



CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN PEER SUPPORT

Empathetic Communication Toolkit

Version 2

How to Use This Resource

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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.

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 “that’s not possible.” He further states that “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 to recognize that even very similar experiences will have unique aspects to them; we will never have the *exact* same experience as another person.

Consider two families who have decided to move to new homes. While both families will have an experience of moving, there will be aspects of the moving process that will be exclusive to each. One family may have had help moving, while the other did not. It may have been raining on the day one family moved and sunny for the other. One family may have more experience with moving and feel more confident and comfortable throughout the process than the other. As we go forward in support of others it’s important to remember that there will be common and distinct elements to consider that characterize individual circumstances.

We must also consider the relationship between power and privilege and what that looks like in the lives of each person. Different parts of identity can impact access to opportunities that may facilitate a more comfortable, safe and productive life. Because our identities are multi-faceted these impacts will look different for each person and may result in disproportionate advantages or disadvantages depending on their context. This concept is reflected within the *Guiding Standards of Peer Support*, as one of the *Peer Support Values in Action* statements is: “The peer support worker reminds me that my health and wellness is unique to me” (Support House: Centre for Innovation in Peer Support, 2018).

Because we will never know exactly what someone else has experienced, it is important that we find a different way to think about empathy. Parkin (2015) offers this perspective: “Empathy is the righteous struggle to try...to understand what it’s like to be in [another person’s] 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”.

Paul Parkin’s work is in very close alignment with earlier work done by Teresa Wiseman, a nursing scholar who published a concept analysis. This work concluded that there are four qualities of empathy:

1. Perspective taking
2. Staying out of judgement
3. Recognising emotion in other people
4. Communicating that recognition to them

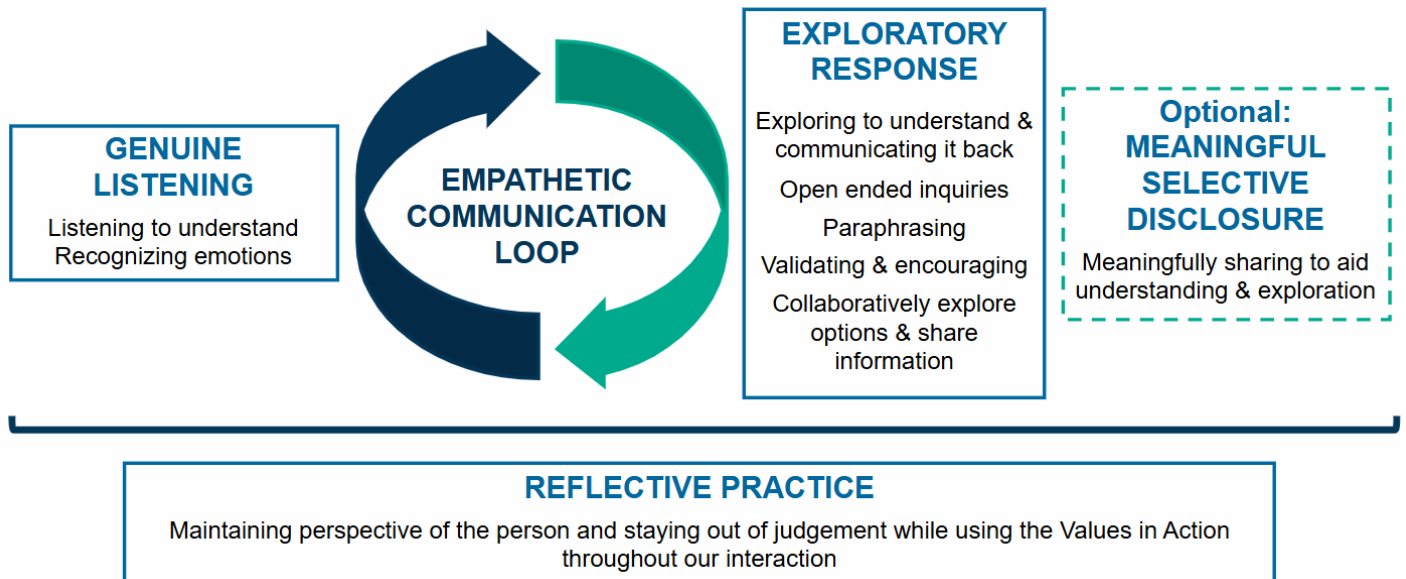
(Wiseman, 1996; Brené Brown on Empathy, 2017).

The Empathetic Communication Model

The Centre for Innovation in Peer Support created the *Empathetic Communication Model* to illustrate how empathy and the *Peer Support 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). Compassion drives our desire to be empathetic and apply the *Peer Support Values in Action* through the stages of the Empathetic Communication Model, which include:

1. Reflective Practice
2. Genuine Listening
3. Exploratory Response
4. Meaningful Selective Disclosure

The primary structure of this model is a loop, depicting the interdependence between Genuine Listening and Exploratory Response. This is called the Empathetic Communication Loop. When a peer supporter offers an exploratory response, it is important to do so with the intention of listening again to what is being shared. To better understand how peer support practice is reflected in each stage of the model, we will walk through the diagram below.



