Post-Secondary Peer Support Training Curriculum

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Including B.C.'s Peer Support Standards of Practice

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See [Appendix 1](#) for the list of authors, contributors, and advisory group members.

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We would also like to acknowledge the original *Provincial Peer Support Worker Training Curriculum* was a co-creation between B.C. community peers, Jenn Cusick, BCcampus and the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions.

Introduction

Peer support is an evidence-based service model used in many different sectors across British Columbia. The purpose of this document is to outline the way peer support has commonly been used in B.C., including by health authorities and community-based organizations. We will also look at the different ways it is currently being utilized in post-secondary institutions and share some ideas and guidelines for integrating peer support in existing student service programs.

In 2021, the B.C. Ministry of Mental Health and BCcampus released the Provincial Peer Support Worker Training Program (written by Jenn Cusick) for mental health and substance use peer support workers. The Post-Secondary Peer Support Training Curriculum, and this document, are adapted from that training.

Currently, most health authorities in B.C. and several non-profits have included peer support in their service delivery for people with mental health and substance use issues. Though the aforementioned training was written for mental health and substance use community programs, peer support is also becoming more common in workplaces. There are peer support programs available for first responders, and others working in high stress jobs. There are also peer support programs or groups in B.C. for people struggling with eating disorders as well as health issues including cancer and diabetes.

> We encourage you to read the B.C. Healthy Minds/Healthy Campuses document called, *A Guide to Peer Support Programs on Post-Secondary Campuses* (2017), as we reference it in this document.

This training is inline with the Mental Health Commission of Canada's National Standard for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students.

A Note on the History of Peer Support

"Peer-developed peer support is a non-hierarchical approach with origins in informal self-help and consciousness-raising groups organized in the 1970s by people in the ex-patients' movement. It arose in reaction to negative experiences with mental health treatment and dissatisfaction with the limits of the mental patient role. Peer support among people with psychiatric histories is closely intertwined with experiences of powerlessness within the mental health system and with activism promoting human rights and alternatives to the medical model." (Darby Penney, 2018) *

If you are a peer support worker, know that you are a part of an international movement with a rich and powerful history. It is a history to be uncovered, studied, and revered. The movement has had a huge impact on shifting mental health and substance use systems toward becoming more recovery-focused today.

Glossary of Terms

Colonization: The practice of domination of another culture. Colonization is when a country violently invades another and claims the lands as its own. New inhabitants move in, displace, control and oppress people who were indigenous to the land.

Compassion: According to UC Berkeley's *Greater Good Magazine*, "Compassion literally means, "to suffer together." Among emotion researchers, it is defined as "the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering."

Critical Thinking: The disciplined process of actively processing information, with the intention of deliberately trying to suspend one's own judgements. Critical thinking involves conceptualizing, analyzing, synthesizing, reflecting on, and/or evaluating information.

Decolonization: The process of examining oppressive beliefs about Indigenous Peoples. It's about releasing oppressive practices, and supporting Indigenous Peoples to reclaim land, culture, language, community, family, history, and traditions that were, and continue to be taken away through the process of colonization.

Empathy: Empathy is about perspective-taking or mirroring someone else's feelings. Empathy is about sensing someone's feelings and imagining oneself in someone else's shoes. Empathy doesn't always motivate us to action, as compassion does, but it is often the first step towards compassion.

Equality: The state of all people having equal value in terms of status, rights and opportunities.

Equity: Promotes overall fairness. Fairness can only work if all people start from the same place. For people who are experiencing systemic oppression, they might need extra support to get them to an equal place of opportunity as someone not experiencing systemic oppression. In getting everyone to an equal place, some people might receive more support or resources than others.

Generosity of Assumption: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words

Holding Space: This means to be with someone without expectations or a desire to fix or save. It means that we choose to be fully present without taking the other person's power away. When

we are holding space for someone, we are humble, and we mindfully challenge any judgements or assumptions we may find stirring up for us.

Humility: This means we approach a person or situation knowing that there is much we don't know or understand, and we are not better than anyone else.

Identity-first language: This is common with specific disability communities. Identity-first language was born from the Disability Pride movement, because it is something to be embraced, proud of, and not shamed for. The descriptor is in the identity category. For example, "Autistic" is preferred over "person with autism." "Deaf person" is preferred over "person with deafness."

Implicit bias: Judgements, prejudices, and attitudes that live deep in our subconscious and affect our actions and our understanding.

Intentional: Done with purpose–deliberate and consciously.

Lived Experience: In the context of mental health and substance use, this means having personal lived experience with a mental health issue, substance use, and/or trauma issue.

Peer-Delivered Services: Many services can be delivered by people with lived experience, while holding a peer, or mutual approach. These services aren't always formal peer support. Some examples of peer-delivered services are employment counselors, substance use counselors, job coaches, peer navigators, clerical workers, or organizational leaders.

Person-centered: This is a process of service delivery that puts the person receiving services in the center of their own care. This means professionals see the person as an expert on their own life. This means that professionals continually keep them at the center of all decision-making that affects their well-being.

Person-first language: Puts the person before the diagnosis. This is about avoiding labels to identify a person. For example: Person with diabetes, instead of "diabetic." Or person with schizophrenia, instead of "schizophrenic."

Social Determinants of Health: From the Public Health Agency of Canada, "The social determinants of health influence the health of populations. They include income and social status; social support networks; education; employment/working conditions; social environments; physical environments; personal health practices and coping skills; healthy child development; gender; and culture."

Trauma: The word "trauma" means wound in Greek. Trauma doesn't refer to a specific event, but rather the psychological feeling of overwhelm and helplessness that may follow a traumatic event or series of events. An event is considered traumatic when our experience of it overwhelms our capacity to cope with, process or integrate it. Traumatic events can be difficult to define because

the same event may be more traumatic for some people than for others – i.e. they may overwhelm. Trauma can result from a single distressing event (e.g., car crash, violent assault, death of a loved one, war or natural disaster) or from a long-term, chronic pattern (e.g., ongoing childhood neglect, sexual or physical abuse).

Trauma-Informed: This means that a person or agency has deliberate intention to create an environment that is very safe for anyone who has a trauma history and can be triggered and re-traumatized.

Worldview: The lens through which one sees the world, based on all their past life experiences.

PEER SUPPORT SERVICES IN PSI: AN OVERVIEW

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A Pathway to Hope

The BC Provincial Peer Support Worker Training Project (2021) emerged out of an identified need for peer support training resources in the document A Pathway to Hope: A roadmap for making mental health and addictions care better for people in British Columbia (Ministry of Mental Health, 2019).

The following is an excerpt from page 29 of the document, outlining Priority Actions:

Develop peer support worker training resources	Made-in-B.C. lived experience support worker training resources will: • Recognize the valuable contributions that peer support workers make in supporting people in healing and recovery. • Incorporate the practice principles described within the strategy. • Provide employers and post-secondary institutions with provincially approved training resources. • Reflect the diverse needs of the population through the application of an equity lens. • Enhance lived experience support worker training quality and consistency across the province.

What is Peer Support?

"Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. Peer support is not based on psychiatric models and diagnostic criteria. It is about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain."
~Mead, Hilton, & Curtis (2001)

Peer support is a supportive relationship grounded in the principles of mutuality, empathy, and connection. Peer support harnesses the personal lived experience of a difficult life situation to create a mutually supportive relationship.

Peer support is a paradigm shift away from a clinical focus. It is grounded in connection and takes a horizontal approach to support.

Peer support is about making sense of one's own pain, and channeling that experience empathically to walk alongside, acknowledge, connect with, and support someone else who also understands the pain of a mental health, substance use, and/or trauma issue.

Peer support services are diverse and adaptable to serve many demographics. However, there are commonalities in all types of peer support service delivery. Peer support services are:

- Always voluntary & self-directed
- Based on a shared lived experience
- Rooted in hope
- Relationship based (not clinical)
- Recovery focused
- Grounded in the action of moving toward wholeness, rather than away from illness
- Different from peer-delivered services, which are services delivered by someone with lived experience but not necessarily rooted in relationship-based connections, which is essential to peer support.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada, and the BC Healthy Minds Healthy Campuses document *A Guide to Peer Support Programs on Post-Secondary Campuses* defines peer support this way:

> Peer support involves at least two individuals with a shared or similar experience, engaging in a relationship for the development and growth of both parties. Two defining factors of peer support are an independence from societal stigma and professional

authorities. Most peer support groups address societal stigma by sharing personal stories that validate an individual's experience as normal or understandable. Often these groups are formed around a specific issue or shared challenge, such as marginalization based on race or sexual orientation. These groups tend to focus on interacting with and improving the social structure that oppresses them.

Regardless of the identity of its members, peer support groups almost always focus on anti-labelling and the empowerment of marginalized persons. Peer support is similar to other forms of support, such as self-help, professional consultation, and social networks, but differs in that it offers members of a community the opportunity to connect with others who have similar experiences and learn from them directly.

Peer Services in Post-Secondary Institutions

British Columbia mental health and substance use peer support services have a long history. Today, most government and nonprofit clinical mental health and substance use services include peer support services. This includes both community care, and in-patient hospital care. Here in B.C. some of the earliest formal, health authority funded peer support programs began in the 1990s. Although some agencies are further ahead than others, in general peer support in the community is now viewed as a valid career choice. Peer support workers receive competitive compensation and benefits. There is a common understanding of what peer support is, and what it isn't within the healthcare sector.

Currently, peer support in post-secondary campuses is not standardized, and there is much variance between programs. Some peers are volunteers and others are paid.

Peer support can mean varying things within each post-secondary institution. The purpose of this document is to offer a framework that can be used to provide definition and context to the different roles within the umbrella of peer support in PSI settings. In order to create continuity, it's important that institutions work from a similar framework, and that there is some level of cohesion with peer support in the larger community.

Each campus has a diverse set of needs, available resources and infrastructure for the delivery of services. We recognize that students are busy and have limited availability to provide peer services. Some campuses may deliver a more traditional peer support model, and others may offer a more streamlined resource-based service. Some campuses offer drop-in peer services, and other peer support workers might have ongoing relationships with students. Therefore, peer support will continue to look different throughout BC campuses.

The aim of this training curriculum and [facilitators guide](#) is to provide information for a large range of campus peer support services.

While aspiring toward a shared framework regarding peer support roles and values, each campus can decide what is relevant to their program and feel free to leave out anything that is not applicable within their context.

What Sets Peer Support Apart

Peer support is about tapping into one's own lived experience of struggle and resilience while

using the wisdom gained from it to support someone else who is on a similar journey. Though many healthcare clinicians, campus staff, and social workers have lived experience, not all of them are able to share it within the scope of their role. This is what makes peer support unique. The people in the support roles have all been through something similar and are free to share their story.

When we are struggling with something like severe anxiety, depression, managing a chronic illness like diabetes, or dealing with a substance use issue, it's a gift to have someone to talk to and listen to us who personally understands what we are going through. It is inspiring to see someone come out the other side of a situation that we feel stuck in.

The following is a simple adaptation of the definition of peer support worker that is used within community mental health and substance use programs:

A peer support worker is someone who:

1. Has lived experience,
2. Can draw from their lived experience and
3. Engages in a mutually supportive relationship with someone struggling with a similar issue.

While the service scope may look different depending on the unique people within the peer support relationship, the relationships are always intentional and purposeful. Everything begins with connection and mutuality. Peer support is about coming alongside one another and walking together.

In the article, *Defining "Peer Support": Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research* (2018), author Darby Penney provides a great definition of peer support:

> Broadly defined, "peer support" refers to a process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experience (Riessman, 1989). A "peer" is an equal, someone with whom one shares demographic or social similarities. "Support" expresses the kind of deeply felt empathy, encouragement, and assistance that people with shared experiences can offer one another within a reciprocal relationship.

Peer support is all about relationship and connection. What brings together a peer and a peer support worker is the lived experience of struggle and the desire for growth.

We recognize that within PSI peer support services there will be less time available for an ongoing relationship. Many connections will be a one-time conversation. However, we also recognize that there is still a relationship and connection that can be formed in a very short-term

exchange. Many people receive support from someone just once, and it can impact their lives in a positive way. Because of this, within this training we still choose to focus on building capacity for relationships. These skills that students receive through this peer support training are also transferable to their relationships outside of peer support services, and could be applicable in their future employment.

The Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training in British Columbia recognizes that many post secondary students are struggling with their mental health. There has been a significant effort to increase mental health resources within the sector, including counselling through the here2talk app and other similar initiatives. Peer support services in mental health are evidence-based best practices, and integrating peer programs can provide a significant impact on the mental health of post-secondary students.

Peer support practices, applied with intention and adherence to the standards of practice as outlined in this document, can be a major catalyst to support change. That change can show up as personal individual growth, overall systems change, and in the development of more inclusive communities.

Peer Support vs. Peer- or Student–Delivered Services

There are several different roles under the umbrella of peer support. Some campuses may have funding to pay students, others may offer volunteer positions. In this section, we'll take a look at some of these roles.

Traditional Peer Support

Traditional peer support is when people with lived *experience (mental health/substance use/ eating disorder/health issue)* receive training to provide support to others who are also struggling. The person receiving peer services is dealing with a similar condition and is likely not as far along in their journey. It can be encouraging for them to engage with someone who has walked a similar path and come out the other side. Sufficient and intensive training is an important aspect of this form of peer support.

Traditional peer support services can be delivered in different ways, including:

- **One-to-one drop-in services:** The peer support workers take shifts at a student center, and work with anyone who comes in looking for support or resources.
- **One-to-one ongoing support:** Peer support workers are assigned students to work with on an ongoing basis. The length of time should be established at the start of the relationship, as there is likely a limited amount of available sessions. It's important that people know about

that from the onset of service.

- **Group facilitation:** Many campuses provide regular support-type groups for students led by a peer support worker. If this is the case, the peer will need traditional peer support training, and some guidance in facilitation.
- **One-time events:** These events can be workshops, or gatherings that are peer-led.

Some campuses simply do not have the infrastructure to run a more traditional peer support program. Utilizing peer support in whatever capacity possible is the best thing we can do.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada's document *Making the Case for Peer Support* (2016) states the following about peer support services.

> We now know what helps people to recover. While many acknowledge there is a role for mainstream services and medical treatments, people are virtually unanimous about the paramount importance of personal resourcefulness, personal support and self-belief in their recovery. Peer support initiatives are probably the best evidence-based approach to foster these. (pg. 106)

Here is another excerpt from the document:

> Peer support works. Peer support is effective.
>
> People with lived experience of mental health problems or illnesses can offer huge benefits to each other. We found that the development of personal resourcefulness and self-belief, which is the foundation of peer support, can not only improve people's lives but can also reduce the use of formal mental health, medical and social services. By doing so, peer support can save money.
>
> Canadian research has contributed significantly to our knowledge base. Several experimental and quasi-experimental studies have demonstrated not only the benefits to individuals involved, but also to the mental health system and communities as a whole, by saving millions of tax-payers dollars through reducing the use of the most expensive types of services. (pg 4)

Some of the challenges that make implementing a tradition peer support program challenging for post-secondary campuses are:

- Lack of funding and staffing to provide mentoring and supervision for peer support workers
- Limited amount of time for training based on resources, facilitators, and student availability
- Lack of available physical spaces appropriate for offering confidential peer support services
- Limited student availability: Students are busy. Some campuses only encourage student

involvement from second year up, and that means the time people can serve in peer support is three years maximum. This leads us to;

- High turnover for peer support workers

Student-Delivered Services

On many post-secondary campuses it is common to classify peer support as students supporting students. When used this way, the term peer may not refer to someone who has lived experience with mental health or substance use. The commonality is that both people are students, even though they might have very different backgrounds and life experiences. Students supporting students in this way would be considered student-delivered services.

Student-delivered services, however, are not the same thing as peer support. Student-delivered services are less focused on mental health and emotional support, and more targeted toward accomplishing specific tasks and providing resources. It's important to be clear about the difference to avoid confusion.

Role Definition

In this section, we'll look at some ways to label the different roles that can be housed under Post-Secondary Peer Support Services. In the Facilitation Guide, we will cover the minimum level of training needed for each. We recognize that there may sometimes be significant overlap between roles; doing our best to clarify roles and ensure appropriate support and training is key. Program coordinators may benefit from reflecting on which parts of these training modules may be relevant for student leaders from a variety of roles.

It's important to acknowledge that sharing stories from lived experience is the basis of all roles under the umbrella of peer support and peer-delivered services. Many peer support volunteers/ staff will have lived experience with mental health, substance use, eating disorders, trauma, health issues, disability, etc.. Others might be tapping into their experience of coming from a different culture, or simply being a student.

Regardless, utilizing lived experience is what differentiates peer support from clinical or administration staff. Sharing stories in an authentic, open, honest, and empathetic way breaks down hierarchies. Some of the following roles will require more intensive training than others, and therefore some will be more equipped to deal with difficult situations than others. Supervision is always important, so that peer support volunteers/staff can feel supported when difficult situations come up.

Peer Support Worker/Facilitator: Someone *with lived experience (e.g. mental health, substance*

use, eating disorder, trauma, health issue, disability) who is providing emotional support and a listening ear to another student who has a similar struggle.

Student Support Worker: This is a student who wishes to support other students with various aspects of student life. *Though there is no required element of mental health to this role, it might still come up from time to time.*

Student Resource Navigator: These students would be trained to support other students in finding and accessing relevant resources both inside and outside the campus. They are trained about campus policies and procedures and support other students with navigating the system.

