

Peer Support Core Functions

The functions described are not exhaustive and are not performed by all peer staff in all settings. Each organization, ideally in collaboration with individual seeking services, determines which functions are most relevant and desired for their community.

Peer Function	Description
Assertive Outreach	Rather than wait for individuals with behavioral health conditions to “hit bottom” or demonstration that they are ready and motivated to pursue their wellness, peer staff conduct assertive outreach to those who have never received services and supports, who may be waiting to receive them, or have become disconnected and may benefit from being reengaged. This is one of the roles for which the most evidence impact currently exists. In addition to physically connecting with people in community settings (that is, outside of behavioral health agencies) outreach also involves removing barriers to receiving care, including bureaucratic red tape and unwelcoming physical environments.
Community Education	Peer staff recognizes that the surrounding community is a powerful resource for healing. They counter stigma and discrimination by identifying opportunities to educate the community about behavioral health conditions and the factors that both help and hinder recovery. Through their education efforts, they identify recovery allies who can be leveraged to support recovery at individual, household, family, and community levels.
Advocacy	Peer staff advocate for participants both within their organization and within the broader community. They also engage in formal advocacy efforts to reduce stigma, increase access to services, and increase the breadth and quality of services.
Empowerment and Leadership Development	Peer staff engage in nonhierarchical, collaborative relationships and support others by helping them clarify their desires and identify relevant action steps. In doing so, peer support staff empower people to make choices and pursue their goals. They also create leadership development opportunities within agencies such as “Peer Advisory Councils” and connect individuals to those opportunities.
Recovery Capital Assessment	Peer staff explore the strengths and assets that individuals bring in support of their recovery from an individual, interpersonal, and community perspective. They support people in identifying potential areas of vulnerability and identify strategies for strengthening these and increasing their recovery capital.
Recovery and Wellness Planning	Recovery-oriented services move beyond the focus on symptom reduction and biopsychosocial stabilization to assisting people with developing full lives in their communities. Peer staff can support people in not only addressing and coping with behavioral health challenges but also with improving their overall quality of life and integrating into their community by supporting them in developing individualized recovery plans. These plans identify goals in multiple life domains along with simple next steps.
Assertive Linkages to Community Resources	Peer staff play a critical role in identifying, mapping, and developing recovery resources, including education, employment, housing, childcare, and others. Peer staff link people to community resources and help them navigate these and other health and social services systems.

Recovery-Focused Skills Training	Peer staff are positioned to help people in their natural communities develop the skills they need in order to integrate into those communities. They also provide life-skills groups in agency- or community-based settings to reinforce new skills, such as problem solving.
Companionship and Modeling	Peer staff provide social support with an increasing emphasis on assisting people in developing their own, sustainable pro-recovery support network. They also provide recreational opportunities in the natural community. These demonstrate that life can be enjoyable with or after behavioral health condition. Through the companionship that they provide, peer staff promote hope and serve as living evidence that recovery is real.
Crisis Support	Peer staff can provide critical support during challenging times by sharing their lived experience, promoting hope, being present, assertively connecting people with needed resources, and so on.
Ongoing Recovery Management	Studies document significant variability in recovery outcomes following treatment for episodes of substance use disorder and the erosion of treatment effects over time. Peer staff extend the duration of support services beyond a treatment episode, intensity those services during window of initial and subsequent vulnerability, and move the locus of support from the treatment environment to the client’s natural environment (Godley & White, 2011; White & Godley, 2003). Support is provided in intervals and via variety of avenues (e.g., in person, by telephone, thought text messages in community, agency, or home-based settings) determined in partnership with the people receiving support.
Health System Navigation	The most recent innovation in peer support is the role of the peer health navigator. A Behavioral Health Navigator supports individuals, their family members, and caregivers and connects them to culturally relevant health services, including prevention, diagnosis, treatment, recovery management, and follow up. Navigators also help people develop and implement individualized action plans. The peer support worker who provides navigation uses his or her familiarity with the system itself to create connections, remover barriers, and increase the ease with which people can access needed supports.