

Purposeful Peer Support

"People don't always need advice. Sometimes they just need a hand to hold, an ear to listen and a heart to understand."

– UNKNOWN



Tautoko Tāne
Male Survivors Aotearoa

“We are all social beings by nature – connectedness and community are necessary if not vital to our wellbeing. The very existence of positive social relationships can be a source of healing for many psychological wounds.

Because sexual abuse and sexual assault occurs in relative secrecy – in a state of disconnection between people – reconnecting and building trust are often at the core of healing from sexual violence. Some survivors turn to peer-support initiatives to build connection and heal.”¹

As a result of suffering sexual harm, many survivors face relationship challenges with friends, family/whānau and workmates and often experience great difficulty interacting socially with the community at large and with some support service providers.

These relationship and interaction difficulties can also contribute to their isolation and often make them more vulnerable to addiction, re-victimisation and further abuse.

This is why purposeful peer support hinges on building a trust-based relationship between the survivor and their peer-worker that ensures the physical and emotional safety of the survivor in that relationship. It is this safe and trusted relationship that can provide a real opportunity for enabling the growth and recovery of the survivor... and likewise for their peer-worker.

Peer support processes, which were initially applied to help people suffering from addiction and mental health issues, are now applied more widely to assist trauma recovery generally, including the impacts of sexual violence. It is the lived experience of the peer-worker, their first-hand understanding of their survivor’s experience, that is the essential ingredient for establishing a successful (hope, growth and wellbeing focussed) peer support relationship.

What is Purposeful Peer Support?

Purposeful peer support is peer support with a purpose – developing authentic relationships that support people in their journey towards wellbeing.

“Peer support is person-centred and underpinned by strength-based philosophies.

The life experience of the peer-worker creates common ground from which the trust relationship with the person is formed.

Empowerment, empathy, hope and choice along with mutuality are the main drivers in purposeful peer support work.

There is a great deal of strength gained from knowing someone who has walked where you are walking and now has a life of their choosing. In this way it is different from other support work, it comes from a profoundly different philosophical base.”²

Typical characteristics of purposeful peer support:

- ✓ People engage with each other and others for support that is based on mutual learning from their shared (lived) experience;
- ✓ The support may include a mix of self-reflection, mutual (one-on-one) support, and peer group support;
- ✓ Peer support is different from counselling and other forms of therapy. It is focussed on developing a trusted relationship with a peer worker that supports a mutually collaborative journey towards wellbeing.

“Peer support is based on the belief that people who have faced, endured and overcome adversity can offer useful support, encouragement, hope and perhaps mentoring to others facing similar situations.”³

Purposeful Peer Support is Person-Centred

PERSON – centred

The **relationship** is the foundation

Begins with welcoming; outreach and engagement

Support is based on the person's experience and the support requested

Support works towards quality-of-life goals

Support is focussed on hope & recovery and is aspirational – moving towards wellbeing

Personal recovery is central from beginning to end

Track personal progress towards recovery

Use methods that promote personal growth and self-responsibility

Peer support is voluntary; people engage and disengage as they choose

The relationship may change and grow throughout and continue even after support ends

The differences between purposeful peer support as a person-centred (strengths-based) programme, and 'illness-centred' (and often deficit-based) therapies can be summarised as follows:⁴

ILLNESS – centred

The **diagnosis** is the foundation

Begins with an illness assessment

Services are based on diagnosis and treatment needed

Services work towards illness-reduction goals

Treatment is symptom driven and rehabilitation (recovery) is disability driven

Primary focus on recovery from the illness and then the disability is taken care of

Track illness progress towards symptoms reduction and cure

Use techniques that promote illness control and risk reduction damage from the illness

Service ends when the illness is cured

The relationship only exists to treat the illness and must be carefully restricted throughout, keeping it professional

