Self-Determination and Peer Support
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This paper is written to provide a brief synopsis of the intersection of self-determination and peer support.

Self-determination is a philosophy in which we believe that every individual has the right to determine the course of their own life. It can help to inform the approach we use in peer support. It can also be used to think about ourselves as a society, and whether we provide the supportive environment for people to be able to practice their right to self-determination.

Essentially, self-determination refers to the right that we all have to full power over our own lives. It is a key component of a recovery-oriented approach, building on the concept that we each create our own recovery path. It emerges as a key principle in peer support as it refers to the right for peers to direct their own services, to make decisions concerning their health and well-being, and to have help to make decisions from whomever they choose. It also includes the right to be free from involuntary treatment, and to have meaningful leadership roles in the design, delivery and evaluation of services and supports.

In the context of mental health peer supporters, a self determination approach informs our relationship with our peers. It helps us reflect on power within the relationship. It helps us question our beliefs about our peers.

Self-determination tells us that we are all capable of flourishing because we all possess deep-rooted and evolved tendencies toward growth and development. Our potential to flourish can be nourished or it can be undermined. Our potential is most fully realized when growth and development are freely chosen and when self determination is intentionally fostered through supportive social, cultural and environmental conditions.

Peer support is an ideal fit with a self-determination approach because people make good decisions when they are free of shame and blame. A fundamental aspect of peer support is that it provides a relationship and ongoing exchange that purposely avoids shame and blame. Within this safe and non-judgmental space, peers are more likely to make positive, healthy decisions. In a peer support relationship, peers are heard and valued, and regarded as whole human beings.

In a self-determination approach we engage in a process of critical thinking and discovery about the perspective of the peer. We can use active listening, compassionate communication and other listening techniques to keep our curiosity alive as we continuously seek to understand the perspective of the peer. We support the inherent competence of the peer. When a question being asked of the peer is: “Can you do that?” a self-determination approach tells us the answer isn’t: “No, I don’t know how.” The answer is: “Yes, I just don’t know how yet.” This viewpoint also helps the peer supporter to overcome feelings of frustration or exasperation, and having thoughts of failure when peers do not seem to be making “progress.”
A self-determination approach helps us to be aware of possible inherent judgment in the use of recovery tools. Recovery tools may infer a desired outcome, for example, completion of a goal. Sometimes what the peer is doing right now, something that is far from meeting the goal, is the best choice in the moment. This is when we use our continuous search for understanding the perspective of the peer to help us stay connected to them. This may be particularly challenging if we are in relationship with someone who is using drugs, staying in bed, or other behaviours that we may see as counter-productive to recovery. It may be, at this time, these are the best choices for the individual to make. We can stay connected because we don’t assume to know what our peer’s recovery path looks like. This may be an area where we need to engage in self-care and seek support for ourselves, to help us stay connected to our peer when we are interpreting our peer’s behaviour as stuck, going backwards, that they are not listening to us, or that we are not being effective.

Stephen Pocklington says: “We get to choose over and over again whether to be a nurturing influence or a managing director. We can’t be both simultaneously.”

To help maintain a self-determination approach, here are some questions we can ask ourselves:

- As a peer supporter, do I think of myself as “fixing” the peers I support?
- Do I think I have the answers that will fix the peer or their problems?
- Have I been looking at this through my own lens? Am I continuing to wonder what the world looks like through the lens of the peer?
- Do I think I have done my job when the peer does what I have suggested?
- Am I energized by giving advice?
- How do I handle it when our meeting is almost over? Do I become a bit more directive, perhaps telling my peer what to do?

And remember: if we have moments of disconnection, if we have strayed from a self-determination approach, we can explore these moments. They provide opportunity for significant growth in our development as peer supporters and in our connection to our peers.

Sources

Stephen Pocklington, speaking at “The Art of Facilitating Self-Determination,” hosted by Peer Recovery Education for Employment and Resilience (PREFER), April 8, 2011, Toronto, Ontario