



A FIELD GUIDE FOR ANYONE NEW TO PEER SUPPORT

What Is Peer Support?

Three kinds of peer support, what they share, and what the research shows

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Help from someone who has been there

Peer support is help from someone who has lived through something similar. A peer supporter uses that experience, along with training, to support someone facing it now.

There are three main kinds: adult peer support, family peer support, and youth peer support. They share a foundation, but they serve different people. This guide is for adults meeting peer support for the first time: agency leaders, funders, school and court partners, and parents.

Lived experience is the qualification. Training makes it a profession.



What every kind of peer support shares

Titles and rules differ, but the core of the work is the same.

SAMHSA describes peer support workers as people who help others through “shared understanding, respect, and mutual empowerment.”¹

Lived experience	Peers are hired for their lived experience and their expertise navigating systems, not only what they have studied. They share it intentionally, when it helps.
A relationship, not a referral	The service is the relationship: showing up, following through, and staying connected.
Not therapy	Peers don't diagnose or treat. They work alongside clinicians, not in place of them.
Not case management	Peers don't manage a person's case or make decisions for them. They help people take part in their own plans.

KIND	WHO THE PEER IS	WHO THEY SUPPORT
Adult peer support	An adult in recovery from a mental health or substance use condition	Adults with similar experiences
Family peer support	A parent or caregiver who has navigated services for a family member	Other parents and caregivers
Youth peer support	A young adult with lived experience in youth-serving systems	Young people

¹ SAMHSA, Peer Support Workers for Those in Recovery, page updated July 23, 2026 (accessed October 12, 2026). samhsa.gov

Adult peer support

Adults in recovery from mental health or substance use conditions, supporting other adults in theirs.

In 2007, the federal Medicaid agency told states that peer support providers “should be self-identified consumers who are in recovery” from mental health or substance use conditions.¹ SAMHSA says peer support workers help people “become and stay engaged in the recovery process and reduce the likelihood of relapse.”²

Many titles	Peer specialist, recovery coach, peer recovery supporter, and peer support specialist are common. A state may group several under one credential.
Where they work	Often mental health and substance use treatment, recovery programs, crisis services, hospitals, and community settings.
What they do	Share their own recovery, help people set goals, connect them to services and supports, and stay with them through setbacks. Because trust comes first, accountability feels like encouragement, not someone checking up on you, and that builds discipline over time.
Recognized in policy	The same 2007 letter called peer support services “an evidence-based mental health model of care.” ¹ NAMI's policy position uses the same words. ³

ONE STATE'S APPROACH (OHIO, AS OF OCTOBER 2026)

Ohio certifies adult peers as Certified Peer Recovery Supporters. The rule describes someone “with a direct lived experience, who has self-identified as being in recovery from a mental health or substance use disorder,” at least 18 at certification.⁴ Other states use different titles and requirements.

¹ Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, State Medicaid Director Letter #07-011, August 15, 2007.
² SAMHSA, Peer Support Workers for Those in Recovery, page updated July 23, 2026 (accessed October 12, 2026). samhsa.gov
³ NAMI, “Workforce: Peer Support Workers,” public policy position (accessed October 12, 2026). nami.org
⁴ Ohio Administrative Code 5122-29-15.1, Adult, family, and youth certified peer supporter, effective April 7, 2022. codes.ohio.gov

Family peer support

Parents and caregivers who have been through it, supporting other families.

Family peer supporters have raised or cared for a child or family member with behavioral health challenges, and have learned to navigate the services involved. Now they walk alongside other parents and caregivers.

Federal guidance describes parent and youth support services as “developing and linking with formal and informal supports; instilling confidence; assisting in the development of goals; serving as an advocate, mentor, or facilitator for resolution of issues; and teaching skills necessary to improve coping abilities.”¹

They support the adults	A family peer supporter works with the parent or caregiver. The young person may have their own youth peer.
They know the systems	Meetings, plans, waitlists, and paperwork are familiar ground. They help families understand the process and speak up in it.
They lower the isolation	Parents can feel blamed or alone. Talking with someone who has been there can help.

ONE STATE'S APPROACH (OHIO, AS OF OCTOBER 2026)

Ohio's Certified Family Peer Supporter rule describes a caregiver “of a person with behavioral health challenges who has successfully navigated service systems for at least one year on behalf of the person,” at least 21 at certification.²

¹ CMS and SAMHSA, Joint Informational Bulletin, “Coverage of Behavioral Health Services for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Significant Mental Health Conditions,” May 7, 2013. [medicaid.gov](https://www.medicaid.gov)

² Ohio Administrative Code 5122-29-15.1, Adult, family, and youth certified peer supporter, effective April 7, 2022. codes.ohio.gov

Youth peer support, and credible messengers

Young adults supporting young people, and a related role that shares the same roots.

