

PEER SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

Peer support has been found to benefit many people living with disabilities. Many key features of peer support in the disability world are the same as for substance use.

WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

Peer support is delivered to an individual misusing or dependent on substances such as opioids, **by a person who has experience living with similar challenges, who has navigated the service system, and who has made progress in recovery.** Peer support has emerged in substance use treatment as a stand-alone support and in combination with traditional treatment and rehabilitation. A growing body of research suggests positive outcomes. Many key ingredients of peer support in the disability world are the same as those in peer support for substance use, suggesting that individuals with both disabilities and opioid use disorder would easily benefit from peer support as well.



Peer support may be informal or more structured. It is often provided by peers trained as **Recovery Coaches** in the professional treatment world. Community groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous are considered nonprofessional, with the goal of members providing mutual support for anyone who wants help with substance use. Participants in these groups may have Sponsors who are peers, who have made progress in their program, and whom they can call for additional support outside regularly scheduled meetings. Both professional and nonprofessional approaches to peer support may be offered together with formal treatment approaches, in a community, outpatient clinic or hospital setting. **Some individuals may think they can manage the challenge of substance use or addiction on their own, though research suggests that individuals participating in structured programs and professional treatment are more likely to achieve their goals and maintain a healthier lifestyle.**

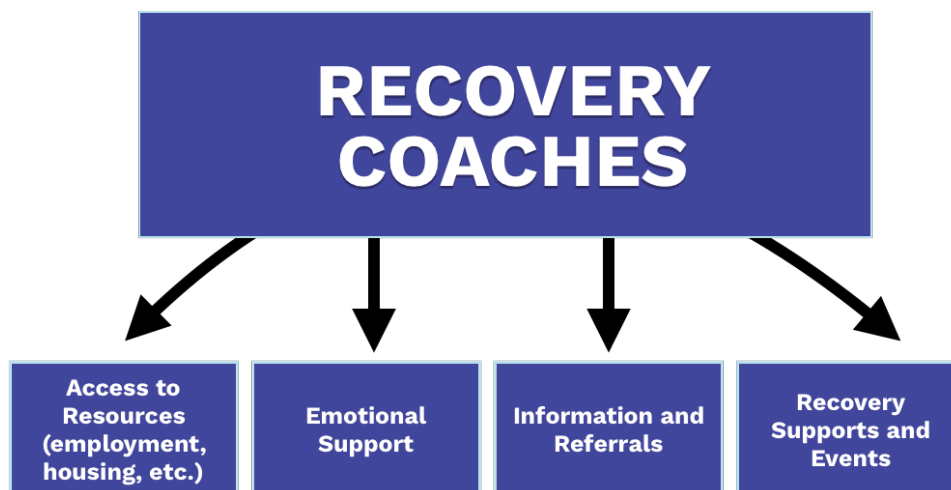
WHAT ARE OPIOID MISUSE, ADDICTION, AND RECOVERY?

Opioids are a group of drugs that include legal drugs prescribed by health care providers to manage pain such as codeine, hydrocodone and oxycodone, as well as illegal drugs like heroin. Opioid use disorder occurs when an individual misuses prescribed opioids, or uses illegal drugs, such as heroin or

pain medications not prescribed to that person, to such an extent that relationships and the routine activities of life are disrupted. **Addiction** develops when a person cannot stop misusing drugs. This situation often arises because of a combination of factors. A person may start down the path of addiction by being prescribed or using a drug, like an opioid, that is easy for the human body to become dependent on, or as a way to cope with pain that is physical or emotional, or in the context of a social situation, in which friends are encouraging or providing drugs as entertainment or to relax. **Recovery**, therefore, may be defined not only as abstaining from substance use altogether, but also in terms of creating new relationships and ways of coping with physical or emotional pain, and embracing a healthy lifestyle to reduce the risk of turning to, and misusing substances in the future (i.e., preventing relapse).

WHAT DOES PEER SUPPORT LOOK LIKE FOR SUBSTANCE USE RECOVERY?

