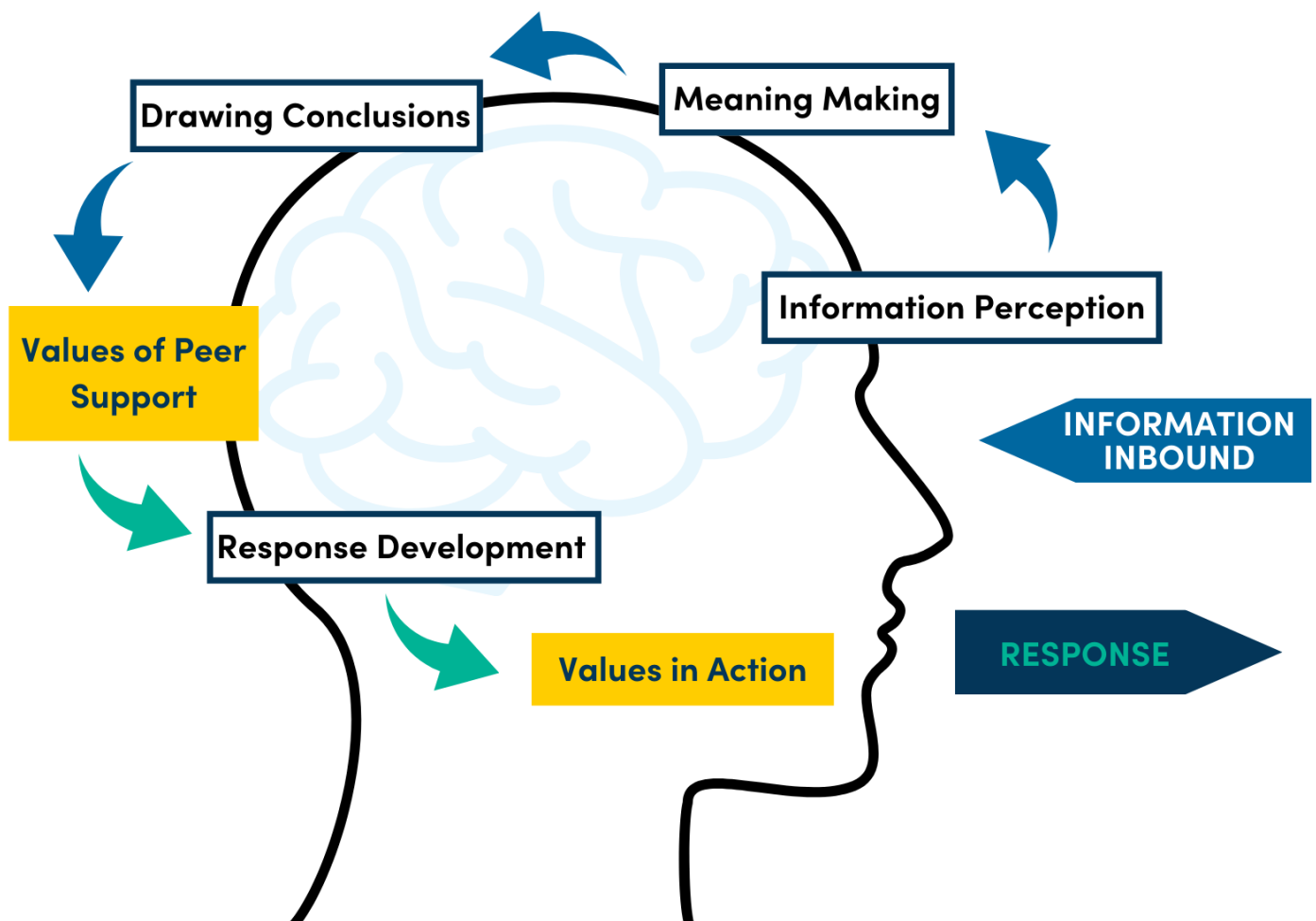
- The Mental Health Commission of Canada's Values of Peer Support
- Centre for Innovation in Peer Support's Peer Support Values in Action
- Peer Support Canada's
 - Peer Support Code of Conduct
 - Principles of Practice
 - Peer Supporter Competencies

Examining Bias Model: A Tool for Peer Supporters

There are five stages in this model:

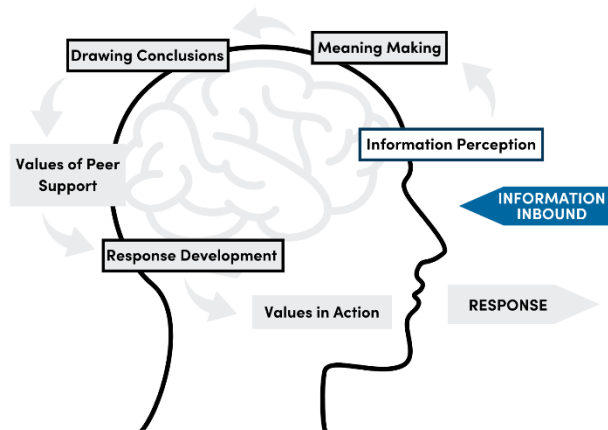
1. Information Perception
2. Meaning Making
3. Drawing Conclusions
4. Response Development
5. Conveying our Response

With these stages in mind let's walk through an example using the visual representation below.