International Peer Support Mentor: This worker *is also an international student who has had some time to adjust to life on campus* and has settled into the local community. They work with new international students and share their lived experience of adjusting to a new culture with them.

International Student Peer Mentor: This *is a student who is local to the area, or from another city in Canada.* They are not peer in the sense that they have a similar lived experience. However, they are interested in supporting new international students to get comfortable on campus and want to support them to get plugged into student life.

Peer Academic Coaches: Students who provide support with topics such as time management, goal-setting, study strategies, giving presentations, note-taking, test-taking and dealing with exam anxiety. *Though there is no required mental health element to this role, it might still come up from time to time.*

Peer Educator: Students who lead workshops, small groups, or even provide one-to-one support on a specific topic related to student life. Topics can range from self-care, health tips, academics, writing skills, finances, studying habits, adjusting to student life. Minimum training for peer educators will depend on the topics they are covering in their sessions.

Core Values of Peer Support

Despite the diversity and the potential differences in practice, there are common values and principles that are fundamental to all peer support.

Hope and Wholeness for All

Hope is the spark that motivates us to step into the realm of possibility. All growth and change, whether we realize it or not, begins with hope.

In peer support we choose to believe that everyone we work with has the capacity for healing, growth, and life satisfaction. Hope is a core value of this work, and we choose to nurture and cultivate it in ourselves and others.

We understand that healing and growth don't come easily, but that holding onto hope can make all the difference in someone's life.

Hope is different than optimism. There is much more to hope than looking at the bright side. Hope is messy and uncertain. Acting on hope is brave and courageous, and always involves risk of some kind. Hope is not sentimental. It's gritty and can sometimes feel scary.

> *"Wholeness does not mean perfection;*
> *it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that*
> *human wholeness–mine, yours, ours–need not be a utopian dream, if we can use*
> *devastation as a seedbed for new life."*
> *~Parker J. Palmer, (A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life)*

Wholeness means a coming together of all the parts of ourselves. It's about seeing our full selves as a wonderful whole, including our strengths, giftings, AND our imperfections.
In peer support we believe that this kind of hope and wholeness is accessible for everyone.

Hope and wholeness for all includes the practice of cultivating compassion for both self and others.

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known–to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save us.

Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation. *A mutual approach means that peer support workers always avoid advice-giving.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	We support the facilitation and creation of an ecology where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.
Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.
	This curiosity isn't fueled by personal gain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support.
	We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption* to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

Trauma-Informed Approach

All peer support services serve others with a trauma-informed approach. This means that we understand that trauma is pervasive, and we serve people with the intent of avoiding retraumatization.

It is very important that peer services are delivered in a way that supports safety, predictability, transparency, and choice at all times. Collaboration and mutuality are also important with a trauma-informed approach.

The standards of practice for peer support services included in this document, when applied and practiced, create a trauma-informed foundation.

Understanding Trauma

Often when we think of the word trauma, we think of it as a particular event. A stressful event causes trauma, but emotional and psychological trauma is actually the result of a stressful event. We define trauma as the emotional response following a stressful event.

Psychological and emotional trauma can leave someone feeling scared, unable to cope, helpless, overwhelmed, numb, and/or disconnected from self and others, and distrustful. Trauma can be caused by a threat to one's physical safety or psychological safety. Sometimes simply witnessing someone else's harm can also cause emotional and psychological trauma.

> The website *Help.org* says, "*It's not the objective circumstances that determine whether an event is traumatic, but your subjective emotional experience of the event. The more frightened and helpless you feel, the more likely you are to be traumatized.*"

It is estimated that 76% of Canadians report having experienced a traumatic event during their lifetime.

SAMHSA's Trauma-Informed Approach

According to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach (2014), an organization that takes a trauma-informed approach is expected to:

- **REALIZE** the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for healing.
- **RECOGNIZE** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, staff, and others involved with the system.
- **RESPOND** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices, and settings.
- Actively **RESIST RETRAUMATIZATION.**
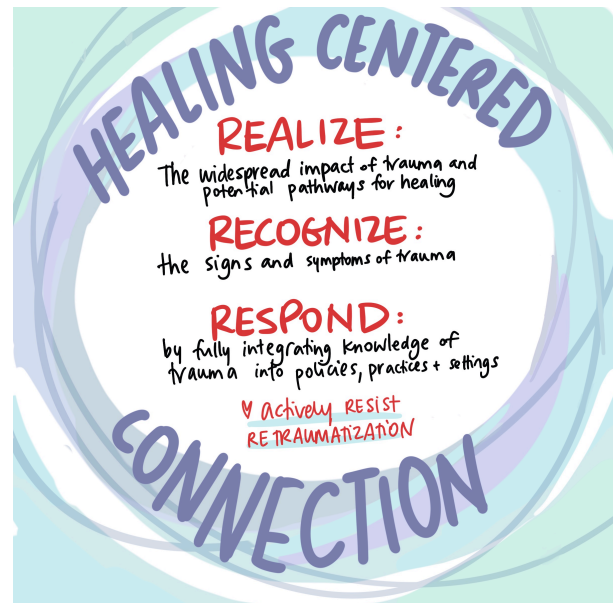
Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach

The same SAMHSA document, Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach (2014), lists the following six key principles of a trauma-informed approach:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment, Voice and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

We understand that all growth comes with discomfort. We recognize that this kind of discomfort doesn't always feel good, but it can still be safe. Peer support services must be intentional at creating environments where people can feel safe enough to risk the discomfort of growth.

Mutuality and Peer Support

Clinical services such as psychiatric or professional counselling are by nature hierarchical. Clinical providers are in a position of power over the person they are serving, and there are some

important ethical guidelines in place to protect those people receiving services. Most clinicians are trained not to share personal stories or anecdotes, whereas peer support workers are encouraged to share. In fact, peer support has a totally different grid than clinical services.

Embracing mutuality does not equate to friendship with people we support. Friendship grows organically over time with people who choose to contribute equally to a chosen relationship. When we use the word "mutuality" in peer support, we are speaking more about a balance of power. Both people must come from an equal place. Both come into the relationship not as experts, but as equals. There is an aspect of learning together that comes with peer-based roles; this means the peer support worker does not have to have it all together. It's ok to say, "I don't know" and to seek out the answer together. The peer support worker must not come from a place of "power over" someone, but rather they must intentionally walk alongside someone with a spirit of humility and reciprocity. Embracing the core value of mutuality is about our attitude towards another person. We are not there to fix, save, or direct someone else. Instead, we walk alongside, share our own stories when it is supportive, and we offer support and a listening ear.

Mutuality doesn't negate the need for clear, and firm boundaries. Boundaries are necessary in this work. Please refer to the Boundaries module for further learning about this topic.

It's also very important to have regular conversations with your supervisor and your team about what boundaries must look like in a post-secondary setting where there can be lots of overlap with relationships. Talking about these issues is very important to prevent messy, and awkward situations.

It is important to note that many peer support workers are paid, so there is still somewhat of a power differential there, and boundary work is important.

When we come to peer support with a more clinical worldview, the idea of mutuality can be hard to wrap our heads around.

What do we mean by mutuality in peer support?

- Mutuality is reciprocal. We are walking beside someone, rather than in front pulling or behind pushing them.
- Mutuality means that both people are learning. A peer support worker doesn't need to have it all figured out. Setbacks are a part of life, and it's ok not to have the answers. The role of a peer support worker is NOT to give advice. Rather, our role is to support our peer to find and trust their own knowing.
- Mutuality means that there is give and take in the relationship. Many of the people we support always find themselves on the receiving end of support. If we unpack that a little bit, constantly being on the receiving end could mean that there is an assumption of a problem.

Such an assumption could be interpreted as "you are not in a position to give right now, because you are broken." Healthy community relationships require both people to RECEIVE and to GIVE. The relationship can crumble if it becomes one-sided. Creating space for someone to give is an important part of peer support. All humans grow compassion, empathy, courage, and self-worth when we learn and have opportunities to give.

Self-Determination

Within each of us is an innate potential to flourish. Like all the potential held in a seed, we have a deep-rooted propensity towards growth. However, many things we face in life steal from the ecology that encourages that potential to grow. It's also important to note that within mental health and substance use systems, there are many blockades inhibiting growth. We know that whether a seed grows depends on the conditions where that seed is planted; if the seed doesn't get enough good soil, sun or water, it simply won't grow.

Peer support is committed to creating ecologies where people can feel safe to tap into their inner wisdom and trust the process of taking agency of one's life.

Self-determination is a person's right to determine their own life and make their own choices about anything that affects their well-being.

Self-determination is about motivation. We know from Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory, entitled *Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being* (2000), that motivation is fueled either.

- Extrinsically (by something outside ourselves–like a reward or punishment; it's less about satisfaction or enjoyment and more about getting something in return)
- Intrinsically (fueled by purpose and meaning).

Lasting change comes through intrinsic motivation. However, we recognize creating ecologies that support intrinsic motivation are sadly uncommon.

Peer support workers can play a big role in facilitating ecologies where self-determination can

flourish. Peer support is about relationship and connection; we do not fix, save, or rescue anyone. We do not give advice, because we can't possibly know all the details of what someone is dealing with. We always have a limited perspective. Instead we support people to discover their inner teacher, so that they can make decisions for themselves.

When we choose to be attuned to the suffering of others, we can grow our compassion.

See the Venn diagram below. The diagram features Compassion (and the desire to alleviate suffering) on one side, and Self-Determination (a person's right for sovereignty) on the other. In the role of peer support worker, it is essential that we balance the compassion we feel with supporting someone's self-determination. This means choosing to be thoughtful and intentional about how we offer support. It is important to remember that each person is an expert on themselves even if they have lost their way and are not in touch with their inner wisdom. Creating the ecology of self-determination supports them on the journey to find and begin to trust their own inner wisdom.

intersection of compassion and self-determination

COMPASSION
The desire to alleviate the suffering of others

SELF-DETERMINATION
A person's right for sovereignty

We sit with the discomfort of choosing not to fix or save.

We acknowledge.

We walk alongside with a spirit of humility and mutuality. We are mindful of our biases.

We utilize our compassion to aid in the cultivation of ecologies that support the growth and practice of self-determination.
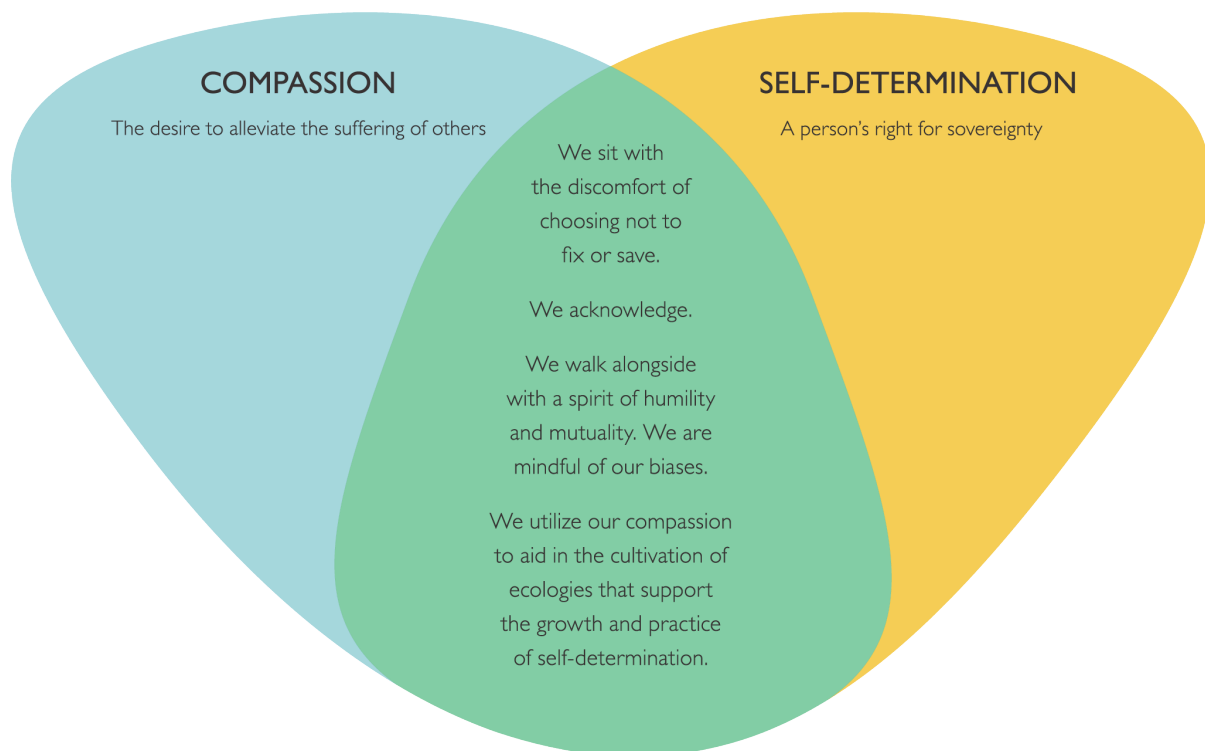
In peer support work we intentionally choose to avoid trying to fix or save anyone. Instead, we

walk alongside others with a spirit of humility, mutuality, and interconnection. We choose to contribute to the creation of an ecology in which people we support can find hope, unearth their strengths, learn to recognize their resiliency, and begin to trust their own inner wisdom. Like a seed, we have the potential to transform when the ecology supports self-determination and interconnection.

Worldview

(Including judgements, assumptions, and implicit biases)

> "A *worldview is a way of viewing or interpreting all of reality. It is an interpretive framework through which or by which one makes sense of the data of life and the world.*"
> ~*Norman Geisler and William Watkins*

We acknowledge that everyone comes to the table with their own worldview based on their past experiences. In this work it is our goal to choose to see worldview as neutral and non-binary. It is simply a lens through which one sees the world.

In the work of peer support, we choose to avoid using the term "non-judgmental" because we recognize that judgements, assumptions and biases are part of the human experience.

In order to make sense of the immense stimulation that comes our way on any given day, our brains need to create containers or categories. If we didn't do this, we would be overwhelmed by all the sensory data that comes at us all day long.

Our past experiences lay the groundwork for making meaning from the information that comes our way. It is impossible to remove our past experiences from the way we currently see the world. The meanings we create tend to be automatic reactions. Our brains fire with assumptions and judgements without us having to think consciously about the situation.

Neuroscientist Beau Lotto explores this topic of perception in his book *Deviate: The Science of Seeing Differently* (2017) where he writes that our brains aren't wired to be objective. Instead, we are wired to create categories so we can make sense of the world, and therefore survive.

This wiring is key to our survival in the world. (Consider the quick thinking we need when we're behind the steering wheel of a car. And thankfully we don't have to relearn how to make coffee every day). However, though these categories we create can be essential for our survival, it is also important that we NOTICE when biases and assumptions come up – especially when they are directed at people or people groups. This noticing is the basis of mindful living.

Instead of creating a guideline of being non-judgmental, which is not attainable, this peer support training curriculum guides peer support workers to become more aware of the

judgements, biases and assumptions we all have. It is essential when doing this work that we recognize when they surface with the people we support, that we learn how to question our biases and assumptions, and consciously do the work to challenge and change them.

This is how we begin to recognize our implicit biases and then move into deconstructing them. The only way we can begin to work with our implicit biases is to bring them out into the open.

Choosing to face our judgements, assumptions and biases, and challenging them are huge steps in creating a safe environment where deep connection can occur. When we deeply understand that all human beings judge, we can mindfully choose to challenge our assumptions because we no longer feel the need to take a defensive stance. With this approach we are seeking to understand another person, rather than seeking to be right. This humility creates greater connection and is a salve within all types of conflict.

> We recognize that no one is perfect, we are all learning, and we create space for that. When connection breaks down, we acknowledge it and work to rebuild it. We commit to learn from our mistakes and do better.

Remember – Peer Support Is Not Clinical

While we've mentioned this above, it's worth repeating that peer support in post-secondary campuses should never be clinical. Since a clinical, hierarchical approach is so prevalent in our broader society and culture, it will take time, intention and work to notice when we're acting or reacting with a clinical lens and shift back toward a peer support lens.

> In peer support, the intention is to walk alongside someone who needs a little bit of support and listen. It is essential that peer support never moves into a counselling situation. It's important to have good boundaries and avoid advice-giving. Connection to the campus counselling department is important, and if at any point the person you are working with seems to need professional counselling support, please refer them.

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Standards of Practice for Peer Support Workers

The following BC peer support standards of practice emerged from the provincial peer support project. They are written for peer support workers to guide their practice whether they work in the community or on a campus. They are also meant to be a guide for supervisors and leaders to support the oversight of peer services.

Depending on your role on campus, some of these standards will pertain to you, and some will not. Make sure to check in with your supervisor regarding the guidelines for your role.

Standards of Practice Components & Competencies

A. Peer Specialized Proficiencies

1. Demonstrates understanding that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to recovery and wholeness. Each person needs to discover what goals, values, and beliefs work for them. Peer support workers recognize that others' paths may be quite different from their own.
2. Demonstrates an awareness and understanding of self-determination and is able to apply it to the peer relationship. Understands that advice-giving and fixing are antithetical to self-determination.
3. Demonstrates a commitment to mutuality. The peer support worker does, however, acknowledge and recognize that there can still be a power differential when in a formal role. The peer support worker actively works to create mutuality and equality, while honouring boundaries and deeply respecting the well-being of the recipient of the services.
4. Chooses to self-disclose and share aspects of their personal story in a way that supports the building of the relationship, connection, and inspiring hope. Understands the importance of avoiding the sharing of traumatic details that can trigger a stress response in someone else.
5. Engages in active ongoing learning.

