

**Peer Support Strategies**

In addition to the ways in which we take care of ourselves, peer support is a useful strategy for coping and stress management among lay counsellors. Peer support involves support and assistance amongst team members at the same level.

As a lay counsellor, it is often helpful to know that other team members have the same feelings and reactions, worries or doubts. It is likely that the team members are also familiar with the work surroundings, the nature of the job and the particular stresses associated with it. Sometimes it feels easier to ask a peer at the same level for support than a supervisor or manager. Together, peers can be creative in developing strategies that will work well in a particular agency or in a specific situation.

There are many different types of peer support, including:

* Buddy systems
* Group peer support meetings
* Trained peer supporters

In all cases, peer support strategies can be very effective in creating a good, open working atmosphere amongst colleagues, where helpers feel understood and supported by each other.

**Tips for peer supporters**

Working in stressful situations, all members of the team need to be supportive of each other. The following tips can help all lay counsellors to offer peer support in the best way – you may want to use the list as part of your messages or distribute it as a hand out:

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| 1. **Be available** | If you are asked to provide support, try to be available. Although not everyone will want to talk, people who have been through a stressful experience usually appreciate knowing someone is there for them. Be available without being intrusive. |
| 2. **Manage the situation and locate resources** | If needed, help to make sure the person is safe, protected, has some privacy and has access to the help they need, e.g. a doctor if they are injured. |
| 3. **Provide information** | Provide the person with accurate information, if you have it, in order to help them put their situation in a more objective and manageable perspective. |
| 4. **Assist a person to establish personal control** | Respect the person’s ability to make decisions and manage the situation. Listen and support them as an equal colleague in making decisions. Allow them to express feelings without judgment. |
| 5. **Give encouragement** | Some people feel guilty, blame themselves or lose a sense of self-esteem during stressful situations. Encourage the person to have a more positive view, by offering objective, alternative explanations and thoughts. |
| 6. **Maintain confidentiality** | Confidentiality is a cornerstone of all peer support. It is essential to the integrity of the entire process. Do not share your colleague’s story with others or provide details about them to others. If other concerned volunteers ask questions, suggest they speak directly to the person. |
| 7. **Provide follow-up** | Sometimes it may be appropriate to provide some follow-up for the person you are helping, by giving them a call or checking with them in person. Be low-key and non-intrusive when providing follow-up, but do keep any promises you make to be in touch. |