



BRIAN CASEY

PEER SUPPORT FUNDAMENTALS



ASK
LISTEN
ENCOURAGE
FOLLOW-UP

**PEER
SUPPORT
FUNDAMENTALS**

ALSO BY BRIAN CASEY

Ambulance Man: A Memoir

*Good Cop, Good Cop: A Get Healthy,
Stay Healthy Guide for Law Enforcement*

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Alley Light Press
Saint Paul, MN
Editor@alleylightpress.com
AlleyLightPress.com

For more information about the author and his books visit: PeerSupportSupport.com,
AmbulanceManBook.com, GoodCopGoodCop.com

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As a disclaimer, the author reminds you that you are hearing from a police officer, former paramedic, health educator, and peer team coordinator. Casey is not an attorney, physician, or psychologist, and this is not necessarily advising on policies or procedures. The views and opinions expressed herein do not represent the official policy or position of the police department where he works.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022942029

Printed by Bookmobile
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

ISBN print: ISBN: 978-1-7325651-4-2

First Printing, 2022

Editing by Terry Casey
Book design by K. M. Weber, I Libri Book Design
Cover and frontispiece images: SvetaZi/iStock
Additional credits are found on page 95.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	vii	
The Meaning of the Rattle	viii	
How to Use This Workbook and Activities	ix	
CHAPTER 1 ■ WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?	1	
What Is Peer Support?	1	
Collective Healing and Protection	2	
Informal Peer Support	3	
Formal Peer Support Team	5	
CHAPTER 2 ■ HELP AND HELPING	7	
Help and Helping	7	
Peer Support <i>Is</i> and <i>Is Not</i>	10	
<i>The Why</i>	12	
CHAPTER 3 ■ PEER SUPPORT ROLE	17	
Peer Support Role in Therapeutic Process	18	
Peer Team Member and Coworker Contact	19	
Boundaries	20	
Confidentiality	21	
CHAPTER 4 ■ GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF PEER SUPPORT	25	
Guiding Principles of Peer Support	25	
CHAPTER 5 ■ PEER SUPPORT SKILLS	31	
Talking	32	
Listening	34	
Intervening and Taking Action	35	
<i>What If – How To</i> Scenario Topic Areas	36	
CHAPTER 6 ■ PEER SUPPORT CORE KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING	39	
Stress	40	
Anxiety and Depression	41	
Relationship Conflicts	42	
Psychological Trauma	44	
Big T and Little t Trauma	45	
Impact of Trauma	46	
Critical Incidents and Traumatic Events	47	
Responding to Traumatic Events	48	
Shielding and Post-Traumatic Stress Recovery	49	
Post-Traumatic Growth	50	
Alcohol Concerns	52	
Suicide Concerns	54	
CHAPTER 7 ■ HOW TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN A TEAM	57	
Getting Started	58	
Able and Ready	58	
Peer Support Team Design, Process and Training	61	
Implementing and Maintaining a Team	64	
CHAPTER 8 ■ TEAM MEMBER HEALTH AND RESILIENCE	69	
Internalize Your Locus of Control	71	
Disciplined Mind	72	
Gain Resilience	73	
Manage Your Thinking	74	
<i>Healthy Thinking</i>	75	
Develop Greater Emotional Competence	79	

<i>Importance Pause</i>	80
Reframe Stress and Psychological Trauma	82
Protective Factors	84
ENDNOTES	87
APPENDIX	89
WORKBOOK ACTIVITY CHART	94
CREDITS	95
INDEX	97

INTRODUCTION

Once in a job interview, I was asked why I was hoping to leave my current job, I said something like, “It was the best place I ever worked and the worse place I ever worked.” And the interview panel all laughed as if they fully understood. Work can be hard, and made harder by both caring a lot or a little. For many, it is one of our central social experiences that may both trouble and sustain us. What made my workplace the best? And the worst? My coworkers. At our best, we shared the good times and made the bad times better together. Peer support is taking this coworker synergy and making it intentional.

This book combines two of my enduring passions: health and wellbeing with a special focus on mental health and personal growth, and public safety work. At nineteen, I started working on an ambulance as an EMT while obtaining a teaching degree in Health Education. I went on to work twenty years as a paramedic and EMS educator before changing careers and becoming a police officer. At the time of this writing, I am a police sergeant and director of my agency’s Employee Assistance Program. I dedicate myself to building and maintaining trust while assuring easy access to mental health support and resources.