B. Principles of Supporting Wellness, Wholeness, Recovery and Social Belonging

1. Actively creates and engages in self-care practices that support their own well-being.
2. Demonstrates awareness of their own stressors and triggers and has a plan to support their own well-being through those challenges.
3. Actively chooses to practice empathy and compassion in interactions.

4. Recognizes the importance of clear, well-defined boundaries. Practices co-creating boundaries with the person they are supporting. *Ask for support from your program supervisor when needed.
5. Demonstrates knowledge of recovery-oriented practices including but not limited to harm reduction, trauma-informed care, and the importance of person-first language.
6. Supports peers to discover strengths, explore new possibilities, and continue to build resilience.

C. Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity

1. Is aware of, and actively reflects on their own set of values and beliefs.
2. Is mindfully aware that they have a set of personal biases, and actively makes space for different perspectives.
3. Understands and can apply intercultural sensitivity towards all cultural groups. Works to avoid stereotyping.
4. Understands the harmful effects of colonization and privilege and works to reduce harm.
5. Understands how stigma and the Social Determinants of Health can affect someone's life experience.
6. Respects a diversity of modalities and interventions, even if different than their own personal approach.

D. Facilitating Communication and Connection

1. Demonstrates an understanding of, and sensitivity towards the effect of personal communication style on others.
2. Communicates clearly, respectfully, and effectively through spoken, written, and electronic modalities
3. Recognizes the importance of, and chooses to use, person-first language[1] in regard to physical and mental health challenges.
4. Uses identity-first language* for those who prefer that.
5. Understands the importance of community and belonging that is needed for one's sense of well-being and supports community inclusion.
6. Actively practices compassionate and empathetic communication.

E. Collaboration and Ethical Practice

1. Works respectfully and effectively with clinical and community staff, as well as with the peer's personal supporters.
2. Demonstrates an understanding of the non-negotiable nature of the Code of Conduct.
3. Effectively collaborates with stakeholders in a way that supports the overall existence of, reputation and respect for peer support within the province.

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1. See [Glossary of Terms](#) for definitions.

Peer Support Canada's Code of Conduct

(Reprinted with permission from Peer Support Canada)[2]

Peer Support Canada is an organization that provides certification to peer support workers across Canada.

The following is the Code of Conduct that their certified peer supporters are required to follow:

- I will act ethically, according to the values and principles of peer support
- I will treat all people with respect and dignity I will respect human diversity and will foster non-discriminatory activities I will honour the rights, beliefs and personal values of individuals
- I will behave with honesty and integrity in providing support to peers
- I will respect the privacy of individuals and maintain confidentiality within the limitations of program policies and the law e.g. potential harm to self or others
- I will not knowingly expose a peer to harm I will not take advantage of the peer relationship for personal benefit, material or financial gain
- I will respect the boundaries of peer support work and will not engage in romantic or sexual relationships with the peers that I support
- I will not provide peer support in a manner that negatively affects the public's confidence in peer support

2. Used with permission. *Peer Support Canada Code of Conduct*. Peer Support Canada. https://peersupportcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Peer_Support_Code_of_Conduct-ENG.pdf

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

INTRODUCTION TO PSI PEER SUPPORT TRAINING

Purpose of Module

To provide participants with a foundational overview of all the practices and knowledge that will be transferable to all the sections of this training.

In this pre-reading package, we will cover some bigger topics that will be referenced throughout the training.

Topics such as:

- Interconnection
- Empathy
- Dealing with uncertainty
- Hope, purpose, and possibility

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic.

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

You Are a Part of a Movement

Though peer support might be a new concept for you, it has a history spanning decades. One of the first formal peer support programs began in 1854 in London, England. However, peer support really started to gain attention in North America in the 1960s and 1970s.

Today we generally have good services for those struggling with mental health and substance use issues (though some people certainly fall through the cracks), but this hasn't always been the case. In the past people struggling with mental health and substance use issues have experienced extremely poor conditions, as well as horrible mistreatment from those who were supposed to provide support and services. Until the 1960s, it was common for people to be admitted to psychiatric hospitals indefinitely for things like depression and anxiety.

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of great change in North America. Many people were dissatisfied with broken social systems, and came together to challenge them. Youth and young adults – many of them university and college students – were often at the forefront of these movements, leading protests and making change.

This time saw the emergence of many important movements including:

- the Civil Rights movement
- Feminist movement, fighting for the rights of women
- Industrial workers movement
- Gay liberation movement
- Disability justice movement
- Anti-war movements

The psychiatric ex-patient movement was also born in this era, and was the start of peer support as we know it today. This movement has grown and influenced mental health systems in Canada and the U.S.. Because a collective of people spoke up about injustices and fought for change, today the mental health service people receive is a lot better than it once was. One of the mantras that came out of these movements is "Nothing About Us Without Us."

"Nothing About Us Without Us," a term born out of the disability movement, and it became a mantra for the peer support movement. Historically people who receive services have been left out of the decision making process by people in charge. "Nothing About us Without Us" is an important mantra that urges governing bodies to include people who receive services in every aspect of governance and decision making that impacts them.

It is very important as a participant in peer support that you know you are a part of something big and significant. It is an honour to be a part of this collective global movement.

A Paradigm Shift

"Broadly defined, "peer support" refers to a process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experience." ~Riessman, (1989)

"A "peer" is an equal, someone with whom one shares demographic or social similarities. "Support" expresses the kind of deeply felt empathy, encouragement, and assistance that people with shared experiences can offer one another within a reciprocal relationship." ~Penney, (2018)

From the Core Values:

> Mutuality: The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.

When discussing mental health support, for many people the first resources and relationships that come to mind are clinical relationships – with a psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor, etc. Clinical support has been the dominant mental health framework in recent history.

Peer support differs from clinical support in many important ways. The role of a peer support worker is fundamentally different from that of a clinician, and is especially evident in the distinctive goals of the peer relationship as compared with the goals of the clinical relationship. There can be a tendency to measure peer support roles against clinical roles; when we do, it can seem that peer support doesn't measure up. But looking at peer support through a clinical lens is unhelpful at best; in fact, when we speak of peer support, the paradigm is so different that it is almost like speaking a different language. Peer support workers fill a necessary gap in the system. When people with common lived experience come together, the connection that can happen is powerful, inspiring, and can fuel transformation.

"Me too." Hearing those two words can help us break through an ocean of loneliness, isolation, and shame.

When we are facing what feels like an insurmountable situation and we meet someone who has gone through a similar experience and come out the other side, we often experience a great sense of relief.

It is an amazing gift to be with someone who listens deeply to us with a compassion that can only come from a mutual understanding of personal suffering.

Connection with acknowledgment and a spirit of mutuality matters.

Nurturing connection takes time and intention. If we create too much busyness in our peer support work and don't leave enough space and time for meaningful connection to occur, everyone loses out on the lasting benefits of peer support.

This curriculum will guide you through a process of understanding the shift toward a different way of supporting others – toward a service that is based on a foundation of mutuality. It is important to pause and think about what that mutuality actually means. It can be easy to speak the language of mutuality but until we unpack what supporting someone in an equal and horizontal way means, we will not fully grasp the meaning of mutuality.

Peer-developed peer support is a non-hierarchical approach with origins in informal self-help and consciousness-raising groups organized in the 1970s by people in the ex-patients' movement. It arose in reaction to negative experiences with mental health treatment and dissatisfaction with the limits of the mental patient role. Peer support among people with psychiatric histories is closely intertwined with experiences of powerlessness within the mental health system and with activism promoting human rights and alternatives to the medical model. ~Darby Penney (2018)

Discomfort and Safety

We tend to want to run from the feeling of discomfort. By definition discomfort is not pleasant. Discomfort often comes paired with the assurance that pain or hard work is in our future.

We all desire to feel good, content, energized, and happy. So, we often chase those feelings and in our quest to experience the best in life, our tolerance for discomfort and uncertainty shrinks. Yet, sitting in and moving through discomfort is 100% essential to growth work. There's just no possible way around it. **Avoiding discomfort essentially keeps us stuck in the status quo.**

When participating in any kind of intentional growth, we need to brace ourselves for a lot of discomfort. This is the case whether we are switching majors, learning to play guitar, advocating for ourselves with a professor, learning to cook for the first time, going back to school for the first time after high school, or unpacking our unconscious biases.

It is important to change the way we interact with the kind of discomfort that disrupts our status quo. If we want growth, we need to get more comfortable with discomfort by actually seeking it, welcoming it, and leaning into it.

Of course discomfort is just plain hard. Shaking up our strongly held beliefs is not for the faint of heart. It's a courageous act. Know that intentionally choosing discomfort – and the uncertainty that comes with growth – are also exactly where possibility and hope can be born.

It's also important to note that discomfort and safety are not mutually exclusive. You can be safe and uncomfortable AT THE SAME TIME. The discomfort that comes with growth is safe, even if it doesn't always feel that way. It is essential that we learn to expand our tolerance for discomfort and to treat ourselves with kindness and compassion at the same time, because this is hard work.

So we know that learning brings up discomfort. And we know that there is uncertainty in discomfort. Remember that one of the best antidotes to uncertainty is wonder and adventure.

We hope that this journey will be one of wonder and adventure for you.

Practices that will Support Your Learning

Throughout this training, you will be encouraged to create practices in your life that will enhance both your work and your life in general.

Movement and the Mind-Body Connection

Most of us grew up being educated in environments that required us to sit in our seats to learn. We didn't have the freedom to get up when we wanted; often we needed permission from the teacher just to get up to go to the bathroom.

In one of our modules, we will explore our need to create categories and containers, and the limitations of siloed thinking. In the past, we have thought of the body and mind as very separate parts of ourselves. That kind of thinking informed the "sit and get through it" approach to learning.

Today, thanks to learning from modalities such as the medicine wheel model that integrate our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of ourselves, we know that learning must include absorption and synthesis. We need to move knowledge from living just in our heads to also living in our bodies, otherwise our learning stays at surface level.
It would be so valuable to apply the same understanding and insight we have about the importance of living an integrated, holistic life to our experience of learning. The truth is, we learn better when we move our bodies.

Throughout this training, whether you are learning online or in an in-person training, we will guide you through some simple movements to support the learning process. We also encourage you to stretch or move (in a way that feels good for you) anytime you feel the need to do so.

Move when you feel the need to move.

Also consider our need for movement when you are working as a peer support worker. There is a trend in recent years to have "walking meetings." We know that moving our bodies supports us to connect with others in a different way. Many people are able to relax and open up when they are moving in a way they don't when sitting across the table from someone. There are also many health benefits to moving our bodies. What a gift that in your role, you get to support people to access these beneficial practices.

Mindfulness as a Practice

We will be covering mindfulness as a practice throughout this training. *In essence, mindfulness is an embodied awareness of what is happening around you.*

Here are a few mindfulness practices you can try out right where you are:

- Consider deepening your awareness of your mind, emotions and feelings
- Consider deepening your awareness of your body, noticing how your skin is being touched by the air, by your clothing, by your chair
- Now notice how it feels to pay attention to these things

It is very easy to start living on autopilot. We do the things we need to do, but we aren't really present. We are often thinking of the next thing we need to do. According to Dr. Ellen Langer, a mindfulness researcher at Harvard University, "Mindfulness is the process of actively noticing new things." (2018) There is so much research that supports the positive impact of mindfulness practices on our mental and physical health.

Interconnection, Relationships, and the Work of Peer Support

"Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect."
~Chief Seattle

Hyper-Individualism

One of the biggest societal issues of our time is the effect of hyper-individualism on our communities. One might venture to say that this has been a steady problem stemming from a colonization mindset.

Yourdictionary.com defines hyper-individualism as "A *tendency for people to act in a highly individual way, without regard to society.*"

In essence, hyper-individualism is an extreme form of individualism, and it means that someone is so focussed on self they have very little regard for others. Some examples of hyper-individualism are:

- A focus only on the success and wealth of an individual, rather than considering what they can contribute to society
- A focus only on personal rights, without considering what is important for society
- Underfunding of public transportation and a primary focus on individual car ownership (*note that hyper-individualism is closely connected to capitalism*)
- Avoiding asking for help, even when help is needed, for fear of being seen as weak, dependent, or incompetent (*note that hyper-individualism is closely connected to ableism and sexism*)
- Excessively over-using non-renewable resources with no regard for the impact on other people and the natural world (*note that hyper-individualism is closely connected to colonialism*)
- Driving dangerously (running a stop sign, speeding, texting, or driving while intoxicated) with no regard for others' safety
- Any attitude or behaviour that avoids addressing systemic issues (e.g. racism, classism or stigma) in favour of the comfort of individuals from the dominant culture who benefit from these power imbalances

This hyper-individualistic worldview can keep us separated and disconnected from one another, which ultimately leads to loneliness and decreased compassion. For those who are struggling with mental health and/or substance use issues, a hyper-individualistic mindset can drive them deeper into despair and aloneness.

It's important to note here that we are not saying individualism is all bad. A defined sense of self, self-awareness, self-determination, autonomy over one's choices, awareness of one's strengths, and clear boundaries combined with personal responsibility are all very important for our well-being. A well-defined sense of self is valuable and can support interconnection.

well-being is optimal when we focus on interconnection
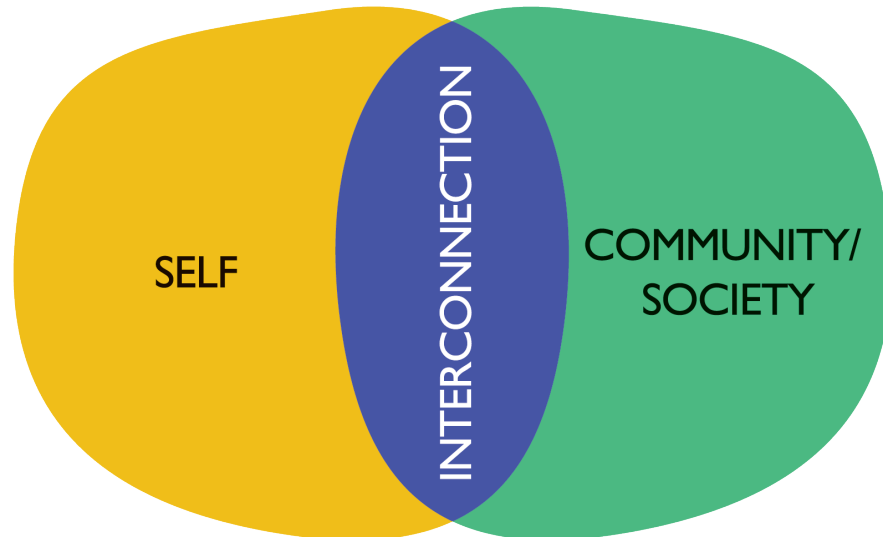
Interconnection is about balancing the needs of self with acknowledgment that we are also a part of something greater than ourselves. What we choose to do individually has an impact on the whole. We can only flourish when we feel a sense of belonging and connection with others. Community and connection is important to our well-being just as eating nutrient-rich foods benefits our bodies and minds. None of us can have a healthy existence living fully isolated.

This training comes from the perspective that supporting the individual while resisting the cultural pull toward hyper-individualism is very important.

Relationships and Interconnection

When we have relationships with others, we become more fully who we are meant to be. As therapist Esther Perel says, "we are shaped by our relationships." (*podcast "Feel Better, Live More with Dr. Rangan, episode #119, 24:24*) The dynamic connection between two people creates something amazing. We are changed by each of our relationships.

Think of relationships like an electrical circuit. Power flows through a source to an object, and back to the source. The power has to flow through both the source and the object. Electricity requires a flow back and forth, otherwise it will not work.

Peer support is about relationship and connection. This means breaking away from the dominant mindset of hyper-individualism, and instead grounding our work in the core beliefs of interconnection and interdependence.

Interconnection is the mindset that everything is connected. It supports the intrinsic value of all life. We are all connected to each other–our communities, our nations, and the very earth on which we live.

Interdependence recognizes that all human beings need community and belonging. While it is certainly a goal to be able to take care of oneself, and create self-nourishment practices, full independence encourages isolation and loneliness. We need other people in our lives.

> Sharing our stories with people we trust, which is a practice in vulnerability, is a powerful antidote to shame. When we choose to share something that we have otherwise kept bottled up–festering, we create an opportunity for an empathetic connection. When we share with others, we often realize that we are not alone.
>
> *"If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive." ~Brené Brown (Daring Greatly, 2015)*
>
> *"Shame is always easier to handle if you have someone to share it with." ~Craig Thompson (Blankets, 2019)*

In the research article *Strategic Storytelling: An Exploration of the Professional Practices of Mental Health Peer Providers*, (Mancini, 2019) shares about the importance of storytelling in peer support work.

> The data from this study suggest that peers represent more than supportive adjuncts to nonpeer clinical treatment providers. They are distinct, legitimate professionals who

utilize a range of complex clinical and narrative skills to help others. Making oneself vulnerable by revealing a personal story that involves shame, victimization, or dangerous behaviors to help another is an act of courage....they have decided to remain engaged with their past experiences to extend the opportunity of survivorship and recovery to others (Frank, 2005). Peer support is an amazing opportunity to nurture the development of interconnection and interdependence mindsets both in ourselves and with the people we support.

