

1) Understanding and describing the peer support specialist role

Overall skill

PSSs are clear about the purpose of the PSS role and understand how to individualize their approach with each participant over time. PSSs are able to accurately and succinctly describe their role to participants, as well as discuss and manage issues related to confidentiality and boundaries.

Key aspects. A PSS...

- Understands the purpose of the PSS role and how skilled practices benefit participants.
- Understands and can communicate clearly to participants what distinguishes the PSS role from other roles on the treatment team, and what distinguishes the PSS role from that of a friend.
- Is comfortable and able to explain why they are considered a “peer.”
- Is able to introduce their role to a participant concisely and to provide further details or answer questions about their role.
- As part of introducing their role, a PSS is able to clearly describe confidentiality between themselves and a participant.
- Is able to describe boundaries that limit what the PSS can/cannot do as part of their role.
- Throughout their work with a participant, is able to provide additional descriptions or clarifications about the PSS role in response to questions or as needed.

Challenges

- Understanding the role’s scope, purpose, practices and skills when supervisors and/or trainers are unclear or present different views about these.
- Understanding and describing how the PSS role is distinct from other roles such as mentor, peer mentor, skills trainer, therapist, etc.
- Clarifying/re-establishing boundaries when a participant has or appears to have expectations for the PSS that are outside of the PSS role (e.g. saying that the PSS is their best friend, or expecting communication during times the PSS is not working).
- Determining how much personal information about being a "peer" is relevant to share and comes across as authentic when introducing oneself to a new participant, and over time.
- Responding when people—including participants, family members, treatment team members or community partners— push for more information or details about a PSS’s lived experiences as a peer.
- Managing situations when other treatment team member’s lack of understanding of the PSS role confuses a participant or leads them to expect that the PSS will do things that are not actually part of the role.

2) Being a peer, being genuine and drawing on personal experience

Overall Skill:

PSSs present themselves and talk about personal experiences with intention, in a way that is genuine and helpful to participants. PSSs provide credible indications that they have key experiences, attributes and/or identities that help them understand participants' perspectives and experiences.

Key aspects

- Cultivates a manner of self-presentation and speaking that is genuine and not overbearing or self-centering. (1)
- Offers knowledge, observations or anecdotes from personal experience for participants to consider. (2)
- Normalizes participants' experiences through reflections, suggestions, etc. without implying that participants should believe, feel or act the same way. (3)
- Is open and genuine about personal experiences without triggering distress for participants or themselves. (4)
- Serves as an example of a young adult who has experienced challenges related to mental health and has had success in navigating life and employment while managing their mental health and wellness. (5)

Key Challenges

- Recognizing and managing the impulse to:
 - Share personal experience as a way to prove worthiness as a peer.
 - Overshare personal experience or share in a way that overwhelms a participant, diminishes their own experiences, or distresses the PSS.
 - Share personal experiences to serve the PSS's own purposes, such as venting, or prompting a participant to provide emotional support. (1)
- Talking with participants about PSSs own ongoing challenges in a way that is genuine but not distressing. (9)
- Claiming or enacting an identity or shared experiences in a way that participants don't see as credible or authentic. (10)
- Managing situations where a participant does not see PSS as having key aspects of identity or experience in common. (11)
- Being able to appropriately raise issues about differences (between themselves and participants) in experiences, identities or access to resources that can make it difficult for a PSS to understand a participant, or for a participant to feel understood. Being comfortable with acknowledging and navigating these topics with participants when they come up. (3)

3) Drawing out participants' preferences, perspectives and ideas (Supporting participants' point of view)

Overall skill

PSSs consistently support participants to explore their own values, preferences, thoughts and ideas. PSSs do this in a way that is non-judgmental and shows genuine curiosity and interest in what participants express. During conversations or other types of interactions, PSSs do not try to convince participants what to do, say or think. PSSs follow participants' lead regarding if and when to meet, and what to do or talk about.