Youth peer supporters are young adults with lived experience in youth-serving systems who support young people going through something similar. Ohio's Certified Youth Peer Supporter rule describes someone with “lived experience with the behavioral health care system and other child or youth serving systems,” at least 18 and no older than 30 at certification.¹

Youth peer support isn't adult peer support with younger people. For what's different, including youth voice, the systems young people move through, training, and supervision, see [Why Youth Peer Support Is Different at shareandsolve.app/#field-guides](https://shareandsolve.app/#field-guides).

Credible messengers

Credible messengers are mentors whose own life experience mirrors that of the young people they work with, most often in programs connected to the justice system.

Related, not the same

They share peer support's foundation of lived experience and trust. Their training, credentials, funding, and supervision usually work differently, so treat them as their own role. Some programs pair the credible messenger approach with youth peer certification, which adds a credential, shared standards, and a path to funding.

How credible messengers, youth and family peers, recovery coaches, and community health workers fit together is covered in [The Lived-Experience Workforce at shareandsolve.app/#field-guides](https://shareandsolve.app/#field-guides).

¹ Ohio Administrative Code 5122-29-15.1, Adult, family, and youth certified peer supporter, effective April 7, 2022. codes.ohio.gov

What the research shows

Research suggests peer support can help. The gains are real but modest, and the evidence is still growing.

Hope and empowerment	A 2014 review of trials found “some evidence” of positive effects on “measures of hope, recovery and empowerment,” though not consistently, and “little or no evidence” of effects on hospitalisation. ¹
Recovery	A 2023 meta-analysis found effects that were “small but significant” for clinical and personal recovery, and concluded: “Effects are modest, though consistent.” ²
Mixed, but promising	A 2024 review of reviews found that results “were mixed,” with “some evidence from meta-analyses that peer support may improve depression symptoms (particularly perinatal depression), self-efficacy, and recovery.” ³
Substance use	A 2019 review said findings “tentatively speak to the potential of peer supports,” including “increased treatment retention.” ⁴ A 2016 review of U.S. studies reported positive effects, and also pointed to weaknesses in how many studies were designed. ⁵

These reviews look at peer support broadly. When you fund or start a program, ask what evidence exists for the kind of peer support and the people you plan to serve.

¹ Lloyd-Evans et al., systematic review and meta-analysis, BMC Psychiatry 14:39, 2014.
² Smit et al., systematic review and meta-analysis, Psychological Medicine 53(11), 2023.
³ Cooper et al., systematic umbrella review, BMC Medicine 22:72, 2024.
⁴ Eddie et al., systematic review, Frontiers in Psychology 10:1052, 2019.
⁵ Bassuk et al., systematic review, Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment 63:1–9, 2016.

Where to go next

Free field guides at shareandsolve.app/#field-guides, by the role you play.

Agency leaders	Program Readiness Self-Assessment; Supervising Peer Supporters; Role Drift; Running Peer Support Online, Safely.
Funders and system planners	The Lived-Experience Workforce; Paying for the Work Between Claims; Keeping Your Peer Workforce.
School and court partners	Why Youth Peer Support Is Different; The Lived-Experience Workforce; From Certification to Employment; Role Drift.
Parents and caregivers	Why Youth Peer Support Is Different, to understand what a youth peer does, and this guide's family peer support page, to understand support for you.

Questions to ask any peer support program:

- ☐ Which kind of peer support is this: adult, family, or youth?
- ☐ What lived experience and training do the peers have?
- ☐ Who supervises the peers, and how often?
- ☐ What do peers do here, and what don't they do?
- ☐ How does the program know it's working?



Starting or growing a peer support program? Blueprints, step-by-step toolkits for program leaders, are at shareandsolve.app/#blueprints.

ABOUT

Share+Solve and Peer Bridge

Share+Solve and Peer Bridge help organizations run their own youth peer support programs. They don't replace your peer supporters, your training, or your program. They give the work you already do a safe, supervised home.

Share+Solve

Where peers and young people connect: messaging, check-ins, goals, and meet-ups, with a one-tap 988 call button on the home screen.

Peer Bridge

Where supervisors see the whole program: caseloads, check-ins, escalations, and program-level reporting.

Private conversations between peers and young people stay between them. Your organization controls its program data, and deletion requests are handled through the platform.

Built by John Dellick, MBA, a nationally recognized peer support professional with nearly a decade in youth peer support and behavioral health.



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