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The Importance of Language Awareness and a Strength-Based Approach in This Work

"Words have great power. The power to help, the power to heal, and the power to hurt. Use this power carefully." ~ Anthony Douglas Williams

One of the core values of peer support work is a strength-based approach.

From the Standards of Practice document: *"It is more motivating to move towards something than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression."*

Everything in this training will encourage you to treat yourself – and support others – with a strength-based approach. When we support people from a deficit-based mindset, we can unintentionally keep them stuck.

There is a popular phrase that says, "words create worlds." When you read that, what comes to mind for you?

What we Focus on Expands

Whatever we give our attention to tends to grow. If we are always focussed on problems, these problems begin to take over our minds and emotions, especially in matters of the heart. In the same way, if we focus on our strengths, they will grow. Whatever we focus most of our time and energy on will just naturally take up more space in our life. *What do you want to grow in your life?*

That's not to say that we don't look at or address big personal or societal problems. This is not about avoiding or ignoring problems. For example, if someone has a relationship with substances, we are not suggesting they should ignore the problem and just focus on their strengths. There are certainly problems we need to address for our own well-being. However, if we are only focussed on examining and solving problems, we are likely to get stuck in the status quo.

A strength-based approach, on the other hand, looks at what is working, and asks, how can we build on it? From this vantage point, we can begin to imagine and create new possibilities.

Building on our strengths supports resiliency. Again, it isn't about ignoring issues, but is instead a paradigm shift in how we approach our problems.

The words we choose give meaning to our narratives, and they have astounding power. Words create our reality. This is also why it is essential to choose language that is person-first. Person-first language is about not defining someone by a diagnosis or challenge they are experiencing. When we don't choose person-first language we are, perhaps unintentionally, supporting stigma.

We will continue to look at the application of a strength-based approach in sections of this training to come.

For Reflection

- *Have you noticed times when you have been affected by someone's words?*
- *Have you noticed your own self-talk? How do you feel when you speak negatively to yourself? What about if you switch things up and speak to yourself with kindness? How does that feel?*

Empathy

Simply put, empathy is an awareness of someone else's feelings in a way that you are able to put yourself in their shoes and feel what they are feeling.

Empathy will play an important role in everything you do in your role as a peer support worker. Empathy will come up throughout the whole training.

When we tap into empathy, we know that we could very easily be in the same situation as that person, if we haven't already been there.

In her book *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't)* (2008), Brené Brown references nursing scholar Teresa Wiseman's **four attributes to empathy**:

1. The ability to see the world through another person's perspective
2. Staying out of judgment
3. Paying attention to, and doing our best to understand another person's emotions
4. Communicating your understanding of that person's feelings

Sympathy is feeling bad/sad for someone without putting yourself in their shoes. Sympathy can have an element of pity, whereas empathy is feeling *with* someone–empathy involves perspective-taking.

The especially difficult part of empathy is that it makes us vulnerable. It asks us to tap into the difficult feelings inside ourselves in order to connect with the other person. That can feel scary. As peer supporters, we need to practice good self-care, and self-compassion.

Empathy puts us in someone else's shoes, but it stops being supportive if we are so enmeshed in the situation that we fall apart. Choosing to be empathetic and compassionate is important, as is avoiding overwhelm from taking on someone's difficult emotions as your own. Part of your self-care will be learning how you take care of you while you are supporting someone else.

Dealing with Uncertainty

As children, many of us were often afraid of the dark. We didn't know what creepy things lurked in the dark corners of our bedrooms. Although as adults we tend to be more comfortable sleeping in a dark room at night without fear of monsters in the closet, we are still often afraid of the unknown.

Uncertainty can be scary. Uncertainty is often uncomfortable and really hard. As humans, we crave certainty. We want to know the answers and the outcomes, and we feel more empowered when we have a sense of control and closure.

Experieves of uncertainty create stress, activating our sympathetic nervous system, which causes a stress response in our body.

In 2016, University College London's Neurology research department conducted an experiment in uncertainty. The experiment proved that high feelings of uncertainty created more stress than feelings of clarity about impending pain. The 45 participants in the experiment played a video game where they had to overturn rocks and guess if there was a snake under the rock. When they were wrong, they got a mild electric shock on their hand. At times throughout the game, it was predictable when they would get shocked, and then the game would fluctuate so that participants were increasingly uncertain of when they would be shocked. What they found was that when the chance of getting a shock was 50/50, people's stress levels were at the highest. When their chance was 0%, or 100% they had the lowest stress response.

This research suggests that uncertainty creates more stress than physical pain itself!

At a biological level we really don't like uncertainty. Uncertainty could potentially mean death, so we always look for certainty and answers. We do anything we can to bring an end to the unknown. Consider the uncertainty of COVID-19. This global pandemic created a much longer season of uncertainty than anyone ever expected. Western society values control, the rights of the individual, freedom, and certainty. COVID-19 challenged all of that! So much loss, and many, many months of living in the unknown. The uncertainty of COVID-19 has impacted many people's well-being.

In the article *Your Fear of Uncertainty Can Disempower You* (2020) neuroscientist Beau Lotto says that people are more likely to feel disempowered when they are uncertain. He says that disempowerment also affects our perceptions. Lotto says, "So ... *what happens to your brain when it perceives itself to be disempowered? Ignorance, gullibility, delusion and even anger can ensue.*"

When uncertain, we are more apt to perceive patterns that aren't really there, and project

meaning onto something or someone else. We perceive things to be bigger and scarier than when we don't have a sense of control.

One thing we can be certain of in this life, is that we will have times of uncertainty. It is part of the human experience. Developing an understanding of what happens to us in uncertainty can help us handle it better.

As you move into peer support work, it's important to remember that uncertainty will affect both you and the people you will work with. And it's also helpful to know that there's actually an upside to not knowing.

The Upside of Uncertainty

As we've noted, there are a lot of challenges that come with uncertainty. Now let's look at some of the amazing things that are also tied to not knowing.

First of all, creativity thrives in uncertainty. In fact, creativity requires uncertainty to flourish! When everything is predictable and routine, it is less imperative that we get creative. When everything is certain, we can get stuck in the status quo. When we face uncertainty, we are essentially also given the opportunity to innovate. Risk taking supports us to build courage and grow.

The state of not knowing means that we become more open to new possibilities. That's why paint-by-number is a much less creative process than grabbing a canvas, some paints and brushes and choosing to see what happens!

When we speak about creativity in this sense, we aren't talking about being an artist. Rather, we are talking about creativity in our thinking and approach – basically, we're talking about divergent thinking. Wikipedia describes divergent thinking as this:

> Divergent thinking is a thought process or method used to generate creative ideas by exploring many possible solutions. It typically occurs in a spontaneous, free-flowing, "non-linear" manner, such that many ideas are generated in an emergent cognitive fashion.

We can't be spontaneous and free-flowing if we are trapped in the predictable. When faced with the unknown, and we feel courageous and empowered (*we might also be feeling fear as well – courage and fear are not mutually exclusive*), we are able to think differently and see new possibilities that we simply couldn't see before.

In the article *Uncertainty: The Path to Creativity?* author Claire Dorotik-Nana says:

Uncertainty also is where we find the very cognitive flexibility that creativity depends on. Creativity, after all, is about bending the rules. It's about perceiving things as they have not yet been perceived. It's about positioning reality in a way that it has not yet been positioned. And it is about flexing your thinking in a way that allows you to see new perspectives – and new possibilities. When it comes to creativity, uncertainty is like mental yoga. (2015)

Increasing our Tolerance for Uncertainty

So we know on the one hand that uncertainty can wreak havoc in your body while on the other hand we know that uncertainty is the key to creativity and new possibilities. That feels like a tricky thing to balance, doesn't it?

There are several things we can do to support ourselves in creating more tolerance for uncertainty. Here are a few ideas:

1. **Normalize ambivalence.**
   Ambivalence is the state of having mixed or seemingly contradictory feelings. We tend to want to be all one thing or another (happy or sad, dissatisfied or grateful), but the reality is that we can often feel many complex feelings all at the same time. It's normal to feel fear and courage simultaneously. We can also feel feelings of sadness and gratitude all swirled together. When we learn to first identify these feelings, and then allow them to exist together, we increase our tolerance for uncertainty.
2. **Increase your tolerance for uncertainty by choosing it.**
   Adventure and uncertainty are intertwined. One of the ways we can both have some fun and increase our tolerance for uncertainty is to intentionally choose adventure. We can hop in the car or onto a bus without a destination and see where we end up. Travel supports our tolerance for uncertainty, and it also stretches our worldview. If big trips are not accessible, consider small adventures right in your own town (e.g.. try a new restaurant, take a different route home, go on a new hike, shop in a new store).
   Another idea is to choose creativity. There are many ways to practice creativity; one idea is to pick up some art supplies and create something without the pressure of making a piece of art. Just create for the process of creation, then rip it up after.
   What are some adventures you can choose?
3. **Choose language that reflects possibility instead of single solution-focused answers.**
   We can get more comfortable with the unknown if we shift our thinking away from being solution-focused, and instead choose openness to multiple possibilities. There is never one right way to approach a situation–there are many roads that can bring us where we want to go. We often want to find the right answer. But what if there isn't one right answer, and

instead there are several right answers? Choosing to be open to new possibilities both increases our tolerance to uncertainty, and it increases our creativity. For example, staying away from "either/or" thinking, and instead choosing "both/and" thinking supports building a tolerance for uncertainty.

4. **Practice self-compassion & acceptance.**
Self-compassion is about offering ourselves the same kindness and generosity that we would offer someone else. Self-compassion is a practice. When we integrate self-compassion in our lives, we are kind to ourselves when we mess up, because we know that all human beings make mistakes. When we are in struggle, we offer ourselves kindness, and we choose to self-soothe. Some examples of self-soothing are having a cup of tea, going for a walk outside, having a bath, laughing with a friend and listening to good music.
What can you do to self-soothe?

5. **Be curious, ask questions–be more interested in the questions than the answers.**
When we are curious, we calm our sympathetic nervous systems. Curiosity increases our sense of calm. For example, when we feel stressed out and overwhelmed, we can get curious about how we are feeling and ask ourselves reflective questions. Questions like: *What led me to feel this way? What if I approach this situation differently? What can I do to support myself right now?*
What other questions support this kind of reflective curiosity?

> *"The opposite of recognizing that we're feeling something is denying our emotions. The opposite of being curious is disengaging. When we deny our stories and disengage from tough emotions, they don't go away; instead, they own us, they define us. Our job is not to deny the story, but to defy the ending—to rise strong, recognize our story, and rumble with the truth until we get to a place where we think, Yes. This is what happened. This is my truth. And I will choose how this story ends."*
> ~ Brené Brown, Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

There are many benefits of curiosity, which is why we picked it as one of our core values. Curiosity also creates opportunity for possibility and creativity.

The Role of Hope in this Work

Hope is a word that is often misused and misunderstood. It's a word that can feel trite and wishy washy sometimes, and can rub some people the wrong way. Often, we distill hope down to the desire to see a specific outcome. However, hope is much bigger than that. Hope is a powerful force, and one that is necessary for survival.

We just looked at how uncertainty can create opportunity for possibility. Similarly, much more than wishing for a specific outcome, hope is about creating opportunity for possibility. Hope is about finding a wee bit of purpose and meaning so we can get out of bed in the morning. Some might say that hope is as important to our survival as food and water. Hope supports our immune system, and it fuels our cells.

In her book *Rising Strong*, Brené Brown says;

> In my work, I've found that moving out of powerlessness, and even despair, requires hope. Hope is not an emotion: It's a cognitive process – a thought process made up of what researcher C. R. Snyder called the trilogy of 'goals, pathways, and agency.' Hope happens when we can set goals, have the tenacity and perseverance to pursue those goals, and believe in our own abilities to act. Snyder also found that hope is learned. (2015)

Courageous Hope

All growth and change whether on the micro or macro level begins with **HOPE**

Hope is not wishy-washy. It is not the same as wishing on a star. We can water down the meaning when we say things like, "I hope it's sunny tomorrow.

Hope is wildly courageous. Acting on our hope requires uncertainty and bravery. Disrupting the status quo (personal or societal) is really, really hard.

Hope always involves risk. Always.

Hope ebbs and flows. Sometimes it's close, sometimes it's very distant.

Hope is the spark that motivates us to do anything, including simply getting up in the morning or embarking on a big, new adventure. Many people who are lost in despair struggle with basic things like getting up or eating.

Hope involves action and movement. It's like a muscle we develop that gets stronger as we use it. The birth of hope can often be really humble, but it can grow into a powerful force for change.

Hope is messy. It often goes hand in hand with a battle of sorts – either an internal battle or a societal activism. Battles are messy and scary. (Think of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey work).

Hope is as essential to well-being as food, water, and shelter.

Hope is never solitary. We are deeply interconnected. When one of us loses hope, we all suffer. We can also hold hope for loved ones who have lost theirs.

Hope is contagious. Since we are so interconnected, hope spreads to those around us.

Connection is essential for **hope** to flourish. Because we are wired for connection and belonging, hope always involves other people. When we are considering movements such as peer support, this means solidarity and working together.

Hope is not the same as optimism or positive thinking. **Hope** is focused. Opening ourselves up to hope means that pain will likely make itself known to us along our journey. But when we reflect on everything above, we can trust in our resilience.

Nurturing Hope

As you begin this peer support training, you are embarking on a deeply meaningful journey. You are also joining a powerful movement to change the way we support and care for one another. May we all nurture hope within ourselves and may we intentionally and collectively create ecologies that nurture hope in others.

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

CREATING THE ECOLOGY OF SELF-DETERMINATION

While Examining Worldview and Implicit Biases

Purpose of Module

All human beings judge. Our brains are wired that way to help us make sense of the world. The purpose of this module is to understand how and why we judge. In this module, you will be invited and equipped to see and acknowledge your unconscious and conscious biases, and then to mindfully question and challenge them.

Self-determination is a strongly supported value in the mental health and substance use system, yet it is one that is not always fully explained. Self-determination is also one of the foundational values of peer support. In this module, we will look at the meaning and theory of self-determination and discuss how central it is in peer support work. We'll discuss how in peer support we can avoid giving advice and instead support the creation of an ecology where people can begin to trust their own inner wisdom. An ecology that encourages self-determination means people can tap into their intrinsic motivation, grow and thrive.

Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions and have freedom from coercion.

(From The BC Peer Support Training Core Values.)

Learning Objectives

1. You will be able to explain that a worldview is a way of organizing experiences into categories and containers so that we can function in the world.
2. You will be able to demonstrate the skills involved in beginning to mindfully pay attention to biases that were previously unconscious.
3. You will be able to examine your own worldview and articulate how your brain has been wired to judge.

4. You will be able to clearly discuss self-determination and why it is an essential part of peer support services.
5. You will be able to demonstrate an understanding of self-determination theory, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as the conditions needed for self-determination to grow.
6. You will be able to dismantle the practice of advice-giving. Alternatively, you will be able to demonstrate the knowledge needed to support the creation of ecologies where people you will support can access their own inner self-determination.

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. *If you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.*

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

Section 1: Examining Worldview and Implicit Biases

Life Application Story

Cassandra really valued her peer support role and loved being able to support students who were struggling.

She had been meeting up with her peer, Taylor, for several months. They discovered that they both enjoyed cycling, so today they had gone for a bike ride in between classes and stopped to grab a treat from the local cafe.

Taylor had moved to Canada for university; this big move was her first time living away from home. She was really struggling with feelings of isolation, homesickness and adjusting to a new culture. Besides her peer, she hadn't met many new people, and tended to avoid social situations.

"What have you been up to this week?" asked Cassandra.

"Nothing much. Just been doing a bit of cycling and studying in my room."

"Have you tried joining any of those clubs we talked about?" asked Cassandra.

"No, not yet," replied Taylor. "The thought of going alone really stresses me out, and I'm already behind on my coursework anyway."

"What about a study group? Two birds with one stone!"

"Yeah. Maybe."

"It might be hard to show up for the first session, but it will get easier. Joining clubs was how I met most of my friends in Uni."

Cassandra would never say this out loud, but she didn't feel Taylor was really putting much effort into being social and making connections. It seemed like Taylor never did anything but hang out at residence, and every week it was the same story. She kept encouraging Taylor to join groups, volunteer, or try some new hobbies, since that's how Cassandra made new friends and nurtured her own wellbeing when life was stressful.

After all of Cassandra's pushing, Taylor joined a club but didn't fit in and found the experience quite negative. After taking a few more months to feel more grounded and comfortable with her new life and the stress of school, she went to a club with a friend she met in one of her classes and they had a great time. She had taken the time she needed and was much better equipped to manage a social life and the pressure of deadlines.

Cassandra realized that everyone moves at their own pace, and that pushing yourself when you're

not ready isn't always the best way forward for everyone. She reflected on her own upbringing, and how pushing yourself through discomfort was valued above things like health and wellbeing. She also recognized she hadn't had to navigate the challenges of moving to a different country where she didn't know anyone and wasn't familiar with the culture, having stayed in the same city for her undergrad. While being social and constantly meeting new people was important to Cassandra, she gained an awareness that these were her own values and shouldn't be forced on anyone else. While she had judged Taylor for not trying hard enough to make new friends, she reflected on how brave it was to move to a new country where she didn't know anyone. The next time they met, Cassandra shared her with Taylor how she admired her strength.

Connection and Over-Relating

"Empathy's the antidote to shame. The two most powerful words when we're in struggle: me too."
~Brené Brown

Connection

One of the things that makes peer support so effective is that it harnesses the power of shared experience.