Purposeful Peer Support Essentials

- ✓ "Purposeful peer support is grounded in the belief that people are their own greatest resource and that adverse life experiences can be sources of resilience and knowledge;
- ✓ Purposeful peer support draws on a shared understanding of recovery;
- ✓ Purposeful peer support focuses on what will sustain recovery – for example, employment, reconnection with family/whānau, achievement and purposeful activities, as well as being included in communities;
- ✓ Purposeful peer support instils hope by being with someone who has been there and 'through it'; and
- ✓ Purposeful peer support is not about 'fixing things' but building on strengths."⁵

These essential characteristics are evident in the six core principles that underpin our approach to purposeful peer support:

Experiential Knowledge

Purposeful peer support provides access to the essential learning, knowledge and wisdom that comes from sharing personal lived experience of sexual harm and the recovery process.

Authentic Relationships

Purposeful peer support relies on authentic two-way relationships between people through 'the kinship of common experience' – trust-based relationships that enable peers to share their experience in a way that is mutually beneficial.

Potential for Change

It is a fundamental principle of purposeful peer support that everyone has strengths – the potential to build a meaningful life. Accessing this potential is an essential part of our journey to live life with more purpose, clarity and passion.

Collaborative Learning

An essential aspect of purposeful peer support is the opportunity it provides for peers to learn from and with each other; to learn from sharing past experiences, and to learn from working together to practice new ways of relating to each other and the communities they interact with.

Self Determination

Purposeful peer support affirms the fundamental right of people to shape their own lives – a belief that all human beings are equally entitled to be in control of their own destinies; determining how their lives are governed and participating in decisions that affect their lives.

Equity Fairness and Inclusion

Purposeful peer support asserts the fundamental right of people who experience sexual harm to have equal opportunities to other citizens and to be free of any form of discrimination.

Some Benefits of Purposeful Peer Support

Meeting with people who speak your language

When you are in a purposeful peer support relationship (one-to one or in a peer group), it's common to share your experience and talk about what you've been through and what you've done – things that relate to why you are there and why you are seeking support. It's helpful to know that you are in conversation with a person, or speaking to a group of people, who understand what you are talking about.

Learning with people who have been where you are

You will meet people who started out where you are, have had similar experiences and have moved forward to a place of recovery. This provides an opportunity to develop coping skills as you learn how others have navigated their life challenges. And it provides you with a regular reminder that healing and hope are real possibilities.

No judgment

No matter what you've been through, what you say or how you say it, your peers have likely been through it, seen it before, or heard it from someone else. There is no need to fear the judgment of your peer support person or the peer group when you are sharing your own experience.

Focused on hope and recovery

Purposeful peer support is not about what is bad, wrong or doesn't work but rather about what is possible and what can be achieved together. You will work with people who are not focussed on problem solving or fixing weaknesses but rather concerned with building on your strengths to co-create something new for the future – encouraging and supporting a journey towards wellbeing.

Making your own decisions

You are in charge of your own recovery journey. Your level of engagement in the peer support activities, including any related support services, will be determined by you. And you are free to disengage at any time.

Some of the benefits commonly reported by people who participate in effective purposeful peer support activities are:

- ✓ Increased self-esteem and self-confidence

- ✓ A sense of purpose

- ✓ Increases motivation to implement life changes

- ✓ Increased involvement in meaningful activities

- ✓ Increases in the quality and number of relationships – greater social support network

- ✓ Increased resilience and quality of life

- ✓ A greater sense of wellbeing and increased ability to cope

- ✓ Increased ability to communicate with and deal with other support services

- ✓ Positive outcomes where other services have failed

- ✓ An opportunity to 'give-back' by helping others.



If you are a male who has experienced sexual harm... you are not alone.

1 in 6 males under 16 years of age experience sexual violence in their lifetime.

We are here to support you in creating a happier, healthier future...

✓ Confidentiality

✓ No judgement

✓ Self-determination

✓ Focussed on hope and recovery

✓ Moving forward together

✓ ... Towards wellbeing

“You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start from where you are and change the ending.”

– C.S. LEWIS