I have written two other books. *Good Cop, Good Cop: A Get Healthy, Stay Healthy Guide for Law Enforcement* which is a health and wellness book for public safety workers which detailing a range of wellness topics. *Ambulance Man: A Memoir* about my entry into ambulance work and early days as a paramedic.

Here, in *Peer Support Fundamentals*, I am able to honor peer support which I believe is a fundamental, yet underappreciated, pathway to health and wellbeing. Peer support, with its origins in communal healing and protection, is possibly the most direct, economical, and often immediately available, route to improving our own lives and the lives of others. Decades of experience working in public safety, as an EAP director, health educator, and peer support team coordinator enable me to speak in simple and relatable terms about the most

pressing mental and emotional issues that peer team members may encounter. Although *Peer Support Fundamentals* has its origins in helping public safety workers, the lessons here will be useful to any workgroup.

Peer support can be like this: *Imagine you are lost and alone in a big city (or in the woods if you prefer). Your cellphone is dead, and you are late for an important meeting. You have a vague recollection of the place you are supposed to go and know it is within walking distance, but can't recall the building's name or address. However, you would recognize the entrance if you saw it. Feeling forlorn and a bit frightened, a local recognizes that you appear lost and afraid. They offer to walk around with you in hopes you find your way. Together you walk.* A friend had this experience and likened it to peer support.

The Meaning of the Rattle

In the mid-1600s in what is now New York, the first 'police officers' carried large wooden rattles to signal to each other when they needed help. Patrol work in some cities was referred to as the Rattle Watch. You may have noticed the rattle in the Peer Support Support logo. The rattle is a unique symbol that represents a trusted call for help and keeping watch.



Rattles like this middle colonies example (*left*) were used to call for help and keeping watch. It is similar to the Watchman's Rattle used in the Peer Support Support logo (*right*).

How to Use This Workbook and Activities

This workbook can be used by an individual studying on their own, as a group process, or as a companion to classroom instruction. Each section includes subject content followed by an activity to reinforce concepts and gain insight for your life and workplace.

Each activity includes directions for individuals and groups. For reference, there is a chart of all of the activities included in the workbook on page 94. Activity options include the following.

- Individual self-reflection process
- Paired process
- Small group process
- Small group then large group process
- Large group process

Confidentiality is the expectation and duty that a peer support team member will not share or disclose information about who they interacted with and what they talked about while in the peer support role. Confidentiality is so important that I want to emphasize that we maintain confidentiality even during peer support training and meetings. There will be more information about confidentiality in Chapter 3.

What is Peer Support?

This is our domain, our important work to do.

What Is Peer Support?

Peer support, as with a trusted friend or neighbor, is someone able and willing to confidentially offer support. Peer support can take place between any two people or members of a group, but because the term is generally associated with the workplace, I will refer to them as coworkers. Peer support team members are a group of specially trained coworkers who offer support and are knowledgeable about resources. They are intentionally not a professional counselor or therapist.

Peer support team members are uniquely qualified because they often understand the stressors of the workplace and demands of the work, and may have had similar experiences on or off the job. Well-trained and skilled peer support teams can elevate a workgroup's expectation of wellbeing. Peer support is the wellness workforce multiplier.

Peer support can be early intervention. With forethought, we can often better plan for, respond to, and prevent unnecessary distress, and in some cases, a crisis. Peer support team members are trained to recognize the limits of their role and refer as appropriate to a higher level of support, intervention or care. While peer support can be utilized to respond to coworkers after a crisis, its primary function is more ordinary as in everyday interactions or encouragement.

A formal peer support team is part of a worker-centric peer support program that is intended to augment existing resources such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and internal or external professional psychological services. Informal peer support likely already exists at your workplace. It is not my role

to grant or deny your workplace peer support. The intention of *Peer Support Fundamentals* is to advance your understanding and develop your skills in effective peer support.

Collective Healing and Protection

Mammals gather and humans talk. Injured or threatened mammals, especially herd animals tend to gather. Humans, which are mammals, additionally benefit from talking about their distress with those they trust. Gathering and talking can be both healing and a communal protective factor. So, I believe it is fair to say, there are both healing and protective benefits to peer support. There is nothing new here. These are ancient practices that can be summarized in what David Grossman has said, “Pain shared is pain divided; joy shared is joy multiplied.”¹

There is a part of growth and healing, recovery from harm, that is individual and personal, and there is a part that is communal. Experience makes us not better than others, but better for others. As a group, we are not as strong as our weakest link, we are as strong as whoever is paying attention and ready to help.