When we are in struggle and we meet someone who sees us – *really* sees us – and says, "Me too." When that happens, connection begins to form. We feel acknowledged. The shame we've been holding onto slowly begins to melt away and we start to believe that we might not be alone.

This kind of relationship is rooted in mutuality. It can flourish when we are treated with empathy. We have the opportunity both to know and to be known. There is so much power in that.

This is peer support in action.

Over-Relating

The shadow side of this beautiful connection is the tendency to over-relate. Over-relating means that because we have commonalities with another person's experience, we assume there are more similarities than there really are. When we over-relate, rather than asking powerful questions about the other person's experience, we fill in the blanks of what we don't know with assumptions that stem from our experiences and perceptions, In the process, we don't listen very well, and the other person doesn't feel heard.

Let's look at an example

Kristin is working a peer support shift at the student center. She is from Nova Scotia and came to B.C. for school. She is adjusting to her new life but often struggles with feeling

homesick. Jas comes into the center looking for support. Jas is an international student from India. She has been in Canada for a few months and is having a hard time adjusting to the new culture. She misses her family and many things about her home country. She understands English pretty well but struggles with some more nuanced language like slang. She heard about peer services and decided to check it out.

If Kristin responds to Jas by saying, "I know **exactly** how you're feeling! I'm not from here either. I'm feeling homesick too," she is at risk of over-relating to Jas's experience. Kristin is not considering that Jas's experience is different than hers because she is not just away from home, she is also adjusting to a significantly different culture. If Kristin doesn't realize this difference, she could start giving unhelpful advice that will just make Jas feel even more unheard and alone.

Instead, Kristin can share her understanding of what it's like to be away from home, while acknowledging that her situation is different than Jas's since she is still living in the same country. Kristin can choose to listen to what Jas has to say about her experience. Perhaps she can share some resources that might be supportive as Jas adjusts to a new culture.

Kristin can choose to harness the connection that comes from missing home, while choosing to be intentionally mindful of differences and curious about Jas's experience.

The connection of "me too" can start to break down when we assume that someone else's experiences are the same as ours. We risk disconnection when we don't create space in our peer support relationships for different perspectives and approaches.

Disconnection can be so much worse when we dish out advice either openly or subtly. Our advice is always based on our own experiences and worldview. When we speak from our own frame of reference without questioning it, we fail to see that the other person's path is different than ours, and we are unintentionally stealing someone's self-determination.

In communication, we can't really begin to understand another person's perspective unless we choose to listen from a place of curiosity and not knowing. Otherwise, everything we say and hear will be filtered through what we already know, and we won't be able to acknowledge or make room for their unique experience.

- Think about one of the first times you felt that "me too" connection with someone. How did you feel when someone shared that they had a similar lived experience as you? How did that feel in your body?
- Have you ever been in Jas's position, and felt like someone was making assumptions about you without really listening?

Worldview

"Every person carries in his head a mental model of the world
—a subjective representation of external reality."
~Alvin Toffler

Simply put, your worldview is the lens through which you see the world. Everything we encounter – from information to conversations to situations – is filtered through our worldview.

An unexamined worldview is invisible to us because it's simply our "truth."

In this module, we will be comparing a worldview to a pair of glasses, and to a filing cabinet that organizes data.

All your past experiences come together to form your worldview. It is made up of literally everything you've experienced; all your big and small experiences impact you. Everything you have ever encountered has played a role in shaping how you think, what you believe, and how you perceive the world around you. No two people have the same worldview. Even when we experience something similar, we never experience it exactly the same, because our worldview affects our perceptions.

These are some things that make up your worldview:

- Your childhood experiences (and there are many!)
- Your race
- Your exposure to other races
- Your exposure to the worldview of others around you
- Your past educational experiences
- The attitude towards education in your family of origin
- Your cultural background and identity
- The subcultures you are involved in (sports, music, arts, etc)
- Your family structure growing up: two parents, single parent, blended family, extended family, family friends, foster care, etc...
- Siblings and birth order, or your experience as an only child
- Your socioeconomic position (both as a child and as an adult)
- Your physical health: do/did you struggle with a health issue
- Your relationship with substances (alcohol or drugs)
- Your mental health
- Your experience of death or loss

- Your experience of trauma
- Your gender & sex
- The village, town, or city where you grew up (small town or city, rural or suburb, etc.)
- The country you live in (now and in the past)
- Your religious beliefs (both as a child and as an adult)
- Your political beliefs
- Your experience with nature
- All social experiences from an early age to present moment
- Any experiences of bullying or mistreatment
- Your experience with food, including food scarcity, or having everything you have ever needed
- Everything you read, listen to, watch (all forms of media, including the news)
- Work experience and work ethic
- And all of your other life experiences!

Consider that each experience in your life has both consciously and unconsciously constructed the way you now see the world. What you believe, and what you perceive, are unique to you, because no one else has shared all of your experiences. We all have reasons—countless reasons—for believing what we believe. Every worldview tells the story of an individual's unique blend of experiences.

Exercises

What are some experiences that make up your worldview? (Pick the top 10 that come to your mind)

Most of our very early life experiences are non-decisions, meaning they happen outside the realm of our choice and control. As we age, we begin to have more opportunity for choice and control, and we learn to expand our belief system.

However, since our worldview begins to form very early in life, unless we choose to wrestle with our worldview and ask big questions, we essentially inherit much of our belief system from others around us. When we choose to reflect, question, and explore we can expand our worldview and challenge our assumptions and biases, as well as those that have been passed down to us. Post-secondary educational opportunities really support that exploration.

In this module we will explore the wrestle, the questioning, and the shift needed to unpack our worldview. From there we will look at the tools we need to challenge our judgements, biases and assumptions.

Shifting our worldview requires us to examine and challenge our strongly held beliefs, while putting ourselves in someone else's shoes.

Have you noticed any shifts in your worldview since you started post-secondary? If so, what encouraged these shifts in perception?

When we take a mindful approach to examining our worldview, we can learn to see life, others, and ourselves differently.

"We see the world, not as it is, but as we are—or, as we are conditioned to see it."~ Stephen R. Covey (The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change)

We All Judge
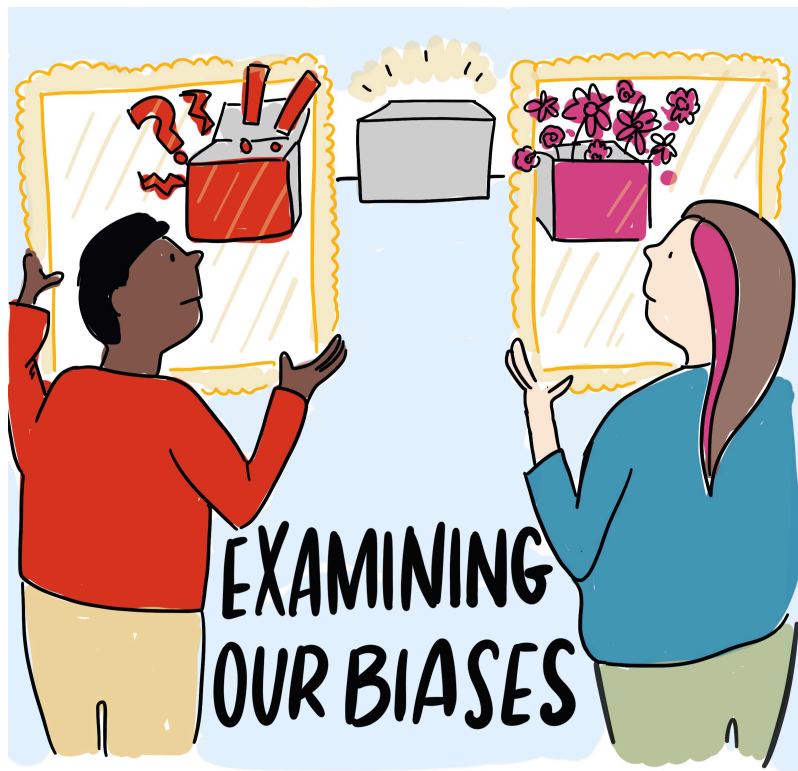
We judge.

Everyone does.

It is impossible to be non-judgemental because our brains are wired to judge. Evolutionarily speaking, without the ability to judge we wouldn't survive. We would have to relearn basic things every day. Functioning in the world would be really challenging.

If the word "judge" bothers you, consider any of these words instead: discern, assess, evaluate, determine, distinguish, intuition, conclude. All these words have similar root meanings.

We choose to avoid using the term "non-judgemental" in peer support, because it is virtually impossible not to judge. Denying the fact that we all judge, actually makes it more likely that we will get lost in our big sweeping judgements. When we deny that we judge, we don't pause to notice our biases and check our perceptions. And then we unconsciously think that our small "t" truths are universal BIG "T" TRUTHs for everyone.

We can, however, learn to be more aware of our worldview and perceptions, as well as the judgements, assumptions, and biases that stem from them.

When we are aware of this very basic human tendency to judge, we can learn to:

- Choose to see our worldview as a cumulation of our past experiences
- Consciously choose to notice and pay attention to our judgements
- Consciously choose to put our judgements aside
- Get curious about someone else's experience and worldview
- Seek to understand another person's perspective, instead of trying to convince others that we are "right"

We *all* have unconscious or implicit biases. Realizing that we have them is the very first step in dismantling them.

It's our goal to approach this topic of judgment as a normal human function that requires intentional and mindful attention. If we are willing, we all have the capacity to manage our judgements, assumptions, and biases.

Let's go deeper into examining how this process works.

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Categories and Containers

Which stands out to you?

Puppies or kittens?

The book or the movie?

Dark chocolate or milk chocolate?

Swimming in a pool or in the ocean?

Texting or calling?

Star Wars or Star Trek?

Coffee or tea?

Solitude or a party?

Many of us have strong opinions about some of these choices, even though they are pretty innocuous. Some people might feel stronger than others, depending on past experiences. Did your opinion come quickly, or did you have to pause and think? If your opinion came quickly, why do you think that is? If you had no opinion about some of those things, why not?

One of a baby's earliest milestones is when they learn to develop categories. Babies need to learn EVERYTHING–dog, cat, apple, cup, to all the parts of the body. The ability to create categories is a huge developmental milestone!

As we grow, we continue to need categories and containers so we can filter information and stimulus that comes our way. Imagine if we didn't – we would have to relearn what a mug or a couch is every single day. What if we had to look up directions every time we went to work or the grocery store? It would be exhausting. Not to mention the fear and constant uncertainty we would be gripped with each day as we encountered strange new things that didn't make sense! When we do not equip ourselves to manage and cope with uncertainty, it causes stress, and activates our sympathetic nervous system. The creation of categories and containers increases certainty and can help to calm our nervous system.

Categories and containers are necessary. We NEED them to make sense of the world. However, these categories can become a huge problem when we don't manage them mindfully and instead allow them to become rigid and mindless.

Let's examine this a little closer.

Organizing Data

Data comes at us every second of the day. As discussed above, the only way to make sense of all this information is to create containers and categories. If we didn't do this, we'd feel absolutely overwhelmed.

The creation of categories helps us construct meanings from what we see, hear, feel, smell and taste. Most of these meanings are automatic. When we walk into a room and see a chair, we know how to sit down. With little to no conscious assessment of the structure, we sit down, trusting that it will support us.

When we take a trip to a new city, we realize how much our lives revolve around all the existing, unexamined categories and containers we have. Travel challenges our sense of what's "normal" and forces us to rethink our routines and schedules.

Have you ever stayed at a friend's house, a hotel, or an Airbnb and felt a disruption in this routine? Perhaps you fiddle for 5 minutes with a coffee maker you don't know how to use, only to give up and decide to visit a cafe instead. Then you hop in the shower and stare at the facet for a long time trying to figure out how to get it to work, only to give up and have a bath.

If every minute of our lives we had to relearn things we already knew, we might fall over from sheer and utter exhaustion.

Bigger than Coffee Makers and Showers

However, this issue is bigger than just categorizing simple stimuli like coffee makers and showers. Our brains work the same to categorize more abstract ideas and beliefs.

When something happens to us in life, we put a meaning to it, and that meaning informs our worldview.

Let's look at an example

In 8th grade Sarah struggled with math. She tried very hard but continually failed her

math tests. She also heard the message at home that girls are bad at math and sciences. The meaning she gave to her experience was that she is bad at math and that, in fact, ALL girls and women just don't have the ability to tackle math well. Her experience and that messaging reinforced one another, and this meaning then created her worldview that she continues to apply to both herself and to other women. She avoids anything that involves math, and her finances are a bit of a mess. This affects her career choices. When she parents her own children, it influences how she addresses math with her own children.

What Sarah didn't consider was that her 8th grade math teacher actually wasn't a great teacher, which made learning math really hard. If she'd had a different experience with her math teacher, if she had received a different message at home, or if she had challenged the meaning she gave to her experience of failing, Sarah may have realized that she could definitely manage math pretty well.

Our belief system is made of meaning that we give to categories such as:

- Individual values
- What it means to be a good person
- Importance of family
- Expectations of friendship
- Expectations of romantic relationships
- Belief in God, religion, or atheism
- Political belief
- The role education plays in one's life
- Our feelings about conflict
- Work ethic
- Beliefs about our own and other people's skill levels
- Beliefs we have about people of other races, genders, ages, abilities, etc....
- Our relationship with money

These beliefs are deeply embedded in our subconscious, and they guide us when we make decisions and discern situations.

These beliefs are deeply embedded in our subconscious and they guide us when we make decisions. While categories and containers are needed, they can become problematic if we forget that we have them. We must continue to examine them, otherwise we get stuck seeing the world from a single perspective. When we do that, we're more apt to make big, sweeping judgements

about others without even realizing we're doing it. These judgments then become our capital "T" TRUTHs we believe should apply to everyone, instead of our own personal "truths" that are there to help us create meaning and organize all the information that comes our way.

The goal is always to:

1. **Be aware that we have a worldview**
2. **Be mindful that these categories and containers exist (*as they are often unconscious to us*)**
3. **Mindfully examine our worldview, categories and containers so we can choose to expand and challenge them. By doing so, we'll then intentionally see the world differently.**

Questioning our strongly-held beliefs supports us to expand our categories and containers. This doesn't mean that we must change our minds

The act of self-reflection and questioning is more important than any conclusions we may reach in the process. In fact, examination, and not change, is the goal. And perhaps in the process of examination, we might decide to change.

Connecting with Others While Acknowledging our Worldview

Some relationships are ripe for misunderstandings because we may see something so differently than another person. When we come from different worldviews it can be hard to see eye to eye.

A practice we can engage in that supports the building of strong connections is to intentionally approach the relationship from a place of **not knowing**. Get curious. Rather than assuming others have the same perspective and worldview as us (and then, when we find out they don't, fighting to convince them why we're right and they're wrong), get interested in learning about their worldview. Seek to understand and empathize with it first. Cultivating empathy supports us to see our own worldview and to try to see someone else's.

An important aspect of empathy is perspective-taking. Challenging our assumptions and biases means we need to put ourselves in the other person's shoes.

In her lecture entitled *Creativity and the Evolution of Culture*, Harvard professor Dr. Ellen Langer says:

> When you are mindful, you are actively noticing things. You are actively drawing distinctions, forming categories. When you are mindless, you're relying on the categories and distinctions that you have drawn in the past. When you're mindful, you're sensitive to context. When you're mindful your behavior does not have to be chaotic. It can be rule and routine guided–it's just not rule and routine governed.

- In reading this section of the module, do you think it's easier for you to notice other people's biases and assumptions than it is for you to notice your own? Why or why not?
- What are some practices you can do to begin noticing when your worldview is impacting your interactions with others?

Implicit Bias

Collins dictionary defines bias this way: *Bias is a tendency to prefer one person or thing to another, and to favour that person or thing.*

Implicit has a similar meaning as unconscious.

Implicit biases show up when our unconscious thoughts impact our words and actions quite automatically.

The Perception Institute says,

> The mind sciences have found that most of our actions occur without our conscious thoughts, allowing us to function in our extraordinarily complex world. This means, however, that our implicit biases often predict how we'll behave more accurately than our conscious values.

Let's look at some examples.

Here's a common riddle that was popular a few years ago:

A father and son get in a car crash and are rushed to the hospital. The father dies. The boy is taken to the operating room and the surgeon says, "I can't operate on this boy, because he's my son." *How is this possible?*

Where did your mind go when you read this riddle? Did you get it right away, or did it take a second to realize that the surgeon was the boy's mother? Or what if the surgeon was the boy's other father, and his parents were in a same sex marriage?

This uncovers some possible implicit biases that we may have. Women today can choose many different careers. However, there is still significant gender imbalance in jobs in medicine, tech, engineering, as well as in leadership positions, etc. In Canada, women have, on average, about 15% of CEO jobs.

Consider a family where the father stays home with the kids. Do you think he might encounter bias if he chooses to get involved in daytime parent groups?

Many people still struggle with unconscious or conscious bias when it comes to same sex partnership and parenting. Consider how schools might speak to guardians and perhaps call them "moms and dads" not considering that some children might have two moms, or two dads, or maybe they are being raised by a grandparent or another family member.

Implicit bias regarding race is also very strong. This bias shows up in so many systemic ways, as we have covered in other parts of this training.