A Walk Through the Examining Bias Model

Experiences that others share with us become the **inbound information** that will go through the stages of the model. This takes us to the first stage in the model, Information Perception.



Stage 1: Information Perception

In this stage we become aware of the different pieces of information that are being shared with us.

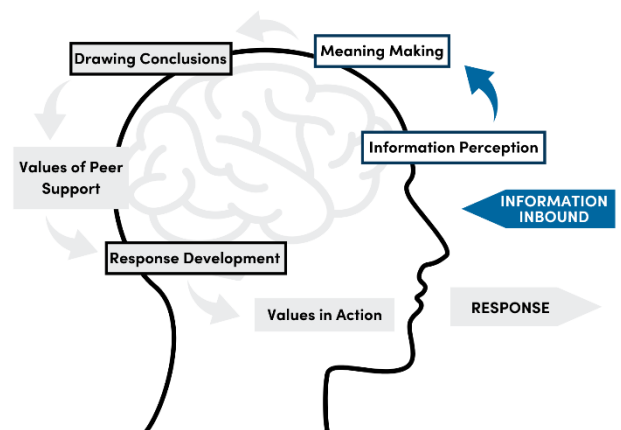
Consider the situation where someone you are supporting tells you that they had a really rough day. They explain that their dad was rude, they got 60% on a test, they were late for the bus, and they lost their pen.

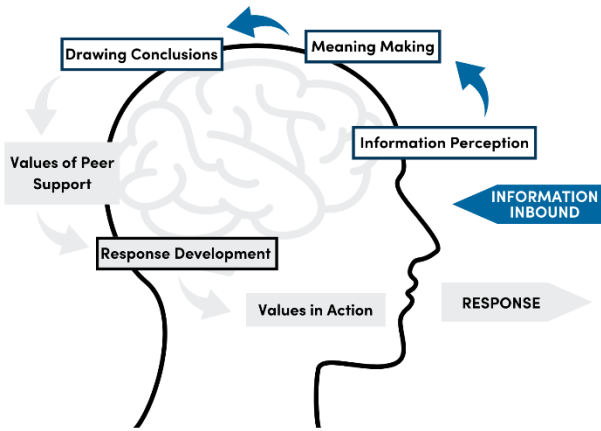
Stage 2: Meaning Making

Once we become aware of the information it is filtered through our perceptions. These are the ideas or beliefs that we have as a result of how we see or understand our experiences. Perceptions can be informed by our biases, prior knowledge, upbringing, beliefs and personal values among other influences.

When the information is filtered there will be some information that stands out to us more than others. For example, if your parents raised you with high academic expectations and placed value on punctuality, this may be reflected in your core values and impact the meaning you assign to these elements.

Your focus gravitates to the test grade and being late for the bus as the “important” parts of the story. You may go a step further and impose a subjective judgement on the information that stands out, deciding that 60% is a low grade and that punctuality should be a higher priority.





Stage 3: Drawing Conclusions

The subjective judgements that we impose on information can shape assumptions that arise and the initial conclusions that we draw about the best course of action.

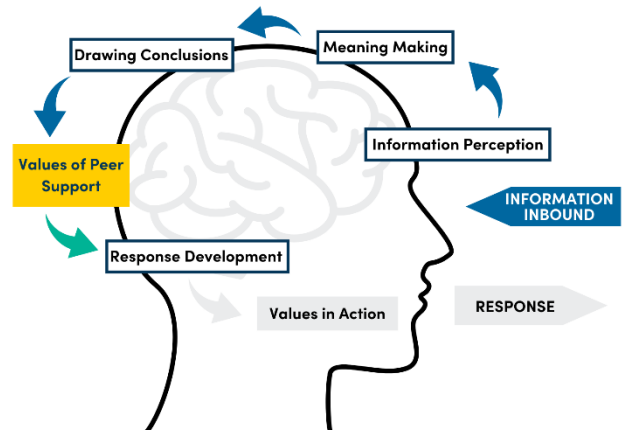
Judgements and assumptions assign value to our perceptions and inform the conclusions we draw.

You may conclude that **this individual needs to focus more on learning and should prioritize being on time**. Once you recognize your initial conclusions, you can consciously challenge your assumptions and biases. You can then reflect on what is informing you before responding to your peer, ensuring that what they have identified as important to them is at the forefront of your conversation. This requires genuinely listening to your peer.

