



California Peer Support Association Newsletter

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The Role of Peer Support's in Helping LGBTQ Peers

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In the past, non-heterosexual orientations were not topics openly discussed with the masses and even more so a taboo topic within the public safety culture. The underlying taboo nature of having an orientation that was non-heterosexual made many LGBTQ individuals feel isolated or as though they were somehow less than. Today much has changed in the way of increased knowledge and acceptance of the LGBTQ community among the masses and within the public safety culture. LGBTQ individuals are being granted rights and privileges that were, at one time, denied to them; and laws have been put into place to offer protection from discrimination and prejudice. As a culture at large, there are still many more obstacles to overcome before the LGBTQ communities experience the same social standing as the heterosexual community. As Peer Supporters, it is their role to provide support and resources to their fellow peers, from a place of compassion, respect and dignity.

Peer Supporters are an integral and imperative aspect of any agency or group, particularly in the public safety arena. They are, many times, the individuals who are sought after to help others with a variety of work-related and personal issues. Peer Supporter's have acquired specialty training in the area of psychological health and wellness. They then utilize those skills on an everyday basis to help identify and facilitate greater mental health and well-being within the agency. Peer Supporters have access to mental health resources and have highly developed knowledge of interventions for helping a peer feel safe to identify areas of stress or difficulty. They are trained in providing appropriate levels of empathy, help, support and resources for further assistance. Peer Supporters are also seen as an important aspect in critical incident debriefings; teaming up with Mental Health Professionals (MHP's) and Chaplains (see "The Helping Triad" by N.K. Bohl, 1998) to provide appropriate, sensitive and constructive support to peers in the aftermath of line-of-duty deaths and injury, critical incidents, suicides, grief and family trauma. Because of this, it is important that they acquire training in LGBTQ issues so that they feel prepared to address those when they arise.

One area that Peer Supporter's may find they face is a peer bringing to them an issue related to sexual expression orientation and preference. These variables alone are difficult to manage and process as a result of stigma and those difficulties may become further exacerbated for the LGBTQ peer when working in areas such as public safety due to the culture. A Peer Supporter may notice that stressors or issues related to work are more distressing or are further compli-

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cated as a result of a peer's sexual orientation. The Peer Supporter may find themselves being asked, by the peer, what he or she should or should not make public about their orientation; how to deal with discrimination and prejudice based on their orientation; resources or support groups for LGBTQ individuals; and even may seek advice about what they should say or do. Even for trained MHP's, working with the LGBTQ community is a delicate and sensitive process; one that requires complete awareness of one's own biases, personal history and motives. The MHP can take the role of advocate and gatherer of relevant legal, social and ethical resources. Given a Peer Supporter's role within the agency and among their peers, they are in a valuable position to offer an array of psychological assistance—utilizing a safe and non-judgmental approach. But, the same remains true here; the Peer Supporter should be aware of their own biases, motives and intentions before providing assistance to an LGBTQ peer. If a Peer Supporter does not feel comfortable or capable of providing compassionate and unbiased assistance, then they are urged to find someone who is able to. It is important to note here that peers may bring up issues to a Peer Supporter that are separate from their sexual orientation and many times, unrelated. LGBTQ peers experience the same issues others are faced with such as parenting issues, fears about aging, trauma, depression, anxiety and stress, relationship conflict, financial stressors, work stress, substance abuse and family issues. It is also important to keep in mind that a peer may seek out a Peer Supporter to help them with issues related to LGBTQ family members (e.g. children or spouse).

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What Peer Supporters Can Do:

Peer Supporters have much to offer. The following are ways in which they can be helpful to the peer while being mindful of specific LGBTQ issues.

1. Create a sense of safety.
2. Promote feelings of understanding through validation, active listening and empathy.
3. It is important to understand and be aware of how the effects of stigma (negative social attitude or social disapproval directed toward a characteristic of a person that can lead to prejudice and discrimination) and societal prejudices can psychologically impact a person.
4. Be mindful that an LGBTQ status can put a person at an increased risk of stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, addiction and a decrease in overall well-being.
5. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
6. Try to avoid making assumptions (even in the face of heterosexual markers such as marriage).
7. Educate yourself as much as possible [Ganior (2000) provides a comprehensive intro to LGBTQ issues], explore your own biases about homosexuality and bisexuality and be aware of how your own background and personal factors may influence your interactions.
8. Consider referrals when necessary:
 - Local support groups
 - Community organizations
 - MHP
 - Chaplain
 - Other Peer Supporters
 - Online resources (for those who may be more private)

Helping LGBTQ Peers (from page four)

9. To help a peer cope with the stigma you can skillfully suggest that they:

- Surround themselves with the right people.
- Learn more about the LGBTQ orientation so they can understand that the stigma is wrong.
- Share their experience with others who can relate and provide positivity in their life.
- Join advocacy groups that support the rights of LGBTQ individuals.
- If necessary, seek help from a mental health professional.

Conclusion:

Issues related to LGBTQ individuals have come quite a ways and they are now beginning to be afforded some of the rights and privileges afforded to heterosexuals. Due to the history of public safety culture, an LGBTQ individual may feel isolated, hide their sexual orientation or be the victim of prejudice/discrimination. Peer Supporters are in a unique position by virtue of specialty training and placement within the agency to provide sensitive, safe, confidential and meaningful interventions utilizing their helping skills. They not only understand the work-culture and the dynamics present at their job, but they are also able to notice smaller changes in a peer's demeanor, attitude and personality. This is paramount in detecting when a peer is struggling and intervening before things get worse. For an LGBTQ peer to know they can confide in a fellow Peer Supporter without fears of judgment and with the protection of confidentiality; creates a positive and nurturing work environment for a peer who may feel alienated or negatively defined/categorized by their sexuality. As with any other specialty area, training and education are important and should be sought after to appropriately understand and provide culturally sensitive assistance to LGBTQ peers.

Be Safe!