Below are some other examples of implicit bias:

- Many people have a bias that in the field of medicine, men should be doctors and women nurses.
- Another bias is that women are better in the arts and men in the sciences.
- If you see a very tall Black male, does your mind think, "Wow! He must be a great basketball player?" What if he's lousy at basketball, and a gifted artist?
- People with a mental health diagnosis can experience bias based on harmful, untrue stereotypes fueled by the media that unconsciously get stuck in people's heads.
- There can be a bias that people who live in cities are smarter than those who live in suburban or rural areas.
- People in wheelchairs and others who experience physical disabilities face unconscious bias on a regular basis, as do people who are neurodivergent.

BIPOC (black, Indigenous, and people of colour) people and females are also likely to experience bias in the hiring process. There have been studies done in which the exact same resume was sent out with different names attached, and observing the responses of potential employers. According to the research, resumes with traditionally white male names get the most attention and are more likely to be called back for an interview. Conversely, the names that appear BIPOC or female are more likely to be overlooked. Since the resumes are exactly the same, and, according to Workopolis, an employer spends about 11 seconds looking at a resume, this says that bias is the problem, not qualifications.

Similar biases show up in issues such as pay imbalances, promotions and leadership opportunities for BIPOC people and women.

It's possible to acknowledge biases in certain areas of our lives but fail to notice them in other areas. It's important to remember that:

- Even the most progressive people have biases they are unaware of.
- When we let go of the shame attached to having biases we have better capacity to deconstruct them.

- What are some other examples of implicit bias we didn't address here?
- What are some of your own biases that you are aware of?
- In recent months have you become more aware of some of your implicit biases?

How are Implicit Biases Formed?

So far, we've talked about how the brain organizes information into categories and containers. We also covered how our life experiences and the information we take in form our worldview and impact the way we approach other people and situations. These important methods of organizing information also create implicit biases.

When reflecting on implicit bias, keep the following in mind:

- Implicit biases are unconscious
- Implicit biases cause instant, automatic reactions rather than thoughtful, reflective responses
- Implicit biases are deeply embedded and show up constantly in our everyday lives
- Every human being has implicit biases–EVERYONE

Intuition

Cambridge dictionary defines intuition as, "*an ability to understand or know something immediately based on your feelings rather than facts.*"

A gut-feeling, or a strong hunch is another way to define this. Intuition is a fast, automatic, unconscious processing style.

Intuition is commonly understood as a deeply learned expertise that we can unconsciously rely on. Consider someone who has extensive experience with technology. They can figure out a problem and fix it in almost no time. Intuition is like a gut feeling that helps us with decision making.

In the article *"Gut Feel" or Unconscious Bias? When Should We Trust Our Intuition?* by Dr. Jennifer Whelan, she states,

> Gut feel is highly efficient, and it can be effective in situations where the problem is simple, well-understood, predictable, and static. So if it happens a lot, you have a high degree of expertise, and the existing solution is reliably correct, and the parameters never change, gut feel is efficient – go with it! However, if the problem is complex, poorly understood or new, or you're trying to find a better solution, your gut is more likely to lead you astray. Your decision-making effectiveness will likely benefit from a more conscious, logical analysis. (2017)

The danger of relying on our unexamined intuition when it involves other people, is that we risk getting stuck in our biases without even realizing it. We think we are tapping into our expertise, but we are tapping into our unconscious biases. Consider the employer who spends 11 seconds reading a resume and "goes with their gut," and chooses the white male candidate.

For Reflection

Can you think of some situations where intuition can bring up implicit bias?

Some Things we Can do to Bring Awareness to our Implicit Biases

"To have a biased belief often means to us that we are bad people. So many of us hold that. Those protections keep it out of our awareness or the risk is that we see ourselves as bad."
~Kate Lingren (Clinical Social Worker & Activist)

• Understand the nature of bias. Dig into why they exist. (Feel free to look back at the reasons we have covered in this module)
• Notice when we have strong reactions.
• Make unconscious biases conscious: talk about them
• Continue to build self-awareness
• Let go of the shame we often attach to having biases. Shame keeps us stuck and we become defensive. When we recognize it is normal to have biases, we create more space to acknowledge and consciously deconstruct them.
• Get curious.

- Seek out people who are different from you. Spend time in communities that are different from your own.
- Seek out information that supports you to stretch your beliefs. Don't fall prey to confirmation bias by only seeking out information that's aligned with your pre-existing beliefs.
- Don't fall into stereotype-based thinking, even if it seems like a silly non-issue. Be cautious about jokes that rely on stereotyping certain people or people groups.
- Seek out people who defy stereotypes.

For Reflection

What will you do to continue to unpack your implicit biases?

Confirmation Bias

Wikipedia defines confirmation bias this way:

> Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's prior beliefs or values. People tend to unconsciously select information that supports their views but ignore non-supportive or contradicting information. People also tend to interpret ambiguous evidence as supporting their existing position. The effect is strongest for desired outcomes, for emotionally charged issues, and for deeply entrenched beliefs.

Confirmation bias is part of what makes biases so sticky. Intentionally or not, we tend to seek out information that supports our views and that further solidifies our views and beliefs. And technology isn't much help; we now know that social media algorithms are designed to show us information in our newsfeed that supports and strengthens our existing views which validates our biases.

Certainty and Uncertainty

Movement and change are vital to life.

Did you know that our eyes need to move in order to gather information? Perception scientist Beau Lotto describes the process on how humans see in the Jordan Harbinger Show podcast episode entitled *Why You See Differently When You Deviate* (2019).

He talks about how there is "a massive hole in your retina, so to speak, which is actually, where your receptors are being covered by the fibers that are going back into your brain." Despite this hole, our brains fill in the blanks.

He then goes on to explain how fast, jerky eye movements are called "saccades" (suh-KODS). Your eyes make hundreds of thousands of saccades a day that enable you to see! If our eyes stop moving, we stop seeing–quite literally. The science is much more complex than we can get into here, but the point is that we need movement to be able to perceive things. Individuals who can't see are able to develop their other senses to support the compensation of lack of sight, which also involves significant movement, growth, and change. So what the saccades demonstrate is that your brain is only ever interested in movement and relationships. It's not interested in absolutes.

When we are stuck we stop seeing.

Approaching anything from a place of absolute certainty is another way we can stay stuck. Our sense of certainty effectively solidifies our biases.

When we make room for uncertainty, we also create space for possibility! We allow room for another narrative, and we deliberately choose to expand our perception.

Even science is less absolute than we'd sometimes like to think. In her Harvard talk, *Uncertainty and The Power of Possibility*, Dr. Ellen Langer tells a story of something that happened at a horse show. A man told her he was getting a hot dog for his horse. Dr. Langer thought this was odd, because "horses are herbivores, they don't eat meat!" However, the man bought the hot dog, and the horse ate it. This challenged her Harvard/Yale-educated thinking. She realized, "everything I thought I knew was probably wrong, at least some of the time."

Her point? Even in science there is room for possibility.

Only when we learn to let go of our strongly held sense of certainty can we be open to new possibilities.

Perception

Do you think it's possible for anyone to be fully objective? Write your first thoughts down.

Examining Assumptions

When we consider interpersonal connection it's important to remember that we only ever see part of a person's story. Just as only about 10% of an iceberg is visible above the water, much of anyone's story is below the surface. Like the iceberg, there is so much we can't see or know about another person. When faced with these unknowns, our brains often begin to fill in those blank spaces with assumptions. When we do, we create a narrative about another person based largely on what WE know from our past experiences, and OUR worldview – which is not going to be accurate or helpful in building connection. It is essential we realize that there is so much we cannot see. We must challenge our assumptions and choose to acknowledge our biases and then put them behind us.
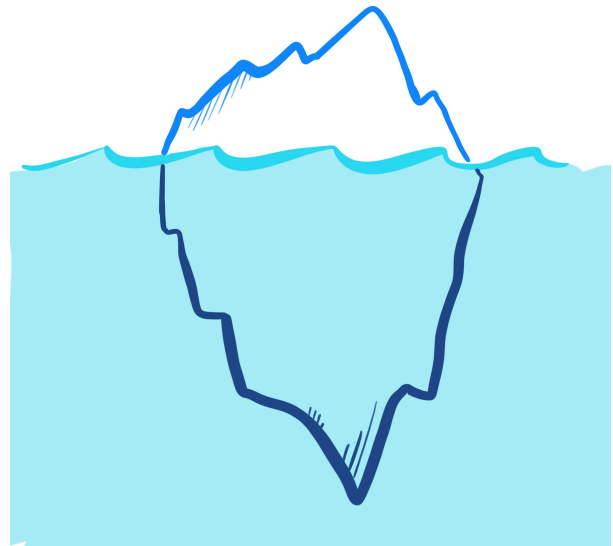
Listening to understand – without filling in the gaps – is essential in peer support work. Most of us aren't really taught to listen in this way. It takes practice. And it's worth it.

Perception and Noticing our Judgements

Noticing our judgments always starts with self-examination and self-awareness. We need to see our mental containers and change the way we perceive them. We must understand that no one sees objectively–we are each seeing through our own worldview and interpreting through the containers we have formed to make sense of things. Bringing awareness to our judgments means questioning our perceptions and containers.

Neuroscientists call this "perceptual awareness." Simply put, perceptual awareness means that we have an awareness that our perceptions are grounded in our assumptions and biases. When we develop this awareness, we can begin to expand our containers, becoming better able to really listen so we can begin to understand.

We can challenge our unconscious biases when we become mindfully aware that we all have them.

Mindfulness is noticing things.

Here we will unpack how our biases get stuck in our subconscious. The way we can unpack these biases is to constantly reflect on our reactions and question ourselves, especially when making quick decisions. We need to disrupt our biases and create more tolerance for difference, with the end goal of becoming more open. Dr. Beau Lotto, in his book *Deviate: The Science of Seeing Differently* (2017) says:

> …if you want to go from A to B, then you must actively engage with the world. But the first step to get to B is to go from A to not-A. To be in not-A is to be in uncertainty, to experience the stimulus without the requisite meaning of the past. The key is to choose to look away from the meaning we have been layering onto stimuli. Stop your reflexive response with awareness. (p 260)

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Everyone Has a Story

The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows is a website and Youtube channel by poet John Koeing. Koeing made up words that he felt were missing from the English language that he wanted to use in his poetry. Among them is the word "Sonder":

> sonder
>
> *n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk.*

In order to support others well, it is important that we learn to de-center ourselves as we listen. As Koeing illustrates with his word sonder, we must remember – and keep reminding ourselves to remember – that we are not the lead in someone else's story. Rather, each person's individual story and experience is as vivid, important, central and valid as another's. When we are able to recognize our biases, decenter ourselves and center the other, we will be better able to listen and understand.

Putting it Together: Supporting Others

In his talk *Experiences in Communication* given in the autumn of 1964 at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, Carl Rogers said:

> When someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good…. When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. It is astonishing how elements which seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens. How confusions which seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is heard.

Section 2: Understanding Self-Determination

Life Application Story

Check out this scenario with Rachel and Devon.

Rachel had just started working in a peer support role. She was excited to support a fellow student, Devon, through some of his struggles with the stress of university. Having had her own challenges throughout her degree, she knew a lot of good tools and strategies for keeping up with deadlines and staying well. Shortly after introducing themselves, Rachel asked Devon how he was coping with his coursework.

"I'm kinda falling behind. The thing is, I have a really hard time getting to sleep at night, and then I wake up late and miss class," said Devon.

"What have you been doing before bed?" Rachel replied.

"Well, I usually play video games until really late, to help me unwind. And then I can't get to sleep, so I just keep playing."

"Hmm. Yeah, that doesn't sound very healthy, does it? Having a good sleep hygiene practice is really important. You really should turn off all screens at least an hour before bed."

Rachel noticed that Devon seemed to shut down, and the conversation stopped abruptly. She tried to get him to talk more about how she could help him, but he was pretty quiet for the rest of the visit. At the end of their time together, Rachel felt satisfied that she had at least given Devon some good suggestions he could apply.

Let's try this again, and this time we will consider self–determination.

Rachel was looking forward to meeting up with her peer, Devon. Based on her desire to help others, she knew that she might struggle with freely giving advice. So, she reminded herself that each person has the tools within themselves to stay healthy and thrive. After chatting for some time about how the semester was going, Devon opened up about his struggle with sleep.

"I'm really having a hard time getting out of bed. I've been staying up really late playing video games or watching movies, and then I sleep in and miss class and don't get my assignments finished on time."

Rachel listened and found herself wanting to step in and make a few suggestions. She realized what she was doing and let herself sit with her own discomfort around not being able to fix the situation and help Devon right away. Instead, she decided to trust that he had the knowledge he needed to find a way through the situation. "Mmm…Sounds like it's a tough cycle to get out of.

Sometimes I stream hours of TV when I know I should be doing the course readings. It makes me feel good for a bit, and then I start stressing out even more."

"Yeah. It's like... I just get really overwhelmed sometimes. And that stuff is fun and an escape, I guess. I know there are assignments and readings I need to do, and not doing them makes me more anxious and depressed," said Devon.

Again, Rachel had a lot of suggestions floating through her mind, but she kept them to herself. "What would help you start tackling some of the assignments that you need to do?"

Devon thought for a while. "I really don't know. I just feel so tired and unmotivated a lot of the time." Rachel knew from her own experience making choices that impacted her health in a negative way, that often she knew what she needed to do and just flat out ignored it for instant gratification. She always regretted her decision later.

Rachel thought for a bit about how she could reframe her question differently so Devon could tap into some of his inner wisdom. "What do you think is your biggest contributor to feeling so tired and unmotivated?"

"I'm pretty sure it's because I stay up until almost 3am every night." Devon said.

"I get that. I feel that way on the nights I binge TV shows. I enjoy it in the moment, but it makes me feel gross the next day. Is there something you can do to support yourself to go to bed earlier?" Rachel said.

"Hmmmmm..." Devon said. "Well, I guess I could set a guideline for myself that I can't play a game unless I've done one reading or assignment that I need to do in my day. That would help me relax a bit, so I don't feel so guilty in the morning. Maybe setting a timer would help me not lose track of time."

"That sounds like an amazing idea. I need to come up with a plan like that to control my TV watching!"

What is Self-Determination?

Self-determination is one of the Core Values of peer support.

Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions and have freedom from coercion.
	We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation.
	Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.

Self-Determination Involves all the Following Concepts

- A person's right and ability to choose what they want and need for themselves
- To be free from coercion, or from having other people make one's life decisions
- It's about getting in the driver's seat of one's life, instead of always being the passenger
- A belief that each person has an inner expert (even if they have barriers and can't tap into their own wisdom at the moment)

Self-Determination Theory

"In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back."
~ Albert Camus

Self-determination is the innate desire to flourish that is embedded within each of us. Self-determination is about feeling equipped to make our own choices so that we feel a sense of control over our own lives. Our well-being is deeply connected to our sense of self-determination.

Our role in peer support is to create the right conditions for others to deepen their sense of self-determination. As supporters, we walk alongside others, but we never fix or save.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci are the creators of Self-Determination Theory. In their paper *Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being* (2000), they talk about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation:

Extrinsic Motivation

The root of the word Extrinsic is external.

This is when people are motivated by something outside of themselves, usually in the form of a reward or punishment. This motivation can come from increased money or reward, general success, good grades, or even fame. Punishment, embarrassment, or public scorn can also serve as extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic Motivation

The root of the word Intrinsic is internal.

This is motivation that is born out of purpose, meaning, and/or pure enjoyment. It means people are motivated by something within themselves. People can be intrinsically motivated by the pleasure of learning, their own interests, the desire to make an impact on the world, enjoyment, and basic life satisfaction. Doing things willingly.

Lasting change **always** comes through intrinsic motivation.

That's not to say that extrinsic motivation doesn't have its place. Often it does. We all find ourselves motivated extrinsically at times. However, that kind of motivation has limits. The scales need to tip in the direction of intrinsic motivation to make a lasting difference in our lives.

For example

Someone might choose a career simply because it pays well (*extrinsic motivation*). If they don't have much attachment to the job itself (*intrinsic motivation*), over time they can feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled.

Someone else might find a career they love, and they find purpose in the role (*intrinsic motivation*). The purpose is a motivator. If they have some autonomy in their workplace and an active role, their intrinsic motivation will continue to grow. At some point they might choose to increase their skill level within their field, so they can get paid more (*extrinsic motivation*).

For Reflection

- List five more examples of extrinsic motivation:
- List five more examples of intrinsic motivation:
- Consider your own motivation. When have you been motivated extrinsically? Describe. Did the change stick? If it did, can you observe some intrinsic motivation involved?
- Counter that with a time when you were intrinsically motivated. What motivated you? Why? Did the change stick? Were there elements of external motivation present as well?

Self-Determination Theory – The Three Parts

self-determination theory

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE THREE BASIC NEEDS:

COMPETENCE	AUTONOMY	RELATEDNESS
People need to gain mastery and control of their own lives & their environment. Essential to wellness.	People need to feel in control of their own life, behaviours and goals. This is about choice.	People need to experience a sense of belonging and connection with other people. *Feeling cared for by others & to care for others.*
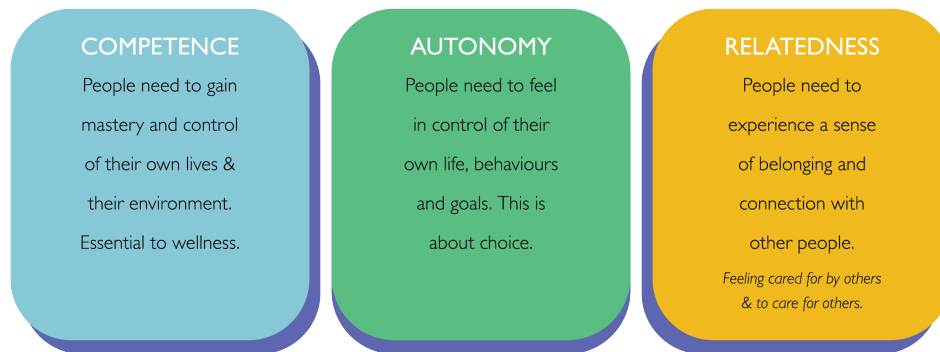
Based on the work of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci.