Stage 4: Response Development

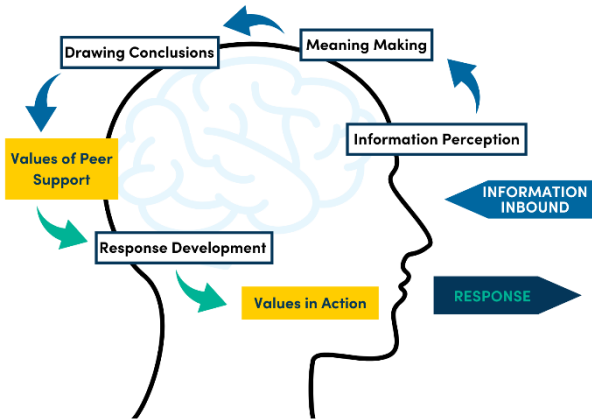
At this stage peer supporters can reorient to the **Values of Peer Support** and use them to develop a response.

Reflection and reflexive practice are integral processes for those in peer support roles. Reflection facilitates greater awareness of events or experiences as they take place. Reflexive practice promotes deeper understanding of the impact that our thoughts and actions can have on those events and experiences. It challenges us to be intentional about how we participate in the world around us.



Rather than accepting your initial conclusions, you may ask yourself the following questions to help you as you develop a response:

- **Am I honouring what this person is identifying as important to them?**
- **Am I respecting them as a person with the right to self-determination?**
- **Am I regarding this person with dignity and respect?**
- **Am I honouring their health and wellness experiences as unique to them?**
- **Am I being empathetic or judgemental?**



Stage 5: Conveying our Response

The **Values in Action** give us important considerations to keep in mind when we share our response. To review the full list of these statements, visit the Resource Highlight at the bottom of this page.

*If you've ensured that your **response** is directed by what the peer has identified as important to them and is grounded in the Values of Peer Support, **you may choose to give them encouragement, remind them that their health and wellness is unique to them and explore options open to them given the situation they have shared.** Remember, peer supporters do not express disapproval of their peers or the choices they make. **We can remind our peer that their feelings and opinions are worthwhile – even if we do not feel the same way based on the influences of our own personal biases and experiences. We also have the option of demonstrating ways that we take care of ourselves when we are navigating experiences.***

RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT:
[Guiding Standards Handout](#)

Working Through our Perceptions

Step One – Observe your underlying, default responses

Record your first thoughts and feelings that arise as you consider supporting the following experiences, identities and attitudes of others. These are for your personal reflection only.

| Experience, Identity or Attitude | Thought | Feeling |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Substance Use (cannabis, opioids, crack, cocaine, crystal meth etc.) | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Addiction (any substance or activity) | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Psychosis (e.g., hallucinations, delusions) | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Suicidality | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Self-harm | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Grief | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Homelessness | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| HIV | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Hoarding | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Criminal activity | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Trauma | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Personality disorders | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Mood disorders | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Anxiety disorders | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Drug use and mental illness occurring together | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Engagement in sex work | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| All gender identities | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| All sexual orientations | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Living with mice, ticks, fleas, bed bugs | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Religious/spiritual beliefs and practices that are different from yours | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Someone of a race that is different than yours | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Someone with skin colour that is different than yours | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Contraception use | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Racist beliefs | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Transphobic/homophobic beliefs | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Xenophobic beliefs (Prejudice against people from other countries) | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Someone involved with the criminal justice system | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Someone with a history of violence | Click or tap here to enter text. | Click or tap here to enter text. |

Step Two – Contemplating and challenging our perceptions

Choose three of the items you would like to challenge from above.

Why do you think/feel this? (Life experiences, prior knowledge, upbringing, beliefs, values)

1. Click or tap here to enter text.
2. Click or tap here to enter text.
3. Click or tap here to enter text.

What assumptions have you made?

1. Click or tap here to enter text.
2. Click or tap here to enter text.
3. Click or tap here to enter text.

Using the Values of Peer Support, how can you challenge your assumptions?

1. Click or tap here to enter text.
2. Click or tap here to enter text.
3. Click or tap here to enter text.

What Values in Action statements can we use to support this individual? What might that look like?

1. Click or tap here to enter text.
2. Click or tap here to enter text.
3. Click or tap here to enter text.

We encourage you to continue to reflect on how bias appears in your life and work. You can revisit this model as often as you would like.

Additional Resources to Explore

The following resources can be found on the Centre's [Provincial Systems Resource Hub](#)

- Empathetic Communication Toolkit
- Developing your Resilience Stories Toolkit
- Relationship to Lived Experience Spectrum

References

Dee, T. S., & Gershenson, S. (2017). Unconscious bias in the classroom: Evidence and opportunities.

Marcelin, J. R., Siraj, D. S., Victor, R., Kotadia, S., & Maldonado, Y. A. (2019). The impact of unconscious bias in healthcare: how to recognize and mitigate it. *The Journal of infectious diseases*, 220(Supplement_2), S62-S73.