Reflective Practice

Engaging in regular self-reflection before, during and after interactions is a practice that enhances our support. This facilitates continuous learning and personal growth. In every interaction, peer supporters are reflecting on what is being shared, then aligning their responses to the Peer Support Values in Action. This allows us to maintain the perspective of the person engaging in services and stay out of judgement, two qualities of empathy.

As supporters we must remember that everyone's journey, health and wellness is unique to them; it is vital that we ensure that we are not being directed by our biases and do not express disapproval of people or the choices they make as they determine what is meaningful to them.

Genuine 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 about their perspectives and how they understand their lived and living experiences. While listening, we seek to better understand the emotions of others, the impacts of their experiences 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 a crucial and important part of the model. Without listening to understand, we may risk a conversation deviating away from a person's needs.

The following Peer Support Values in Action are reflected in this stage:

- 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

Being exploratory in our responses is done with the goal of developing a better understanding of a person's unique life context, needs, barriers, challenges, concerns, strengths, and goals. It is important that we communicate our understanding back to the person we are supporting, to ensure that it is accurate and that their truth is reflected.

There are many ways we can engage in exploratory responses. Consistent with health and wellness being unique to each person, the supports that are of benefit to someone will be individualized. At different times in the conversation, we may choose to offer any of the options below. Once we have offered an exploratory response, we then return to genuinely listening.

Open-ended Inquiries

These types of questions are asked with the intention to learn more; they invite more than a yes or no answer. They also support the empathetic exploration of perspectives and experiences. This improves our understanding and creates a space for the person we are supporting to explore and self-determine what is important to them.

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 practice. When we validate others' thoughts, emotions, and experiences, this creates safety and invites 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 brainstorming next steps. It is important that options, goals, resources, and next steps are directed by the person engaging in services rather than ourselves.

Communicating Back

Communicating our understanding of what has been shared often involves summarizing and paraphrasing what we have heard back to the person engaging in services. This is also an opportunity to check the accuracy of our understanding and give the person we are supporting the opportunity to provide any necessary clarify.

The following Peer Support Values in Action are reflected in this stage:

- 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.

Tools that Facilitate Exploratory Response

You may wish to consider the following resources as you develop your skills in this stage.

O.A.R.S. (Hall et al., 2012).

Open-ended Questions

- 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

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

Reflective Listening

- 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

- Let me see if I understand so far...
- Here is what I've heard. Tell me if I've missed anything

OARS

Key Skills in Motivational Interviewing

O **OPEN QUESTIONS**
to explore concerns, promote collaboration, and understand the client's perspective.



A **AFFIRMATIONS**
to support strengths, convey respect.



R **REFLECTIVE LISTENING**
to explore deeper, convey understanding, deflect discord, elicit change talk.



S **SUMMARIZE**
to organize discussion, clarify motivation, provide contrast, focus the session and highlight change talk.



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W.A.I.T. Why Am I Talking? (TED - The Empowerment Dynamic, 2017).

You may ask yourself the following questions as you consider what is motivating you to share.

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?

Communication Encouragers and Discouragers

The items on the list below have been identified as encouragers of effective communication:

- 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

This second list shows items that have been identified as 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 the potential impact of encouragers and discouragers in the context of a peer support relationship and align our supportive practices appropriately.

- 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

Meaningful Selective Disclosure

Another way that we might respond to those we support is by selectively disclosing from our lived and living experiences in a way that is meaningful to them. The purpose of sharing from our journey is to aid in the other person’s self-determined exploration; it should not be done in a prescriptive way or to suggest that someone should support themselves in 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 identify similar emotions, impacts and experiences.

Sharing 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. We may also choose to share 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.

Meaningful selective disclosure is optional. If we do choose to share from our journeys it is important to be intentional and to do so with the intent of conveying that people are not alone in their experiences and struggles, to inspire hope, to provide validation, and/or to facilitate exploration of available choices and options. If the focus of the conversation shifts to the peer supporter, the dynamic of the conversation may no longer be in support of the person engaging in services. Skillfully and mindfully sharing from our journey requires practice, and training may be helpful.

Conclusion

This resource was created with the intention of supporting empathetic communication between peer supporters and those engaging in services. Developing effective communication skills may take time and practice. To further facilitate professional development, the following questions may also guide you as seek to align your practice with the Guiding Standards of Peer Support:

Before a connection

- Do I have what I need to show up as my best self for another person today?
- What gifts do I bring to the supportive relationship?
- How will I support myself during this conversation if any discomfort arises?
- Do I have additional resources ready and available if needed?

During your conversation

- Have I considered what is informing my responses?
- Are any of my personal views or biases present?
- Does my conduct reflect the Values of Peer Support and demonstrate the Peer Support Values in Action?

Once the conversation ends

- How did I honour the Values of Peer Support and use the Peer Support 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)?

Additional Resources to Explore

All programming from Support House Centre for Innovation in Peer Support is delivered through our [Learning Centre & Resource Hub](#).

The **Learning Centre** provides a range of opportunities, including self-directed e-learning, facilitated learning programs, consultation services, and provincial communities of practice.

The **Resource Hub** houses our educational toolkits, documents, and videos. Together, these resources reflect current best practice in the delivery and implementation of Peer Support across 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***



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