Let's explore more about Ryan & Deci's self-determination theory.

Have you ever said, or heard someone say, *"How can I motivate that person?"*

The answer is that you can't motivate anyone. Not really.

Anything you can do is rooted in extrinsic motivation–basically offering a reward or a punishment, and that doesn't support self-determination or real deep-seated change.

However, we CAN create an ecology that supports someone to develop their own self-determination. **Creating this ecology is one of the most important things we can do when we support others!** All lasting change must be intrinsically motivated. In other words, all change must come from within.

As a supporter you cannot make change happen in someone else's life. You can, however, work intentionally to create conditions that will encourage someone to find their inner motivation.

The Self-Determination theory says that humans have three basic needs–Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness. In other words, we need to have mastery and skills, autonomy, and connection.

Competence

As human beings, we all need to feel effective, competent, and well-trained. We must have regular opportunities to continue our growth and learning.

- We need to have and work towards small and large goals.
- We need to be constantly learning and practicing new skills
- When we feel like we have skills and competency, we are more likely to take risks, and reach towards goals
- We thrive when we feel a sense of mastery
- When we feel competent, our capacity for risk-taking and dealing with uncertainty increases
- It is essential that we have a sense of control within our own lives
- Feeling competent fuels our sense of purpose
- Competence encourages curiosity

Consider your own experience of competence. How has learning a new skill supported your motivation towards meeting a new goal?

Autonomy

People need autonomy over their goals, choices, and behaviours.They need a sense of independence and relative freedom. When a person feels a sense of autonomy, they are able to take initiative and have the tools to self-regulate.

- We need to have autonomy over our own choices, big or small
- When we have a sense of autonomy, we are better prepared to take personal responsibility for our life, and give up blaming others
- We can get out of auto-pilot and choose to be intentional
- When we have a sense of autonomy, we are able to notice what choices and actions are life-giving and supportive, and which aren't

Consider your own experience of autonomy. Have you noticed your ability to make your own choices impacting your motivation? Do you notice how your choices impact your sense of well-being?

Relatedness

We all have a deep-seated need for belonging. When we feel connected to others, we are more apt to feel engaged and motivated. We all have a need to both give and receive support. It is harder to access our self-determination without that connection to a social group.

- Respect and genuine caring are important aspects of our belonging
- Inclusive environments that encourage diversity are essential
- Feelings of connection and relatedness are broken down by criticism, ostracizing, and cliques
- We need social and community connections and support systems

Consider your own experience of relatedness. Have you noticed that when you are connected with others, that you have a greater sense of motivation? Have you noticed your motivation decrease, as you feel lonely and isolated?

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Encouragement and Self-Determination

Receiving positive feedback and encouragement is an important part of growing self-determination. When we hear unexpected words of encouragement from people we trust, it increases our confidence, which supports building our motivation.

Many of us cringe when we hear the word "feedback" because we associate it with criticism. But we aren't talking about that kind of feedback here. While there might be a time and a place for constructive criticism, when we consider the growth of someone's self-determination, we want our feedback to be positive.

Within your role as a peer support worker, learning to give this kind of encouragement and positive feedback is necessary and can be an invaluable tool.

Here are some tips to develop your skill of giving positive feedback and encouragement:

- **Notice.** Pay attention to the growth of the person you are working with, no matter how small the growth is. We have to be looking for these small moments though, or they will pass us by.
- **The small steps matter a lot.** When someone is struggling, little things can be very hard. Celebrating small wins is important and so encouraging. For someone who is struggling with their mental health, it can be so meaningful to have someone affirm to them, "You got out of bed, got dressed, and ate! That's a big win!" Truly, tiny steps forward make all the difference!
- **Be specific.** Instead of saying "that was awesome" or "you're doing great," find something very specific to share with them.

  - For example: *"The way you managed that situation was so good! I saw that you were very clear with your boundaries. I know you have shared with me that boundary setting is hard for you. I really saw that you were clear and firm with what was ok for you."*
  - Or something like, *"Wow, those cookies are so delicious. I love the flavour combination of cinnamon and chocolate. You really have some skills with flavour."*

- **Be genuine.** Don't make things up. If you do, people will know and it will break down the trust you have built. Trust your ability to observe real strengths. If you want to work on this skill, practice when you are watching TV shows, movies, reading books, or listening to podcasts. Take note of the strengths and abilities of all the people in the stories. We can really expand our skill of seeing strengths if we pay attention.
- **Celebrate.** Together, intentionally celebrate small and big wins. Celebrating in small ways really supports the growth of self-determination. Consider mutuality in this, since it is an important aspect of peer support.

  - You can also model this kind of celebration. "*I did something super hard today. I had to*

advocate for myself with my phone company, and I was avoiding it. So I'm going to treat myself to a latte today!"

◦ A lot of us aren't great at celebrating small and big wins. Supporting someone to be able to identify their wins is really important.

Ecology of Self-Determination

"A seed only begins to manifest its greatest potential the day it is buried in dirt."
~Matshona Dhliwayo

First let's define ecology.

The following definitions of "ecology" come from Dictionary.com:

1. *The branch of biology dealing with the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment, including other organisms.*
2. *The set of relationships existing between organisms and their environment: desert ecologies.*
3. *The set of relationships existing between any complex system and its surroundings or environment: the ecology and politics of healthcare.*
4. *Also called human ecology. The branch of sociology concerned with the spacing and interdependence of people and institutions.*

Now let's look at a simple example of ecology. In the spring, many of us desire to bring plants into

our outdoor spaces. If we head to the local garden store and simply buy a bunch of seeds and plants without considering the ecology of our spaces, the chances of cultivating a thriving garden are pretty slim. When we plant seeds, we need to consider soil quality, sunlight, temperature, and watering needs. Each plant is different. It's also important to consider the combination of plants we wish to grow, and how they interact with one another. Tomatoes planted beside a lower growing plant will steal the sun as it grows taller, and the smaller plants won't grow.

It's a little mind-blowing when you consider all the potential held in a tiny little seed. It's very easy to look at a tomato seed as we plant it and think it will never amount to anything. Then as time moves forward and we tend to it, the seed grows into a plant, and as we tend to the needs of the plant, we get to see it grow. Eventually the plant flowers, and little green tomatoes pop out. Growing tomatoes requires patience, but with the right care and attention we can have a beautiful harvest at the end of summer.

For Reflection

Have you ever felt moved by nature? Think of a time when you felt a surge of hope related to the resilience of nature. For example, this could be a time when a nearly dead houseplant grew a new leaf after some care and attention. Or perhaps you had the opportunity to walk through a forest that was previously devastated by fire, and you saw the forest restoring itself.

What did you see? Please describe below.

The Difference Between Environment and Ecology

Environment

An environment is simply the static surroundings someone or something is embedded within. When we speak of "environment" we are speaking about the conditions surrounding a living thing. In your case, right now your environment might be the room you are in—including things like the temperature, the colour of the walls, the chair you are sitting in, the computer you are working at, the lighting, the sounds, the smells in the room. Some environments are very static, especially if you consider places like hospitals, malls, or offices. There is much less interconnection, uniqueness of self, working together, and choice in an environment.

Let's look at another example of a more static environment: *Consider a teenager entering high school for the first time. Many of us felt like small fish in a big pond when we were that age. There were very concrete systems and rules in place. Desks were set up a certain way. Classes were run to meet the needs of the majority rather than the individual. Curriculum was offered in a way that fit with the school objectives and values and to meet the requirements of the province. There weren't always opportunities to influence the physical environment or even the learning environment. A lot of us found ourselves having difficulty fitting in or feeling like we belonged.*

(*Your high school may have looked different. Today many schools and education systems are working to change to a different approach that meets the needs of kids differently. However, many of us had challenging experiences in school.)

Ecology

Ecology, however, is the environment *plus* the interconnection of YOU and all living things in that environment. An ecology is living and breathing and interconnected. Each part of the ecology has a role and importance.

Consider the ecology of the outdoors. Every living thing is interconnected and relies on other living things for survival. Let's look at the role honeybees play in our ecology. Bees pollinate plants. Pollination starts the growth of fruit. The sun and water nourish the plant. It grows and grows. We harvest the fruit, and the fruit then nourishes us. One living thing affects another, each action influences other living things. As humans, our health is greatly interconnected with the health of the bee population.

> Ecology is about a relationship: it is the fluid, interactive interconnection between all living things and the environment they inhabit.

When discussing ecology, a big component of interconnection is something we call uniqueness of self. Uniqueness of self means that each living thing – with all its individuality – has a unique and important role to play within the whole. We aren't all the same. We are all different and our strengths and differences complement each other. Uniformity should never be the goal (*as we covered in the person-first language section*). Interconnection means that we join our unique gifts together and that connection creates an ecology that is wonderful and dynamic. When we each have **competency, autonomy, relatedness** (*which are the three parts of self-determination theory we talked about earlier*) we can begin to trust ourselves, and harness our self-determination, resilience, and courage. As we do, we can step into our unique role in the ecology of our life and community.

A thriving social ecology is a community where all participants are valued for who they are. Together the members of the community support and encourage each other. They intentionally

create opportunities to honour each other's strengths and uniqueness while guiding others in skill building. Both solitude and connection are valued and encouraged. Conflict is seen as a normal part of relationship and community living. Differences of opinion are handled in an honest, direct and respectful way, with each person being mindful of their own judgments, biases, and assumptions.

For Reflection

- Can you think of any communities similar to the one mentioned above? (They can be real or fictional, e.g. from a book or movie – The Fellowship of the Ring from the Lord of the Rings trilogy, or the gang from The Wizard of Oz)? What are some things you appreciate about that community?
- How do interconnection and self-determination show up in the community?
- Can you see the ecology of peer support looking like this?

How can Peer Support Foster an Ecology of Self-Determination?

Like the potential held in a seed, people also possess an innate propensity towards growth and transformation. Self-determination requires a specific ecology to flourish. We recognize that we can face many obstacles that can inhibit our growth. However, when the conditions are right in our lives (thanks to our ecology) we can harness our intrinsic motivation, find hope and a sense of purpose, and move forward.

Reflect on the core values of peer support. If we live out the core values in our work, consider how that will add to an ecology that encourages self-determination.

Below, write down some ideas on how living out the specific core value can contribute to an ecology that supports self-determination. Consider intrinsic motivation and the 3 components of self-determination that we covered earlier in this module (Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness).

You are the Expert on You

Looking for others to "fix" us is a popular trend in our society. Marketers are taught to first identify a consumer's problem, tell us all about how vexing the problem is, and then tell us how the product they are selling will solve it! It's a very well used formula. Try to notice this formula the next time you see, read, or listen to advertisements.

As a society we tend to place a huge emphasis on problems and on problem-solving. The biggest lie that we are fed is that someone else always holds the key to "fixing us."

But here is a thought: What if *you* are the expert on you? What if you hold the key to your own growth embedded right within you? What if everyone you know is also an expert on themselves?

Would this be a *paradigm shift* for you? (A *paradigm shift is a huge change in approach, and all the assumptions underneath that approach.*)

Each human being holds a wealth of knowledge, ability, resilience, and strength. It's similar to that tiny seed, or that acorn that will eventually become a giant oak tree!

Sometimes life is really tough. We can get discouraged and overwhelmed. We might even feel despair. When we are lost we can lose sight of who we are, what we believe, and the direction we have for our lives, but that doesn't mean that all those things aren't still within us waiting to be discovered.

The Paradigm Shift

- The non-negotiable belief that each person has an inner expert within
- This is **absolutely essential** as you move into your role as a peer support worker
- This paradigm shift upholds *self-determination* at the core of effective peer support work.

Avoid Advice-Giving

"When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honoured."
~Parker J. Palmer

Before we dig into this section, let's consider shifting our language and mindset from "helping" to "supporting" when we are working with someone. When we come alongside and support, we are encouraging the growth of a person's self-determination, rather than trying to fix them. Even shifting our language from using the word "help" to "support" goes a long way in creating an ecology that supports self-determination.

As peer support workers, rather than giving someone advice, we work to help them uncover and trust their inner teacher. No fixing, no saving, no setting each other straight. Instead, we keep honouring the relationship at the core of our interactions, and we support people to tap into their inner wisdom and find the answers within.

When we give advice, we are always giving advice based on our own personal experiences. Our advice is rooted in our own perspective. The people we are supporting have different experiences, beliefs, values, hopes and dreams. Even when we have much in common there are always differences.

When we are tempted to give advice, it is essential that we recognize these facts. There is a time and place for concrete advice. If we go to a lawyer for legal advice, a doctor for support with a heart condition, or an accountant for tax support, then we want some very concrete advice. However, when we are dealing with issues closer to the soul and heart, we need a different approach.

For Reflection

- Have you ever been sharing a problem with someone, and they jumped in and gave you advice? How did that make you feel?
- Have you had an experience when you shared something personal with someone you trust, and rather than giving advice, they asked you questions? Did that support

you with figuring out what your next steps should be? How did it make you feel?
- Has there been a time when you asked for advice, and got exactly what you needed? Who did you ask? Why was it what you needed?

But What if we are Directly Asked for Advice?

We get into this work because we want to make a difference. We want to "help" people, and often "helping" feels like it goes hand in hand with advice-giving.

"Helping feels good to the helper, but over time it may make the helped feel incompetent."
~Ellen Langer (Mindfulness)

How do we not give advice? Isn't it rude not to give advice if we are asked? Won't it create disconnection?

These are common questions when we first learn about self-determination and advice-giving. If you are feeling this confusion, you are not alone! It can feel very hard to avoid giving advice when we are asked for it, especially when we have lots to say!

The key is to remember that people need to be intrinsically motivated to make a change. And that advice-giving is essentially extrinsic. So even if we are asked for advice, it's important to remember that our advice does not support their self-determination.

So, when someone asks for advice, we can instead ask them intentional questions that support them to tap into their own inner wisdom and find their answer within. We get to reflect what we notice and hear, so that they are better able to trust their own wisdom.

Creating Safety

In peer work, we must navigate the challenge of keeping the space between us and the people we are supporting open without eroding their self-determination with our well-intended advice. This means we must sit with the discomfort that comes with not giving all the answers. We can't possibly fix anyone; it's not our role.

As peers, we are there for the mutual relationship–the connection and the support. It's important to regularly reflect on the core values of peer support because it can be so easy to get sucked back into that "fix-it" role.

Here are some things to keep in mind as we work to create safety in our peer support work:

- Be mindful about the words we choose in conversation.
- Remember that all change comes from within.
- Avoid giving clinical advice. (Especially about medications or diagnoses.)
- Let go of any agendas aside from supporting others to explore their inner wisdom.

Silence can be a wonderful thing. To feel safe with someone and be able to spend time together in silence is a gift.

Here are some wise words from Parker J. Palmer, author of A *Hidden Wholeness* (2008):

> "In the face of our deepest questions — the kind we are invited to explore in circles of trust — our habit of advising each other reveals its shadow side. If the shadow could speak its logic, I think it would say something like this: 'If you take my advice, you will surely solve your problem. If you take my advice but fail to solve your problem, you did not try hard enough. If you fail to take my advice, I did the best I could. So I am covered. No matter how things come out, I no longer need to worry about you or your vexing problem.' The shadow behind the 'fixes' we offer for issues that we cannot fix is, ironically, the desire to hold each other at bay. It is a strategy for abandoning each other while appearing to be concerned. Perhaps this explains why one of the most common laments of our time is that 'no one really sees me, hears me or understands me.'" ~Parker J. Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life (p. 117)

> "When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honoured. If your problem is soul-deep, your soul alone knows what you need to do about it, and my presumptuous advice will only drive your soul back into the woods. So the best service I

can render when you speak to me about such a struggle is to hold you faithfully in a space where you can listen to your inner teacher.

"But holding you that way takes time, energy, and patience. As the minutes tick by, with no outward sign that anything is happening for you, I start feeling anxious, useless, and foolish, and I start thinking about all the other things I have to do. Instead of keeping the space between us open for you to hear your soul, I fill it up with advice, not so much to meet your needs as to assuage my anxiety and get on with my life. Then I can disengage from you, a person with a troublesome problem, while saying to myself, 'I tried to help'. I walk away feeling virtuous. You are left feeling unseen and unheard."

~Parker J. Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life (pp. 117 – 118)

For Reflection

- When you read Parker J. Palmer's quotes, what comes up for you?
- As a peer support worker, it is important to build safety and trust. How will you do that? How will you sit with the discomfort of holding back on advice-giving?

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

CULTURAL HUMILITY

Purpose of Module

Culture is a very important aspect of humanity. When we identify with the dominant culture of a society, we can lose sensitivity to understanding and empathizing with people of other cultures, races, and ethnicities. Today, there are many issues within our society that have come from the mindset of colonization in North America. We will examine some of the history of colonization, and work at ways we can take a humble approach in breaking down some common and destructive tendencies.

Many students come to Canada to study. In this module we will look at how we can apply the principles of cultural humility as we work with international students in peer support programs.