Peer support in substance use recovery may be provided by **Recovery Coaches** individually or in groups, with structured curricula regarding illness or relapse management, coping skills and wellness, or more informally, focusing on feelings and experiences, and overcoming social isolation. In structured sessions, the Recovery Coach or peer specialist uses pre-planned, recovery-oriented discussion topics to engage with clients. In unstructured sessions, the Recovery Coach meets with clients and focuses on clients’ concerns that can be addressed without a planned agenda.



Recovery Coaches in professional substance use treatment provide a range of support services to clients that can include:

- access to resources to meet basic needs, like housing or employment;
- emotional support, empathy and concern;
- connections to information and referrals to community resources; and
- links to targeted recovery community supports, activities, and events.

Contact with people with substance use disorders may be face-to-face; via e-mail, telephone calls, text messages, and instant messaging; or online. In the most effective models, the role, expectations and behavior of Recovery Coaches are clearly defined, with supports such as continuing education and ongoing supervision provided to the Recovery Coaches themselves as they work together with people with substance use disorders. In this way, people with substance use disorders make progress in recovery and achieve the goals of their choosing.

WHERE DOES PEER SUPPORT HAPPEN?

In the professional substance use treatment arena, peer support programs vary in the ways in which they operate. Recovery Coaches may be available in a variety of treatment settings, including inpatient or residential situations (e.g., a sober living home or halfway house), as well as in outpatient treatment or community clinic settings. They may also support women pursuing recovery who may live with their children in residential programs as they recover from addiction and learn better ways of parenting. A Recovery Coach may be quite flexible in engaging with clients, visiting in a person's home or meeting them in a coffee shop, for instance, to check-in and provide essential encouragement and support at a location that meets the person's needs.

TRAINING RECOVERY COACHES.

Many, but not all, people who provide peer support for substance use disorders complete a course in recovery coaching and earn a certification. Certification requirements may vary by state as well as by the agency providing the services. Some programs may require the Recovery Coaches themselves to have a designated period of sobriety or treatment engagement. Training may include topics such as cultural competence and ethical issues, along with training in skills such as motivational interviewing, to help clients identify the reasons why they want to pursue recovery and change their behavior.

PEER SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS.

While we are unaware of Recovery Coach or peer support approaches that specifically target the needs of individuals with disabilities (e.g., traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury) who also misuse substances (e.g., opioids), **peer support in general has been found to benefit people living with disabilities.** For example, for individuals with physical disabilities such as those with spinal cord injuries, key ingredients in peer support include inspirational motivation, individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. For these individuals, enhanced self-efficacy, improved self-care, empowerment, and the prevention of hospitalization are desired outcomes. These approaches and goals are consistent with those of Recovery Coaching. However, Recovery Coaches may need

additional training and support to make essential accommodations or adaptations to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.

CONCLUSIONS.

- **Peer support should be flexible, adaptable, and tailored to an individual's characteristics, situation, concerns, and needs.** It may need to differ by a person's particular challenges as well as by the ways in which they are best supported (e.g., in person, by telephone or online, in groups). The key ingredients of existing models of Recovery Coaching in substance use treatment are consistent with peer supports in the disability arena, and can be maintained as long as flexible accommodations are made to meet the needs of individuals with diverse disabilities.
- **Different stages of substance use recovery - treatment, transitions in treatment, and recovery management - may require different types of peer support in diverse settings.** Recovery Coaching may differ depending on the individual's level of care. Likewise, Recovery Coaching for individuals with disabilities misusing substances such as opioids may require additional training and accommodations to meet the needs of individuals' life circumstances and health conditions.
- **To the best of our knowledge, no peer support models are developed specifically for individuals with disabilities who are misusing opioids.** While there is considerable overlap in the mental health and substance use domains in terms of peer support process and outcomes, peer support in other disability domains has focused on some of the same outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy) and some different outcomes (e.g., physical mobility). Models with strong theoretical underpinnings may suggest similar mechanisms of change for individuals across disability groups, with adaptations made to tailor peer support to the specific needs of individuals within disability groups.
- **Regardless of the population targeted or services provided, peer-delivered services should be nonjudgmental and supportive, rather than directive.** Peer supports must be flexible, with varying levels of service intensity according to a person's need. The services provided should be driven by the individual, with flexible accommodations made based on a person's particular challenges, to meet individually specified recovery, self-management and lifestyle goals.

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