



CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN PEER SUPPORT

Ethically Navigating Boundaries in Peer Support

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Ethical Considerations for Peer Support Workers

When engaging in professional peer relationships it is vital that supporters conduct themselves ethically. An ethical relationship considers morals, values, equity and a dedication to never knowingly causing further harm to an individual. The Centre for Innovation in Peer Support identifies five widely recognized guiding works as the [Guiding Standards of Peer Support](#). Together, they set the foundation, identify necessary competencies, guide professional boundaries and identify authentic, values-based, best practices that uphold the fidelity of peer support. This includes guidance for ethical peer practice.

When providing service, Peer Support Workers endeavour to create supportive relationships that uphold the peer values of empathetic and equal relationships as well as dignity and respect. Despite the best efforts of any supporter, there is a power imbalance that exists between those engaging in and offering support. Contributing to this are responsibilities that Peer Support Workers are expected to uphold in connection with their role. This includes striving to ensure the safety of those engaging in services. Applying an ethical lens to this dynamic allows us to shift power to the person engaging in services, creating more opportunities for them to direct their care. This is done through discussion about rights, responsibilities, boundaries and choices that guide each person in the peer support relationship.

Boundaries

Boundaries can be guidelines, rules or limits that a person creates to identify reasonable, safe, and acceptable ways to maintain healthy relationships and connections (Integrative Psychotherapy Group, 2024). Boundaries are relevant in several areas of our life. Our personal boundaries reflect many aspects of worldview, such as lived and living experiences with our culture, history, and wellness.

Professional boundaries will be reflective of:

- the scope and intention of the peer role
- relevant legislation (e.g., Personal Health Information Protection Act)
- organizational policies and procedures
- program structure

Peer Support Workers strive to balance their personal boundaries with the boundaries identified by their organization connected to their professional role, as well as the boundaries of those engaging in services.

Some of the ways that people describe boundaries are:

- the unseen lines that we strive not to cross
- physical and emotional distances
- unique parameters of a relationship

Why Boundaries are Important

Effectively communicating boundaries in peer support relationships is one of the ways that we can establish transparency, safety and trust with people engaging in services. When people are aware of the parameters of the peer support relationship, they are better able to make informed decisions about their care. Open and frequent communication about boundaries invites those engaging in support to share any practices that they would like to see reflected in the peer support relationship. This further contributes to supportive connections that are based in integrity, authenticity and trust.

Communicating Boundaries in Supportive Connections

Below are some relevant focus areas and questions to consider when communicating boundaries in professional peer relationships.

Intention of our Role

- What is within and outside of the scope of the peer role?
- hours/frequency of support
- What is the duration of the supportive relationship?
- We are friendly, not friends - friendship brings different expectations than professional relationships to an interaction

Means and Frequency of Communication

- Appropriate methods of contact
- Availability and the estimated timeframe for a response (i.e., 2 business days)

Confidentiality

- We honour individuals' confidentiality in accordance with [PHIPA](#) and [PIPEDA](#)
- This includes conversations with co-workers unless we have been given consent to disclose specific information with individuals in their circle of care.
- We clearly communicate that we will disclose necessary personal information if someone expresses that they are at risk of serious harm to themselves or others or if a child under the age of 16 is at risk of being harmed.

Physical Contact

- It is important to communicate our level of comfort with physical contact and encourage others to do the same.

Agency Policy

- Please refer to any agency specific policies that inform the parameters of your working relationship



When to Communicate Boundaries

Communicating boundaries at the beginning of a relationship promotes clarity at an early stage. Revisiting boundaries throughout the relationship further establishes consistency. There may be times when a boundary is not upheld. If this occurs an intentional conversation to acknowledge what happened and discuss what would be helpful going forward is necessary.

When communicating boundaries, it is helpful to:

- explain the reason for the boundary (i.e., what is informing it)
- remain compassionate, empathetic, and understanding of others' needs
- be consistent, clear, open and honest
- provide alternate options that honour our boundaries
- debrief with a supervisor if it is an ongoing issue
- avoid apologizing or taking on guilt
- give yourself permission to honour your boundaries

Setting boundaries is role modelling how to maintain wellness and healthy relationships with those engaging in support. It also creates opportunities for people to explore their own resourcefulness and resilience in the context of meeting their needs and creating their own boundaries.

