

Remote Support: Tips for Peer Support Specialists Using Technology During the COVID Public Health Emergency



Overview



Privacy, security, and confidentiality issues are essential to peer support services, not just treatment services. Peer Support Specialists or Recovery Coaches that work for substance use disorder treatment providers should seek guidance from the treatment provider regarding privacy and security issues (HIPAA) and adherence to 42 CFR Part 2 (Federal Confidentiality Rules and Regulations) regarding the use of technology to provide peer support services.

Peer Support Specialists/Recovery Coaches that work for a Recovery Community Organization (RCOs) or other community organizations should seek guidance regarding the organization's policies/practices regarding providing services remotely using technology.

Numerous Alcoholics Anonymous groups in consultation with AA's General Service Conference established guidelines regarding the use of technology to provide mutual support (e.g., websites, online meetings, telephone meetings, social media groups, etc.) and these can be reviewed to help inform peer support specialists' decisions regarding using technology.



Use of Technology- The use of technology to provide peer support services should be purposeful and planned (not a casual decision) with the types of technology selected that will best meet the peer's need for support, engagement, and maintaining/enhancing recovery.

Peer Support Specialists should have access to telephone, text messaging, and videoconferencing platform services in order to provide services virtually (email, apps, and social media are not included in this narrative). All three technologies contain privacy/security and confidentiality issues, with Short Message Service (SMS) texting (using text function on cell or smart phones), posing perhaps the greatest risks. However, using a recommended videoconferencing platform and the telephone include risks as well (e.g., recording sessions or uploading recorded sessions; videoconferencing or telephone sessions being overheard).



Assessment of Technology Skills/Access:

Assessment: Conduct an assessment of your technology skills. How familiar are you with different videoconferencing platforms? Could you help a peer who was having trouble using the technology?

Questions to Ask Peers: What is your access to technology? Do you share a device with someone else? Have you used a videoconferencing platform before like Skype, Apple FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Facebook, etc. Do you have access to the internet/WiFi? What is your technology preference?



Technology Skills:

Practice to Develop Competency:

Spend time using various videoconferencing platforms to develop/increase proficiency.

Instructional videos are available for most videoconferencing platforms, which can help build these skills. Organize online trainings and discussion opportunities regarding use of videoconferencing platforms and/or devote time in staff meetings to discuss problems, successes, and tips. Remember repetition (repeated use) of a videoconferencing platform helps build competency.

Be a Champion and Role Model for your peers regarding using technology for Remote Support



Skills

According to SAMHSA: 'Peer support workers engage in a wide range of activities, including advocacy, linkage to resources, sharing of experience, community and relationship building, group facilitation, skill building, mentoring, goal setting, and more. They may also plan and develop groups, services or activities, supervise other peer workers, provide training, gather information on resources, administer programs or agencies, educate the public and policymakers, and work to raise awareness.' https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tac/core-competencies_508_12_13_18.pdf. All of these services could be provided remotely but may require an enhancement of current skills and increasing flexibility and creativity.



Engagement- The first Core Competency for Peer Workers according to SAMHSA revolves around engagement (e.g., engages peers in collaborative and caring relationships). Activities that promote this engagement include: 1. Initiating contact with peers; 2. Reaching out to engage peers across the

whole continuum of the recovery process; 3. Demonstrating genuine acceptance and respect; and 4. Demonstrating understanding of peers' experiences and feelings. All of these activities can be done using technology. However, initiating contact needs to be done more frequently and then for shorter or longer periods of time depending on the peer. The Peer Support Specialist may want to develop a checklist of items to ask all peers that includes recovery support and COVID-related items. In addition, slow your pace of responding to your peer as to not talk over the peer (respectful behavior) and if on camera, experts recommend you increase your presence about 110%. Finally, reach out more, as engagement can be short and meaningful (checking in and reaching out).



Listening Skills- Part of the first Core Competency includes listening to peers with careful attention to the content and emotion being communicated.

This can be more difficult to do using videoconferencing, telephone, and text, but not impossible. Peer Support Specialists should consider working in a space with little to no distractions to increase focus, as well as using headphones. Pay more attention to changes in tone and volume, silence, hesitation in speaking, etc. Next, increasing your verbal encouragement/comments/reflections may be helpful (e.g., wow, that sounds difficult, I get it, I am here...etc.). These types of responses can be texted too. Finally, a simple rule- talk less. Peers should talk ¾ of the time and the Peer Support Specialists talk ¼ of the time.

Reach out more, be creative, and listen well and deeply



Give Guidance- The Peer Support Specialist may need to give guidance on use of technology when delivering services in this format. This does not mean telling the peer what to do regarding their recovery but more about the structure of the services. Examples include: asking the peer if they can move to a more private area to talk; asking the peer to move close to the camera or change the lighting if possible so their face can be seen; and requesting the peer not have their camera on while driving or shopping.



Activities in Your Back Pocket- When running recovery support groups remotely, it may be helpful to have resources or activities prepared that encourage interaction and engagement. Some Peer Support Specialists on a recent webinar shared examples of activities: recovery bingo; an in-home scavenger hunt- go find something red where you are living and bring it back to the group; relaxation exercises; creating self-care plans with limited resources; morning reflections; group art projects using materials found in the home that describe how you are feeling; and card games or question and answer games regarding recovery with each group member writing down their answer and then revealing their answers at the same time. In addition, create a list of conversation starters like: the best things about recovery are?; I wish my family could understand this about my recovery; and I am most proud of myself for.... and have these types of activities ready before group. Finally, Peer Support Specialists reported meeting peers in parking lots and talking on the phone while remaining in their cars for both individual and group sessions or instructing a peer to drive to the parking lot of a business that offers free wifi and use their wifi to do a peer support session (individual or group) or attend an online mutual support group (e.g. AA, NA, Life Ring, etc.).



Questions About COVID-19

Peers may be worried about their health and risks of contracting COVID-19. Several websites provide accurate and helpful information. The CDC's website is excellent and the following link is to the FAQ page <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html> which provides answers to numerous questions. In addition, SAMHSA has a website on COVID-19 with lots of useful information and includes a pdf on virtual online support groups <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/virtual-recovery-resources.pdf>. Finally, NIDA provides a handout on the risks factors related to substance use and COVID-19 <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/04/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>. The Peer Support Specialist does not have to be the expert on COVID-19 but have resources like this available and review them with peers, remembering to only refer to websites that provide the best science and accurate facts (e.g., CDC, SAMHSA, NIDA).