

# Mental Health Perspective

*Dr. Sara Hibbs*

It's a Saturday and your cell phone rings. While you recognize the caller ID, you let the call go to voice mail and are left with a feeling of irritation and frustration. On Sunday, you check your e-mail and see the increasingly familiar e-mail address in your in-box. You try to ignore the situation by not opening the e-mail, but your irritation and frustration build, mixed in with a little bit of guilt. By the time you arrive at work on Monday morning, you have six voice mails from the same person waiting for you at work. As you delete each one of them, your mounting feelings of frustration and irritation overshadow any guilt and you consider taking serious action to rectify the situation - like moving to a deserted island. This mystery person is not your boss, former spouse, or bill collector, but someone much more difficult to deal with. It is the **PERSON IN PERPETUAL CRISIS**.

Most, if not all, peer supporters have experienced this scenario. And while the term "perpetual crisis" is not an official, clinical term, it is an accurate description of the person who always seems to be in crisis no matter how much time, energy or patience you devote to assisting them. The person who does not understand the personal boundaries most of us take for granted. The person your mother (or other peer supporters!) warned you about.

All joking aside, this scenario can prove confusing for a peer supporter whose role is to assist individuals in crises. A person is in crisis, they come to you, you help them work through the situation, they de-escalate, and they go on their merry way. Neat, clean, simple. A textbook scenario.

But a person in perpetual crisis is not able to go on their merry way and will, either directly and indirectly, demand more time, attention and skill than is realistically feasible for a peer supporter to provide. Further, these individuals often seem to encounter crisis after crisis after crisis. Despite every effort by a willing peer supporter, they may be unable (or unwilling) cope with stressors most others could manage. Thus, they are more easily overwhelmed and frequently present in a crisis state. Here are some signs that you may be dealing with a person in perpetual crisis:

- You feel you work harder at "solving" their problems than they do or feel emotionally drained after a conversation with them.
- You feel guilty at the thought of not making time for them or setting boundaries with them.
- You feel angry, irritated or resentful when they approach you, or when you think of them approaching you.
- You feel helpless and overwhelmed during a conversation with them to the extent that you doubt your abilities or perspective as a peer supporter.
- You experience relief when they don't contact you or they reach out to one of your colleagues for assistance.

Once you recognize a frequent flier as possibly being a person in perpetual crisis, it is imperative to consider referring them to a mental health professional (MHP) for ongoing care. Consulting with a colleague you know and trust or a MHP can help you work through the dilemma you may be facing, such as how to broach the referral subject with the person in perpetual crisis. It can also provide support for the perpetual crisis person if they over-react to being referred to a professional. Overall, it is important to recognize that a person in perpetual crisis requires a different level of assistance than can be provided by **any** peer support program. And, most importantly, referral them to a MHP is not an indication of poor skills or failure on behalf of a peer supporter.

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