Navigating Resistance to Boundaries

There may also be times when Peer Support Workers experience resistance to the boundaries that they share. This may come from a place of discomfort within others or a need for understanding about why those boundaries are important. No matter the reason, it is an opportunity to explore this further and demonstrate a commitment to openness and mutual understanding.

How a supporter responds to resistance of boundaries can be impactful. Consider the following in your conversations with others.

1. Reassure peers that they matter and are important.
2. Share why your boundaries are important to you.
3. Be aware of and share the scope of the peer support role.
4. Use "I" statements and, if relevant and comfortable, share about your lived/ living experiences that inform your boundaries.
5. Acknowledge when a boundary is a personal boundary or an agency policy.
6. Give the person engaging in services space to feel and explore their feelings.
7. Remain calm.
8. Suggest taking a break and talking about it later, if needed.
9. Debrief with someone you trust.
10. Utilize supervision, if needed.

Navigating a Crossed Boundary

If a boundary is not upheld, taking the time to acknowledge the situation and identify together how it would be best to proceed in the peer relationship is important. This process should not be rushed as it can determine how best to support the future success of the peer relationship itself. The following sections list key considerations to guide these discussions.

Personal Considerations:

- How do I feel?
- What is my body telling me?
- What is my comfort level right now?
- What is my role in this situation?

Considering the Peer Engaging in Services:

- Is there any potential harm to the peer?
- What is their body language telling me?
- How are they responding to the boundary having been crossed?
- Have I checked-in to make sure they are comfortable?

When the Peer Support Worker crosses a boundary:

- Sincerely apologize
- Provide time and space for the peer if needed

When the person engaging in services crosses a boundary:

- Remain respectful and professional
- Be consistent, clear, open and honest

In either situation:

- Reinforce that boundaries are important
- Discuss the impact of the boundary being crossed
- Discuss what emotions are coming up for both parties
- Discuss how this boundary can be better supported
- Brainstorm strategies to recall and honour each other's boundaries
- Debrief with a supervisor if it is an ongoing issue

Holding others in unconditional high regard is at the core of mutually respectful communication. This practice lends itself well to navigating misunderstandings around boundaries or circumstances where they need to be revisited. We encourage anyone in a peer support role to reflect on how this can impact their approach to conversations about boundaries and supportive relationships generally.

Keep these considerations and practices in mind as you review the upcoming scenarios.

Scenario 1: Navigating Romantic/Sexual Interest in Staff

There may be times when someone expresses a romantic interest in you while you are in the role of a supporter. It is in direct conflict with the Peer Support Code of conduct to engaging in romantic and/or sexual relationships with those engaging in support. Consider the following as it relates to communicating boundaries in a scenario where someone you are supporting expresses this kind of interest in you.

How can romantic/sexual interest be expressed?

- Comments
- Actions
- Pictures

Safety

- Do I feel safe meeting with this individual?
- Do I have a plan in place to exit the situation quickly if I feel unsafe?
- Does my supervisor know where I am and who I am with?
- Have I scheduled another staff person to check in with me after or during my interaction with the peer?
- Am I alone or are there other people around?

Legislation

- 1.6 Workplace Sexual Harassment under the **Occupational Health and Safety Act** defines workplace sexual harassment as:
 - *“Engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker, in a workplace because of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression where the course of comment or conduct is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome, or making a sexual solicitation or advance where the person making it is in a position to confer, grant or deny a benefit or advancement to the worker and the person knows or ought reasonably to know the solicitation or advance is unwelcome”* (Ministry of Labour, 2016).