Key aspects

- PSSs use active listening skills to support participants in sharing and exploring their experiences, values, ideas, preferences and perspectives. (1)
- PSSs make reflections that fit well within the conversation and accurately restate or summarize key content that participants bring up. (2)
- PSSs are able to gauge when a participant doesn't want to participate in certain activities or talk about certain things, or when they do not want to talk at all. (3)
- PSSs are able to make observations and offer ideas for a participant to consider, without putting pressure on them to agree. (4)
- PSSs identify and remember key content from conversations or interactions with participants, and bring this into later conversations when relevant. (5)
- PSSs are comfortable acknowledging when they have misunderstood what a participant is communicating. A PSS should be able to own mistakes as needed and then return the focus of the conversation to the participant's thoughts and ideas. (6)

Challenges

- Managing the urge to steer a participant towards what the PSS thinks they should think or do. (This can be obvious or subtle, and may occur without the PSS being fully aware of it.) (1)
- Navigating situations in which a PSS is concerned that a participant's thinking or reasoning may lead them to do something counterproductive, risky or harmful. (2)
- Navigating situations when clinicians or family members put pressure on a PSS to "make" a participant change their thinking or behavior. (3)
- Keeping track of key content from participants' communications over time. (4)
- Navigating situations in which a participant is reluctant or unable to share their thoughts, ideas or preferences. (5)
- Navigating situations when participants raise topics that the PSS finds difficult or uncomfortable, or when they do not share opinions expressed by a participant (e.g. suicidality or self-harm, or topics connected to sexuality, privilege/oppression, political views) (6)

- Keeping what a participant says confidential (even if other treatment team members request information), unless the participant specifically provides permission to share; and explaining to participants any exceptions when confidentiality might be broken due to threats of harm to self or others. (7)

4) Delivering empathy and validation

Overall skill

PSSs attend to, empathize with and validate the participants' emotional expression and tone—positive, negative and mixed. Across their interactions and communication together, PSSs create opportunities for participants to explore topics or ideas that are important or meaningful to them.

Key aspects

- Provides validation and empathy that is rooted in the participant's perspective. (7)
- Recognizes and validates when participants indicate things that are important or meaningful to them. Creates opportunities for participants to explore these topics if they want to. (1)
- Recognizes and responds to emotional content with participants—including positive, negative and mixed emotions in conversations or actions. (2)
- Is able to assess and/or ask when it would be helpful to go deeper into emotionally significant topics and help participants explore further. (3)
- Knows how to come out of discussing emotional or distressing content with participants and is able to conclude a conversation so that both are left feeling reasonably okay. (4)
- Checks in with participants and plans follow up with other providers for additional support to ensure participants' safety when necessary. (5)
- Manages their own reactions to what participants may disclose, including when triggered or experiencing vicarious trauma and distress. Knows how to seek support for themselves in processing these experiences and creating boundaries.

Challenges

- Feeling overwhelmed or unable to genuinely understand or validate emotional experiences or ideas that participants talk about, such as those connected to trauma, racism or other forms of oppression and extreme or unusual experiences related to mental health. (1)
- Managing situations where a participant doesn't feel that it's possible for a PSS to genuinely understand them due to different styles of communication, personal experiences, identities, cultures and values, socio-economic status, etc. (2)
- Giving reflections or responses that come across as inauthentic, exaggerated or misaligned with what participants are communicating, including over-empathizing or being excessively enthusiastic or positive. (3)

- Recognizing when topics are too traumatic or unhelpful to explore with participants and knowing when and how to get additional support from other providers. (4)

5) Supporting motivation and activity

Overall skill

PSSs are particularly attentive to things participants say and do that provide information about what motivates them, including values, commitments and passions, and relationships and activities that bring satisfaction or joy. PSSs support participants in exploring these motivators *from their own perspectives*. When participants show interest, PSSs work with participants to develop activities, plans or goals based on what emerges.