Please take what I say and compare it to what you know, your observations, your experience, and your study. Make your clarifications, ask your questions. Sometimes we defer too readily to unwise experts, when we are the experts. What I love most about peer support is that it is provided by so-called non-experts or amateurs. People on the factory floor. Simple coworkers.

To build and maintain trust with coworkers, I think it is a good idea to honor their suspicions, even stigma, around mental health issues. It makes sense that a person might be reluctant to talk openly about their distress. At the same time, peer support can provide them with the ease of talking to someone without them writing anything down, without an appointment or record of the meeting.

This is our domain, our important work to do.

KEY POINTS

- As with a trusted friend, peer support offers confidential support.
- The group can heal and protect.
- Peer support training can advance our understanding, develop our skills, and encourage us to take action.

INDEX

A

Activity Chart, 94
Alcohol concerns, 52–53
Animal Brain, 45
Anxiety and depression
 defined, 41
 overview of, 41–42
Aurelius, Marcus, 71

B

Big T, 45
Boundaries
 different relationships and, 20
 peer support role and, 20–21
 problem employees and, 20
 supervisors and, 20–21
Broken Window Theory of Selfcare,
 79
Building and maintaining peer
 support teams, 57–67
 able and willing checklist, 60
 build and maintain checklist,
 66–67
 establish and identify resources,
 65
 finding and training team
 members, 62
 getting started, 58
 identify team leader or
 coordinator, 59–60
 initial and on-going training, 65
 maintaining team, 64–67
 seek workplace support, 64–65
 select team members, 63
 signs of a successful team, 58
 team design options, 61
 team design/structure and training
 checklist, 63–64
 work culture readiness, 59

C

Collective healing, as benefits of peer
 support, 2
Confidentiality
 confidentiality agreement, 22
 defined, 21
 limits to, 21

Confidentiality agreement, 22
Consortium model of peer support
 team, 61
Counseling, in therapeutic process, 18
Critical incidents, 47–48

D

Depression, 36–37
Disciplined mind, 72–73

E

Education, in therapeutic process, 18
Emotional competence
 develop, 79–82
 Important Pause, 80–82
Epictetus, 71–72

F

Formal peer support, 5–6

G

Grossman, David, 2
Guiding principles of peer
 support, 25–29

H

Hayes, Steven, 79
Health and wellness
 develop emotional competence,
 79–82
 disciplined mind, 72–73
 gaining resilience, 73–78
 Healthy Thinking, 75–78
 Important Pause, 80–82
 internal locus of control, 70–72
 as principle of peer support, 27
 protective factors, 84–85
 reframing stress and psychological
 trauma, 82–84
 worry well, 83
Healthy Thinking, 75–78
 defined, 75
 steps in, 75–76
Human Brain, 45

I

Important Pause, 80–82
Informal peer support, 3–4
Intake, in coworker contact, 19
Internal locus of control, 70–72
Invitations to provide peer support,
 24, 89–93

K

Knowledge areas for peer support
 alcohol concerns, 52–53
 anxiety and depression, 41–42
 psychological trauma, 44–51
 relationship conflicts, 42–43
 stress, 40
 suicide concerns, 54–55
 training in, as principle of peer
 support, 27

L

Listening, as peer support skill,
 34–35
Little t, 45
Locus of control, 70–72

N

Negative self-talk, 75–76
Neibuhr, Reinhold, 71
Neuroplasticity, resilience and, 74

O

Outreach, in coworker contact, 19
 for traumatic events, 48–49

P

Peer support

- being a peer, as principle of, 25–26
- benefits of, 2
- boundaries and, 20–21
- collective healing and, 2
- defined, 1–2
- guiding principles of, 25–29
- informal, 3–5
- invitations to provide, 24, 89–93
- what it is and is not, 10–11

Peer support assisted-technologies, 19

Peer support role

- boundaries and, 20–21
- confidentiality and, 21–23
- in therapeutic process, 18–19

Peer support skills

- intervening and taking action, 35–36
- listening as, 34–35
- talking as, 32–33
- training in, as principle of peer support, 27

Peer support team. *See also* Building and maintaining peer support teams

- identify team leader or coordinator, 59–60
- motivations for joining, 7–9
- process for, 62
- responding to traumatic events, 48–49
- selecting members, 63
- signs of successful, 58
- size of team, 61

Peer support team members

- confidentiality and, 21–23
- coworker contact process and, 19
- finding and training members, 62
- finding your *Why*, 12–15
- health and resiliency skills for, 69–85
- role in therapeutic process, 18–19
- skills needed for, 58