Timing

- Am I able to respond rather than react?
- If relevant, wait until you or the person engaging in services is in an emotionally safe place to have the conversation

Power Dynamic

- It is unethical to engage in a romantic or sexual relationship with anyone we are supporting
- Please be familiar with any sexual consent legislation that applies to you as a person in a position of authority

Tools & Techniques

Supervision:

- Consult with Supervisor for guidance and information
- Documentation, if needed

Utilize Technology & Safety Applications

Be Aware of Your Surroundings

- Meet in public spaces or offices
- Have a plan in place to leave the situation, if needed

Scenario 2: Exploring the Sentiment “I love you”

The phrase “I love you” can have different meanings to different people. Context may determine the degree to which its use is appropriate in professional relationships. It is important not to make assumptions about someone’s intention in favor of asking for clarification when needed.

When deciding how best to respond, consider the following:

- Explore the significance and understanding of the word love from the peer’s perspective and your own.
- Have an open discussion.
- Reply highlighting aspects of the relationship that you appreciate (e.g., “I love the great conversations we always have”).
- Modelling alternatives to the phrase “I love you” can be helpful (e.g., “I enjoy” “I appreciate” “I find it meaningful when...”
- Reply with community-based sentiments rather than being specific to an individual (e.g., “I love you all”).

Scenario 3: Receiving Gifts

Many identify and share that peer support relationships are meaningful for them. They are described as a source of genuine care and connection with someone who has a shared or similar experience to the person engaging in services. Gift giving is one of the ways that someone may wish to express gratitude to their supporter.

There are several important considerations when it comes to whether it is ethical to accept gifts. Consider the following:

- Acknowledge that people are trying to show appreciation and gratitude
- Any supporter is expected to uphold the ethical commitment to avoid taking advantage of their person engaging in support for the purpose of personal benefit, material, or financial gain.
- Consistency in our boundaries in this domain is vital
- There may be times when accepting a gift is appropriate
 - Please refer to your specific agency policies
 - Cards are generally accepted (e.g., Thank you cards, holiday celebration cards)
 - Gifts intended for the community as a whole may be welcomed
 - Homemade gifts can be welcomed
 - Certain agencies may have a price cap for gift value (e.g., 5 dollars)
 - A donation to the program, contributing to supplies needed, or helping with clean up and set up can all be ways of contributing to the community
- Seek to understand different cultural traditions of gift giving
- When using agency expenses to buy coffee, ensure the peer knows it is from “the organization” rather than from you personally.

Boundaries Post-Service Delivery

Some supporters ask if it is possible to have a personal relationship with someone once they are no longer connected to the program in which the supporter works. There is no college of peer workers currently, and therefore the supervising ethical body you are accountable to is your agency. Whether this is permissible is sometimes informed by the policies and procedures developed within organizations. These policies may contain information regarding the length of time that must pass before a connection can occur outside of one's professional role, whether connection through social media is allowed, etc.

If your agency policies and protocols allow for personal relationships post-service delivery, here are some additional considerations intended to assist supporters to make informed decisions about the boundaries they wish to uphold:

- What challenges could be encountered entering a personal relationship with someone you have supported?
- In small, remote communities navigating dual relationships and boundaries may be more complex.
- How will the power dynamic that has existed effect this personal relationship?
- How will your relationship be impacted now that the person who was engaging in services is now also supporting your emotions?
- How will the person who was engaged in services be impacted by the person you are outside of our role, when you take off your professional hat?
- Why do you want to have a continued relationship with the individual?
- What is the person engaging in services' reason(s) for wanting a relationship after the professional relationship? (Friendship? Additional Support?)
- Be conscious of how much time has passed since the peer relationship
 - Is it right away or later?
 - Be aware of a need to explore different boundaries going forward
- If the person decides that they need or want to reengage with the organization with which you work, you will now have to navigate a dual relationship
- How will this affect your relationships with other people you support? Will they expect the same? Is this something you are prepared to offer?
- Is there a trusted colleague or supervisor with whom you feel comfortable discussing these dynamics?

Dual Relationships

Dual relationships are a dynamic that occurs when we are present in more than one role in an individual's life. This is sometimes referred to as "wearing multiple hats."

