



Peers for Progress—Manage Peer Support

Peers for Progress offers tools and resources for the recruitment, management, supervision and retention of peer support workers.

<http://peersforprogress.org/take-action/manage-peer-support>

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focus

What is the Focus?

The *Focus* newsletter highlights important issues in mental health, providing timely information on a range of topics, including work-force development, supported education, organizational development and sustainability, peer-to-peer services, youth transition and system transformation. Have a suggestion for a topic? Let us know!



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Managing Peer Support Employees Experiencing Mental Health Crisis

Managing employees in any kind of organization can present challenges. When those employees are providing behavioral health services, the additional issues that come along with the responsibility of providing competent, appropriate services in a safe, positive environment arise. It becomes imperative that employees are engaging with those seeking an organization's services in a compassionate, competent manner that reflects the values of the organization.

In peer-based settings, where the people providing those services are themselves individuals with behavioral health needs, the organization that employs them must consider yet another layer, and plan to accommodate the behavioral health needs of their staff members. In that context, not only is it important to make sure that employees are representing the organization well, but it is also essential to support those employees in their own wellness.

Even in the best managed setting, it is always possible that an employee that is also an individual with lived experience can sustain a mental health crisis. In order to deal with that possibility, it is important for consumer organizations to create a plan before an employee crisis situation arises. It is advisable for every organization with volunteers and/or employees to have an Employee Handbook that documents a set of standard policies and procedures related to employment. For organizations that employ people with lived experience, that Employee Handbook should include a chapter dealing with policies and procedures for employees in mental health crisis.

What policies and procedures should be included to accommodate peers in an Employee Handbook? And what other issues should be considered in supporting the wellness of peer employees? Here are some suggestions:

1. **Develop policies and procedures** for how the organization will engage with employees in crisis and **make sure they are shared** with every employee/volunteer as part of orientation.
2. Make sure that new employees/volunteers are aware that **the organization is there to support their wellness**, both in times of crisis and in general. Letting employees know that they work in a safe environment, and that there is a plan to support them if they need it, can make them feel more secure in their working environment.
3. **Build time for wellness** into project deadlines, daily work activities and work schedules. Allowing employees the space they need for their own wellness will make them more secure, efficient and healthy.
4. **Openness is essential.** Set expectations among all stakeholders regarding the potential for personal crisis. Employees, managers and those receiving services should all be aware that the organization provides a safe environment for people with lived experience.
5. When a crisis occurs, **the first priority is safety.** Ensure that the person in crisis is in a safe, trauma-free place.
6. Assist the person in crisis to **identify and utilize any personal tools and resources** (e.g., a WRAP plan) they may have. It may be advisable for employees to share their crisis plans or other tools they rely upon for wellness with their manager and co-workers in advance, if they are willing to do so. This will allow managers and co-workers to have tools and strategies on hand before a crisis occurs.
7. It is important for an organization and its managers to **remain flexible to allow for the possibility of employees experiencing mental health challenges.** Once an employee is sufficiently capable of discussing their job responsibilities, review the employee's current responsibilities, and readjust deadlines and expectations with the employee, so he/she feels empowered to manage their responsibilities during their personal crisis (this will require the extra time built into project deadlines, from #3 above).
8. **Be the employee's champion** as he/she manages the balance between their crisis and their work responsibilities. Ideally the employee will recognize the organization as a resource and ally when they experience crisis.
9. **Repeat the process** of planning for crisis, supporting employees and adjusting duties and deadlines as necessary.
10. Provide the employee with information about **resources and services** that may be helpful. If employees have health coverage through the organization, make sure that they are aware of the resources available through that coverage and how to access them.
11. **If you need help, don't be afraid to ask.** Just as it is advisable to have a plan in place for individual employees, it is also a good idea to have a set of local resources on hand for quick reference should a crisis situation become too serious for an organization to handle internally.
12. When the crisis has been resolved, be sure to **acknowledge the strengths and positives** in relation to the employee's ability to balance the crisis with their employee responsibilities, so that the experience can be a positive foundation for how to work through the next crisis. Assist the employee to briefly document the experience so that he/she can look back at it and draw strength from it in the future.



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