

Burnout, Trauma & Compassion Fatigue in the Peer Supporter Role

Peer supporters (e.g., peer recovery coaches, peer recovery specialists) have proven to play a critical role in the recovery of individuals experiencing substance use and mental health challenges. Using shared experiences, peer supporters connect with individuals on a personal level, act as a mentor and guide in navigating complex systems, and provide hope and encouragement. As the peer support field has grown in popularity and impact, so has the susceptibility of peer supporters to burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue. These conditions impact peer supporters' quality of life, and in turn, the sustainability of peer support programs.



Professional Burn Out

Physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion caused by job stress and exposure to overwhelming, emotionally demanding work



Secondary Trauma

Exhaustion, irritability, avoidance, depression, and anxiety caused by bearing witness to others' trauma



Compassion Fatigue

Feelings of numbness, inability to balance empathy and objectivity, difficulty concentrating, cynicism, and diminished sense of purpose caused by providing empathy in an unsustainable professional role

Impact of Burnout, Secondary Trauma & Compassion Fatigue on Peer Supporters & Agencies

- Additional emotional labor for peer supporters
- Decreased capacity to meet job requirements
- Diminished ability to provide professional, compassionate care
- High peer supporter turnover
- Increased costs for organizations employing peers
- Decreased quality of care for individuals working toward or in recovery

Warning Signs



Watch for patterns of:

- < Increasing physical illness
- < Taking more personal leave
- < Changes in job performance
- < Employee turnover – especially if turnover continues to happen as new people enter the role.
- < Lack of focus or follow-through
- < Indifference or apathy
- < Relapses in their own recovery

Listen and respond to peer supporters when they express that something about their role or the work is unsustainable.

Risk & Protective Factors for Peer Supporters

Burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue are concerns in the peer support field, and research is beginning to identify factors that increase risk of these conditions and factors that protect peer supporters. These risk and protective factors fall into three domains: agency-level culture, workplace structure, and characteristics of individual. **Efforts to address burnout often focus on the individual peer supporter; however, research indicates that intervention at the cultural and structural levels are far more impactful.**

Cultural

Risk Factors

- Professional culture of "just deal with it"
- Moral blame for shortcomings
- Role is socially undervalued
- Discussion of own mental health needs seen as "unprofessional"
- Stigma or hostility from coworkers

Protective Factors

- Normalizing mental healthcare and self-care
- Supportive organizational culture
- Collective efficacy
- Reducing stigma and social valuing

Structural

Risk Factors

- Overworked and underpaid
- Ambiguity of the purpose of self-disclosure
- Lack of stability in role and expectations
- Lack of access to professional counseling or peer support

Protective Factors

- Clear roles and expectations
- Strong supervisory working alliance
- Formal peer support groups
- Access to supervision from senior peers
- Autonomy in carrying out role
- Rewards and recognition

Individual

Risk Factors

- Isolation
- Loss, trauma, and stress at work
- Cumulative minority stress
- Intense self-criticism
- Sense of internal struggle

Protective Factors

- Self-compassion
- Self-efficacy
- Interpersonal connection
- Stress inoculation (preparing for likely stressors)
- Sense of purpose



Resources & References

- > [Healthcare Professionals and Compassion Fatigue](#) | Hazelden Betty Ford Center
- > [Compassion Cultivation Training](#) | Compassion Institute
- > [ChristianaCare Center for WorkLife Wellbeing](#)
- > [Understanding and Bolstering the Peer Recovery Workforce](#) | Foundation for Opioid Response Efforts
- > [Predictors of Employment Burnout Among VHA Peer Support Specialists](#) | Park et al. (2016)
- > [Narratives of burnout and recovery from an agency perspective: A two-year longitudinal study](#) | Salminen et al. (2017)
- > American Psychological Association Conference 2021 Panel: Exploring Compassion Training as Burnout Inoculation for Healthcare Professionals | Barnali Basu, Erika Rosenberg, Karen Mott, Sarah Owens Woodard
- > APA Conference 2021 Poster: Predictors of Job Satisfaction Among Peer Support Specialists | Paige S. Erickson, Kristen Abraham