Permission, in therapeutic process, 18

Post-traumatic growth, 50

Post-traumatic stress recovery, 49–50

Potential psychological trauma, 44

Privileges communication, 22–23

Problem employees, boundaries and, 20

Protective factors, 84–85

Psychological trauma, 44–51

- Big T and Little t, 45
- critical incidents, 47–48
- Human and Animal brains, 45
- impact of trauma, 46–47
- overview of, 44
- post-traumatic growth, 50
- post-traumatic stress recovery, 49–50
- as potential trauma, 44
- protective factors, 84–85
- reframing, 83–84
- responding to traumatic events, 48–49
- shielding from, 49–50
- traumatic events, 47

Purpose, finding your, 12–15

R

Rattle, meaning of, viii

Relationship conflicts, 42–43

Resilience

- gaining, 73–78
- Healthy Thinking*, 75–78
- managing your thinking, 74–78
- neuroplasticity and, 74

Resources, establish and identify, 65

Responsiveness, as principle of peer support, 26

S

Shielding from traumatic events, 49–50

Skills. *See* Peer support skills

Stockdale, John, 72–73

Stress

- make stress your friend, 82–83
- overview of, 40
- reframing stress and psychological trauma, 82–84
- worry well, 83

Suicide concerns, prevention and intervention, 54–55

Supervisors, boundaries and, 20–21

Support, in therapeutic process, 18

T

Talking, as peer support skill, 32–33

Team coordinator model peer support team, 61

Therapeutic process

- defined, 18
- peer support team member's role in, 18–19

Therapeutic resources, identifying and establishing, 65

Therapy, in therapeutic process, 18

Thinking

- Healthy Thinking*, 75–78
- managing your, 74–78
- negative self-talk, 75–76

Training, initial and on-going, 65

Trauma. *See* Psychological trauma

Traumatic events

- defined, 47
- responding to, 48–49
- shielding from, 49–50

Trustworthiness, as principle of peer support, 26

V

van der Kolk, Bessel, 44

W

Wellness. *See* Health and wellness

What If—How To Scenarios, 36–37, 89–93

The Why, 12–15

Worry well, 83

The most pressing mental and emotional issues peer team members may encounter –presented in simple and relatable terms.

Imagine gaining the knowledge, skills, practice and confidence to help your troubled coworkers. *Peer Support Fundamentals* helps you do just that by delivering lessons that benefit you individually, your coworkers and your workgroup. A workgroup who utilizes *Peer Support Fundamentals* and builds a high-functioning peer support team creates a system that makes helping coworkers easier.

Peer support can be early intervention. With forethought, workgroups can often better plan for, respond to, and prevent unnecessary distress, and in some cases, a crisis. Peer support team members are trained to recognize the limits of their role and refer as appropriate to a higher level of support, intervention or care.

This hands-on peer support and wellness workbook gives you the principles, basic knowledge, and essential skills needed to best support coworkers in mental and emotional distress. Each chapter includes powerful and engaging activities that can be used individually or as a group process to explore, reinforce, and deepen understanding of the concepts presented in the book. *Peer Support Fundamentals* can be an economical and practical tool for initial or ongoing peer support training that locks in learning while providing relevance to your unique workplace.

Peers are uniquely qualified because they often understand the stressors of the workplace, demands of the work, and may have shared experiences on or off the job. Well-trained and skilled peer support teams can elevate a workgroup's expectation of wellbeing and act as a wellness workforce multiplier.

Peer support can decrease the unnecessary suffering of coworkers and give the peer supporter a greater sense of purpose.

PEER SUPPORT FUNDAMENTALS

TOPICS INCLUDE:

- Building and maintaining trust
- Guiding Principles of Peer Support
- What peer support *IS* and *IS NOT*
- Listening, talking and intervening skills
- Recognizing invitations to peer support
- Overview of stress, anxiety and depression, relationship conflicts, psychological trauma, alcohol and suicide concerns
- Team member health and resilience, and much more



Brian Casey is an author, health educator, and director of his agency's Employee Assistance Program.

He has a degree in

Health Education from the University of Minnesota and over thirty-five years of experience working as a paramedic, EMS Educator, and police officer. His skills include developing peer support teams, building and maintaining trust with public safety workers, and promoting mental and emotional wellbeing. He is also the author of *Ambulance Man: A Memoir* and *Good Cop, Good Cop: A Get Healthy, Stay Healthy Guide for Law Enforcement*.



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