Sub-skills. A PSS...

- During conversations and activities with a participant, a PSS notices and uses opportunities to help participants recognize and explore their motivators, including
 - Aspirations, interests and passions
 - Personal, family and cultural values and commitments
 - Activities and relationships that bring joy, satisfaction, pleasure, or a sense of accomplishment or achievement
- During conversations and activities with a participant, a PSS notices and uses opportunities to help participants recognize and explore their ideas and preferences related to well being, including self-care, wellness, personal safety and harm reduction.
- During conversations and activities with a participant, a PSS notices and uses opportunities to help participants build recognition about the people, groups and organizations that support their aspirations, values and well being, or that could do so.
- When participants show interest, PSSs work with them to plan and engage in activities that reflect their motivators and preferences (i.e. as explored in conversations described in the bullets above).
- Uses opportunities that arise during conversations, interactions or activities to explore and reinforce participants' awareness of their personal growth, learning, progress and success, even when changes, progress or accomplishments are small.

Challenges

- Managing situations where a PSS believes that a participant's motivators actually detract from their wellbeing or aspirations (e.g., pursuing material items to an extent that results in continued financial hardship, or valuing a relationship that seems to cause them distress and anxiety).
- Managing the desire to "get" a participant to pursue goals or activities when they are not internally motivated to do this.
- Responding to situations when a participant is non-communicative about motivators, values, commitments and activities, and/or generally does not seem to express interest, joy, excitement or motivation.
- Managing situations when activities do not turn out as planned, including when participants become discouraged or frustrated.

- Managing situations when some of a participants' values, commitments and aspirations are in conflict with others (e.g., when a participant's goals for their education conflict with their family's expectations, potentially causing disruption in valued relationships).

6) Supporting personal agency and empowerment

Skill Area

PSSs are attentive to opportunities to support participants in exploring options and making choices about mental health treatment and other aspects of their lives.

Skills in this area. A PSS...

- Is attentive when a participant expresses thoughts related to having a mental health diagnosis and mental or emotional experiences that are unusual and/or stigmatized, and provides an opportunity for them to explore these thoughts further if they wish. This includes exploring the meanings and values that participants attach to their experiences.
- Is attentive when a participant touches on topics related to mental health treatment and other strategies for improving/maintaining wellness and mental health, and provides an opportunity for them to explore these thoughts further if they wish.
- Is attentive when a participant is considering a decision or change, helps them to recognize options, explore choices and take action that is aligned with their values, goals and preferences.
- Is attentive when a participant is considering taking action and, if they want, helps them think about what they can do for themselves and whether/how to access help or support.
- Models and offers strategies for accessing sources and information about various options and choices.
- Offers/coaches strategies that can help a participant effectively advocate for their own choices, preferences and goals.
- Assists participants in understanding power differentials (e.g., between individuals with different identities or roles, or between individuals and organizations, institutions or systems) and how these may impact their ability to make progress on their aims and goals. Provides participants with information and strategies on how to work with, negotiate with or confront power structures as they pursue activities and goals.

Challenges

- Managing reactions when a participant's interpretation of their mental health experiences or choices regarding treatment are difficult for a PSS to understand or accept.
- Managing and responding to situations when a participant makes clear what kind of help or assistance (from the PSS or others) they want to carry out an activity, and the PSS thinks this amount of assistance is too much or too little.
- Managing and responding to situations in which a lack of power and/or resources poses significant barriers to participants' efforts towards their aims or goals.
- Managing and responding to situations in which other treatment team members, or other key people in a participant's life, may be pressuring a participant to accept a specific interpretation of their mental experiences, or to accept specific treatment recommendations.

- Managing and responding to situations in which a PSS faces conflict over their own agency in their role (e.g., when a treatment team is pressuring a PSS to get a participant to comply with the team's view of treatment or medication, and the PSS feels this goes against their role).