We have dual relationships in or with:

- Professional spaces
- Community groups

- Recovery-based groups
- Virtual communities
- Friendships
- Family
- Neighbours
- Previous romantic relationships

Considerations and practices that may assist a Peer Support Worker to effectively be in a variety of spaces and uphold necessary boundaries include:

- Being proactive about how a Peer Support Worker would proceed if they saw someone that they support in the community can establish expectations (e.g., “If I see you in the community, I will not approach you or initiate conversation. This is to maintain your right to privacy and confidentiality.”)
- Referring to the policies and procedures within your agency
- Requesting clarity in any area that is needed before acting
- Ascertaining whether the other person is comfortable with you in the space and, if not, the options available for how to proceed
- Deciding whether you are comfortable with the person connecting to the same space and, if not, what options are available to you regarding how to proceed
- In a supportive context, are there other staff available to support the space aside from you?
- Is there a way that a private conversation can be had with the person during the time when you are in a shared space, or would it be better to wait until afterwards?

Conflict of Interest

A Conflict of Interest occurs when something interferes with the ability to exercise and maintain professional discretion and impartial judgment (Positive Living Society of British Columbia, n.d.). Preexisting relationships are one potential cause of these conflicts. If a Peer Support Worker is experiencing a Conflict of Interest that impacts the quality of care available to a community member, this must be addressed with the Supervisor or the program to ensure access to needed supports.

Options to consider include:

- Connection of the community member with an alternative staff member
- Making a referral to alternative agency
- Continued support with increased, transparent supervision discussions

The remainder of this resource includes appendices with opportunities to explore understanding and communicating boundaries further. We hope that the considerations and scenarios throughout this document aid those in peer support roles to work alongside those engaging in services to communicate boundaries that are clear, compassionate, and conducive to healthy peer relationships.

Appendix A: Establishing Your Boundaries Worksheet

What legislation influences your boundaries?

- Privacy Legislation
- Harassment Legislation
- Consent Legislation
- Duty to Protect and Report Legislation
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-
-

What professional ethics are you guided by?

- Peer Support Code of Conduct
- Values of Peer Support
- Values in Action of Peer Support
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-

What are the policies, procedures, and directives from your organization?

-
-
-
-
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What is within the scope of my role?

What is outside the scope of my role?

How frequently do I connect with someone I am supporting? What is the duration of our relationship?

What are the appropriate methods of contact in my professional relationships? When can a person I support expect a reply?

Other Directives from your Organization:

-
-
-

What are your personal boundaries?

Physical contact:

-
-
-

Topics am I uncomfortable sharing about:

-
-
-

Other:

-
-
-
-
-

What can I do to have healthier boundaries?

Example: I can say no to tasks that fall outside of the scope of my role

If there are times when I may have to navigate a dual relationship, how will I do this?

Example: *“Notify my direct Supervisor”*

Appendix B: Scripts for Communicating Boundaries

The following working scripts are intended to give structure to a conversation that explores a variety of boundaries relevant to peer support relationships. We invite you to shift the language used to best reflect your needs and the unique needs of your respective programs.

Confidentiality: “Anything that is said between us stays between us. I will not share your information, experience, thoughts, or feelings with anyone without your permission beforehand. I expect the same commitment from you. Our mental health community is a small one, and we will have people in common. If I hear an indication of harm to yourself or others, I have a responsibility to ensuring your safety and this will mean disclosing necessary details to others.”

Choosing to end a peer relationship: “If we, you, or I feel that this peer relationship is not beneficial for you, we can speak with each other, or with the supervisor, and examine options in having a different person support you. We understand that it is not a failure or a rejection of the other person, but that sometimes people do not connect and there is nothing wrong with that. We want the best support available for you.”

Intentional Support: “Our time together is a mental health service, overseen by my organization. This relationship focuses on your recovery experience by providing support for you. The scope of my role is... I will not come to you for support, and you are not responsible to provide me with any; we are here to support you!”

Parameters of a Professional Relationship: “As a Peer Supporter, I am not permitted to... Provide my personal contact information (including phone number or email), provide transportation or money, act as an emergency support, or engage in personal relationships with a peer.”

Sharing from one’s wellness journey: “If I’m uncomfortable discussing something or you ask a question I feel is too personal, I will tell you. I have a right to privacy too. Please try not to take it personally.”

Safety: “We both have a right to safety. I will not tolerate violence, physical or verbal abuse, or manipulation. If any of these should occur, I may address them with you directly and report them to my supervisor immediately. If at any point you feel that this relationship is not safe, I invite you to share that with me in the moment as well as contact my supervisor.”

Appendix C: Ethical Guidelines in Professional Relationships

(Positive Living Society of British Columbia, n.d.)

It is the responsibility of the Peer Support Worker to establish the tenor of their professional relationship with clients, members, and others, and to ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients, and others to whom there is a professional duty, over the needs of the peer navigator. In establishing a professional relationship, the peer navigator considers relevant contextual issues, such as age, culture and gender of the client, and ensures the dignity, individuality and rights of the client and members of our society are protected.

2.1 Appropriate Professional Boundaries

2.1.1 Peer navigators maintain appropriate professional boundaries throughout the course of the professional relationship and after the professional relationship.

2.2 No Exploitation for Personal or Professional Gain

2.2.1 Peer navigators do not exploit professional relationships for personal benefit, gain or gratification.

2.2.2 Peer navigators do not take unfair advantage of any professional relationship or exploit others to further their personal, religious, political, or business interests.

2.3 Declare Conflicts of Interest

Peer navigators avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgment. Peer navigators inform clients when a real or potential conflict of interest arises and take reasonable steps to resolve the issue in a manner that makes the clients' interests primary. In some cases, protecting clients' interests may require termination of the professional relationship with proper referral of the client to another professional.

2.3.1 When peer navigators provide services to two or more people who have a relationship with each other (e.g., couples, family members), peer navigators clarify with all parties which individuals will be considered clients and the nature of the professional relationship with other involved parties.

2.3.2 Peer navigators who anticipate a conflict of interest among the individuals receiving services, or who anticipate having to perform a difficult role, clarify with clients their role and responsibilities. (For example, when a peer navigator is asked to testify in a child custody dispute or divorce proceedings involving clients).

2.3.3 Peer navigators carefully consider the potential for professional conflicts of interest where close personal relationships exist or where social, business or sexual relationships with colleagues are contemplated or exist.

2.4 Dual and Multiple Relationships

Dual or multiple relationships occur when peer navigators relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social, or business. Dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively. While having contact with clients in different life situations is not inherently harmful, it is the responsibility of the peer navigator to evaluate the nature of the various contacts to determine

whether the peer navigator is in a position of power and/or authority that may unduly and/or negatively affect the decisions and actions of their client.

2.4.1 Peer navigators take care to evaluate the nature of dual or multiple relationships to ensure that the needs and welfare of their clients are protected.

2.5 Physical Contact with Clients

2.5.1 Peer navigators who engage in appropriate physical contact (a hug) with clients are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries to govern such physical contact.

2.6 No Romantic or Sexual Relationships with Clients

2.6.1 Peer navigators do not engage in romantic relationships, sexual activities or sexual contact with clients, even if such contact is sought by clients.

2.6.2 Peer navigators who have provided support or services do not engage in romantic relationships, sexual activities or sexual contact with former clients for at least one year. It is the responsibility of the peer navigator to evaluate the nature of the professional relationship they had with a client and to determine whether the peer navigator is in a position of power and/or authority that may unduly and/or negatively affect the decisions and actions of their former client.

2.7 No Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment refers to unwelcome sexual comments or lewd statements, unwelcome sexual advances, unwelcome requests for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature in circumstances where a reasonable person could anticipate that the person harassed would be offended, humiliated, or intimidated.

2.7.1 Peer navigators do not sexually harass any person.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

All programming offered by Support House Centre for Innovation in Peer Support related to the practice of 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 practices in the delivery and implementation of Peer Support across Ontario.

Products on our Resource Hub:

[Guiding Standards of Peer Support Handout](#)

[Stages of Peer Relationships](#)

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

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.

References

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