The goal of cultural humility is to become aware of our cultural lens and choose to let go of our biases so that we can perceive other cultures with respect and a sense of humility.

Learning Objectives

1. You will be able to articulate a broad definition of culture and explain why having a sense of culture is important for one's well-being.
2. You will observe and reflect on your own culture, including your practices, beliefs, and values.
3. You will demonstrate openness and acceptance towards those who have different belief systems, cultural practices, and lifestyle choices than your own.
4. You will develop skills to be able to create safe, culturally sensitive, humble environments for the people you will support, including international students.
5. You will be able to demonstrate an awareness of the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples in BC.

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. *If you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.*

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

Culture Defined

"The role of culture is that it's the form through which we as a society reflect on who we are, where we've been, where we hope to be."
~ Wendell Pierce

What is the broad definition of culture?

As mentioned above, culture is a complex combination of beliefs, values, traditions, and ways of life shared by a people group.

We tend to equate culture only with ethnicity. However, everywhere people gather, culture is cultivated. And while culture and ethnicity are certainly entwined, we also find distinct cultures form within cities, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, community associations, religious organizations, activism work, and family and friend groups.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines culture as:

A. "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group"
B. "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization"
C. the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic

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Material culture refers to the objects or belongings of a group of people. Stores, cars, phones and physical structures where people worship like mosques or churches are all part of material culture.

Non-material culture, in comparison to material culture, refers to the ideas, attitudes, values, norms and beliefs of a people group.

Let's Look at The Interconnection Of Culture and Well-Being

- **Culture and belonging**. When we embrace a culture, our sense of belonging and purpose is increased. As we talked about in Module three: Unpacking our Biases, as humans we create

helpful categories to make sense of the world around us. These categories then help us to create meaning while discovering our place in society. Identity with culture is intrinsic to belonging.

Culture isn't relegated to our ancestry, it's much broader. Every people group has a distinct culture whether it's a family, an organization, a church community, a group of people who have immigrated from the same country, people who love The Grateful Dead, or even a group of friends who play Dungeons and Dragons every Saturday.

- **Shared culture connects people**. When we experience shared culture, we feel connected to others, and less alone. As we have covered in other parts of this training, connection and interconnection are essential elements of well-being. We will explore different aspects of culture including popular culture, subcultures, and counterculture movements.
- **Consider your own personal connection to culture**. Whether that culture is related to your national culture or a subculture you are involved in, how important is that culture to your well-being? How can you nurture your connection to culture?

After we have explored our own connection to culture, we want to increase our acceptance for other cultures through exploring:

- Why it is essential that in peer support we honour those who identify with cultures that are different from our own, engaging them with humility and deep respect.
- How disconnection from one's culture combined with pressure to blend in with a dominant culture, can be very detrimental to one's well-being.
- Aspects of Canada's colonization that have stolen culture from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, and what we can do to support reconciliation.

We begin with the WHY: the importance of culture.

Then we will move into the HOW: implementing culturally humble practices.

What is Culture?

Culture is learned. As time passes, and current events become history, culture evolves. Culture is like a pair of glasses that influences the way we see and experience the world.

Consider the previous module where we covered worldview as well as categories and containers, and let's link those concepts to culture. Remember, we create categories and containers to make sense of the world around us. And our worldview is the cumulative sum of all our life experiences. Culture and worldview are very intertwined; a person's culture makes a huge impact on how they experience and function in the world. The categories we form will be different depending on the culture in which we are immersed.

In the BCcampus textbook *Introduction to Sociology – 2nd Canadian Edition*, the author William Little states the following in the "what is culture" section:

> Firstly, almost every human behaviour, from shopping to marriage to expressions of feelings, is learned. Secondly, culture is innovative. The existence of different cultural practices reveals the way in which societies find different solutions to real life problems…Culture is, therefore, key to the way humans, as a species, have successfully adapted to the environment. The existence of different cultures refers to the different means by which humans use innovation to free themselves from biological and environmental constraints. Thirdly, culture is also restraining. Cultures retain their distinctive patterns through time." This means that the culture retains its uniqueness even amidst large global changes. (2016)

Historical events can have long-term impact on the culture of a people group. When an event occurs that is shared by many in a people group, together the people create meaning from the event. These events affect collective norms, social practice, and belief systems.

History and lived experience leads to deep-seated beliefs, and the development of worldview. An essential way to understand a particular culture is to look at its history.

As you can imagine, storytelling is an important part of culture. Storytelling is essentially the way we make meaning from past experiences and then share that meaning with others. Storytelling keeps culture alive through the passing down of important meanings from one generation to the next.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of History website says that "history builds empathy through studying the lives and struggles of others. The website goes on to state,

> Studying the diversity of human experience helps us appreciate cultures, ideas, and traditions that are not our own – and to recognize them as meaningful products of specific times and places. History helps us realize how different our lived experience is from that of our ancestors, yet how similar we are in our goals and values.

For Reflection

- What is a culture you identify with?

- How do you see history affecting the culture of that group?

Components of Culture

In the opensource textbook *Leading with Cultural Intelligence* (2012) published by Saylor Foundation, the author defines culture this way:

> Culture consists of the shared beliefs, values, and assumptions of a group of people who learn from one another and teach to others that their behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives are the correct ways to think, act, and feel. It is helpful if you can think about culture in the following five ways:
>
> - Culture is learned.
> - Culture is shared.
> - Culture is dynamic.
> - Culture is systemic.
> - Culture is symbolic.

Let's dig a bit deeper into these components.

Culture is learned: From the time we are children, we learn about our culture through our interactions with others in our community, especially our caregivers. As we grow, we learn through observing others, listening, and asking questions.

Culture is shared: We all engage in multiple different cultures. Culture is connected to our ancestry. Culture is also shared in the communities we live in. The places we work. Anytime people gather and share experiences, culture is formed. The way we collectively interpret the meaning of experiences, adds to the cultural tapestry. Each different group will all have its own culture. Spending time with people who understand all aspects of our lives can feel comforting.

Culture is dynamic: Culture doesn't stay the same. It's fluid. It moves and changes as time moves forward. Since culture is shared, we all influence the forming of culture in small (and sometimes big) ways, and over time it shifts. Consider how the introduction of various technologies has impacted our own culture. *Perhaps you remember a time before smartphones, social media, and texting. How do you think the introduction of smartphones has impacted culture?*

Culture is systemic: We will cover a bit more about systems in future modules. Some examples of systems within a society are healthcare, law, governance, capitalism, education, social services

and our economy. This is just a sampling, there's many more systems that impact society. When speaking specifically about culture, we must try to understand that these systems contribute many different layers to our lives, and therefore our culture. Some of these layers can be helpful while others are quite harmful. The history of each of these systems – and how they have helped, hurt, or harmed people – influences culture and therefore the behaviours of people who live within the society.

Culture is symbolic: Symbols are most often something material that stands in for something else. Symbols can be important to certain cultures and can also communicate a message.

Consider the symbol of the eagle or an eagle feather. What would one of these symbols mean to you if you saw it? While it may mean nothing to one person or people group, in Indigenous culture the eagle is sacred. It is considered the messenger of the Creator. The eagle is also the national symbol of several countries, including the United States. Depending on your culture, you would interpret the symbol differently.

Consider religious symbols like a Star of David, or a cross. What would one of those symbols communicate to you if you saw the symbol on a building?

What if you saw a rainbow sticker outside a store, what would that mean to you?

Or what if someone you passed on the street gave you a Vulcan salute (Star Trek: means live long and prosper)? Would that mean anything to you, or would you scratch your head in confusion? What about a thumbs up sign? Do you think these symbols have the same meaning in different parts of the world, or could they mean different things depending on the culture?

Depending on your connection to a culture, you may interpret a symbol differently than someone else would interpret them who is from a different culture.

Some elements of culture are:

- Values and beliefs
- Social norms
- Symbols and language
- Stories
- Artifacts
- Heroes

Culture can show up in many ways including art/drama/music, customs, faith/religions, food, attitudes, and rituals.

Cultures can change and shift over time. However, since so many people influence culture, any changes can move quite slowly.

"A *nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.*" ~ *Mahatma Gandhi*

Culture is the soul connection of a society. It bonds people together and creates a sense of belonging with people who "get" us (at least certain parts of us). Without some sense of connection to culture, we risk becoming disconnected and displaced.

Participating in a culture can be a source of wonder and delight. Culture can come with a wellspring of creativity. We can find identity in alignment within our cultures. Through our cultural expression we tell stories and pass wisdom to the younger generations, we celebrate the goodness of life, we create artistic expression, and we remember the past and nurture hope for the future.

"*Traditions are the guideposts driven deep in our subconscious minds. The most powerful ones are those we can't even describe, aren't even aware of.*" ~ *Ellen Goodman*

When Identifying With a Culture Doesn't fit Anymore

Culture isn't always connection, beauty, and art. Sometimes belonging to a certain culture can be oppressive and constrictive. Some people choose to leave a community they have grown up in, or one they have chosen themselves, if they find the culture of that group to be limiting,or oppressive. As humans we evolve and grow, and something that resonated and felt meaningful to us at one time might not resonate anymore. Our values and priorities can shift over time, and if we don't feel like the community culture aligns with our values, we might feel the need to pull away from that specific group.

It's not uncommon for people as adults to leave a religious community in which they grew up because it doesn't feel right for them anymore. Some communities can place high demands on people that they are no longer willing or able to meet. Pulling away can be hard to do, because religion can be so tied to culture, including family culture.

We are often attracted to a community because we resonate with the culture of that community. We all have this deep need for belonging. However, as time moves on and we shift and grow, we might need that community less. Some people have been hurt or abused by certain communities, and it can be made worse if the culture of that group keeps people from acknowledging the hurt.

This is important to keep in mind when doing peer support work, because we shouldn't assume that people will always feel a connection to a certain group or culture. We must be cautious about pushing anything on anyone, even if that is engagement with a cultural group. We must remember the principles of self-determination and create space for them to choose what they need for their own well-being.

For Reflection

- Has there been a time in your life when you had to leave a community or group, because you didn't align with the culture of the group anymore? How did it feel?
- Was it hard to find another community that you trusted? If so, what made you trust

the community?

Worldview and Culture

Cultural Lenses

Consider how our worldview affects the way we perceive the world. Every single one of our past experiences influences our worldview, and therefore the meaning we give to our experiences.

Our involvement in cultures plays a big part in creating the way we see the world. Both the way we assess a situation and how we approach decision making are filtered through our cultural lens (or lenses). We notice these lenses especially when we travel to a new area. We might find ourselves feeling confused by a new culture. We might find the experience of being in a new culture to be odd, interesting, or just plain different. We might feel invigorated, uncomfortable, or even frightened by the differences in culture.

When we find ourselves exposed to new situations and experiences like this, we face uncertainty. As we have discussed in other sections of this curriculum, we humans really like to avoid the discomfort of uncertainty, so we – without even being aware of it – seek certainty. When we don't know something, our brain goes to fill in the blank with something we do know–and that something will come from our own cultural lens!

Our lens is simply what we know or consider to be "normal." So it is understandable that we can have a really hard time becoming aware of our cultural lens. It feels much easier to just rely on what we already know and believe to be true for us.   This is why it can become so easy to make assumptions and judgements about people from other cultures. When we are home in our usual environments, with our usual community, we most often forget that we even have a cultural lens that's always at work. This is especially problematic when we interact with people from different cultures within our usual settings (work, community, etc.).

> The goal of cultural humility is to become aware of our cultural lens and choose to let go of our biases so that we can perceive other cultures with respect and a sense of humility.

"Our cultural lens is so much a part of us that we are not even aware of how obvious it is to others. Like the nose on your face, you may forget that it is there, but everyone else sees it. I can't look at you and not see your nose." ~Susan C. Young

- Has there been a time when you felt uncomfortable or nervous in a different culture? Why? Do you think that has anything to do with your own cultural lens?
- Have you ever felt invigorated by another culture? If so, what attracted or intrigued you?

Social Norms

Science Direct defines social norms as "a way of thinking, feeling or behaving that is deemed by the group as appropriate."

Every culture and community has a different set of norms.

Let's look at some from different countries. This is not meant to be exhaustive, it's just meant to give some examples:

Canada:

- It is customary to tip in restaurants. Servers rely on tip money, and it's considered rude not to tip.
- It's considered rude to slurp or burp while eating.
- If you get on an empty bus, it would be considered inappropriate to sit next to the only other person on the bus.
- It's considered polite to look people in the eye and say hello when you pass them on the street. It would be rude if you didn't reciprocate a hello or a smile on the street by a passerby.
- When speaking to someone, eye contact is considered polite, but also breaks are good. Constant eye contact can be too much.
- Canadians value promptness.
- Regardless of COVID protocols, people expect others to give them personal space.

China:

- Family heritage is very important therefore people are addressed by their last names. Calling someone by their first name is considered rude.
- Burping is considered a form of gratitude.
- It's customary to refuse a gift a few times before accepting it.
- People sleep in open public places.
- Harmony is very important, and people will go to great lengths to avoid causing anyone public embarrassment.
- Tea is an important part of culture. Teacups are continually filled as they are emptied. It's customary to tap the table with two fingers to say thank you.

France:

- It's considered rude and an insult to the chef if you ask for salt or other condiments.

- It is considered good manners to arrive at someone's house 10-15 minutes late, so that you don't interrupt the host as they are preparing.
- Most people in France practice a double kiss (on each cheek) greeting, although in some areas it's four kisses.

India:

- The right hand is used for eating, greeting people, touching things, because the left hand is used for toileting. This is also the same in much of the Middle East, Sri Lanka, and parts of Africa.
- Feet and footwear are considered unclean. Footwear is always removed when entering a home or place of worship. It's important to avoid pointing feet at other people.
- Being late is very normal, and not considered rude.

Japan:

- It's considered an insult to tip any service industry workers (taxi drivers, servers etc.).
- Eye contact during conversation is considered disrespectful.
- Slurping your noodles is the norm. By slurping, you are complimenting the chef.
- It is considered impolite to introduce yourself, instead you wait for someone else to introduce you.
- The oldest person in the room is revered. They are to be served first.
- Long before Covid, people have been wearing masks in public to avoid spreading germs
- It's common to greet people with a bow.

Latin America:

- It's considered a faux pas to be early to something. It's considered better to be late.
- It's considered rude to have your hands in your pockets.
- People stand close to one another in conversation. In conversation, it's considered rude if you step back in need of personal space.

Middle East

- It is important to dress modestly, despite the heat.
- Public displays of affection are frowned upon.
- Excessive complimenting can make people feel uncomfortable.

Here are a few more social norms from different countries:

- It's considered rude to sit in the backseat of a cab in Australia or New Zealand if you are traveling alone. Riding in the back suggests that you think you are better than the driver.
- A thumbs up sign in the Middle East is equivalent to the middle finger in Canada. In Brazil, Germany, and Russia the OK gesture is considered very rude.
- In some cultures, flowers have significant and specific meanings, and can communicate a message that may not be intended.
- Here in Canada a head shake means no, and a nod means yes, but in several other countries these gestures have the opposite meanings.
- While in Canadian culture eye contact is considered a cultural norm, plenty of other cultures see it as being disrespectful (including China, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, South Korea).

It's impossible to know every culture's different societal norms. Because of this, it's important to recognize that we have assumptions and biases based on our own cultural lens. When we feel like someone is acting weird or odd, instead of assuming something about them, what if we take a humble approach and instead realize that they might be from a different culture, and therefore have different cultural norms and practices?

For Reflection

- Have you ever been in a situation where you thought someone was being rude, and then realized the person was working within a different set of norms? Describe:
- What are some different norms you have noticed while traveling or engaging with a different cultural group?
- Have you noticed different norms within different families, organizations, or community groups? What were they?

Now that we've explored cultural norms a little, you can see how it is so easy to misinterpret behaviour from someone who is from another culture. When doing the work of peer support, it is quite common to work with people from other cultures. It's important that we understand that their norms could be different than what we are used to, and we must choose to take a humble approach and challenge our assumptions.

Humour and Culture

Humour and laughter are universal. However, what we experience as humorous is different depending on our cultural lens. Not all cultures value humour as a desirable personality trait. Cultures that are grounded in collectivism, tend to place less value on humour than western cultures, which are more grounded in individualism.

There have been several studies done on this phenomenon. The study called *Cultural Differences in Humor Perception, Usage, and Implications* (2019), by Tonglin Jiang, Hao Li, and Yubo Hou, states the following in the summary:

> ...Westerners and Easterners' views toward humor fundamentally differ from each other. Westerners regard humor as a desirable trait of an ideal self, associate humor with positivity, and stress the importance of humor in their daily life. On the contrary, Easterners' attitudes toward humor are not that positive. Specifically, ...Chinese [people] have ambivalent attitudes toward humor. Even though Chinese might sometimes admit that humor is important in daily life, they do not think they are humorous themselves. For Chinese, humor is a talent that exclusively belongs to experts and is not a desirable trait of their ideal personality.

Our cultural lens plays a big part in our humour perception. For example, when we say, "that person has a great sense of humour," that statement is an assessment of someone's humour based on our cultural lens. Maybe someone else thinks that the person we are referring to is not funny. Maybe whether or not they have a sense of humour is irrelevant to them. We may think someone is not funny while another person thinks they are the most hilarious person in the world. Of course, we want to ensure that jokes or attempts at humour are not at the expense of another person's sense of worth or safety.

We must always make room for different perceptions, even in something as simple as humour. You might work with someone who has a different sense of humour than you, and that's okay. Cultural humility is about creating safe space for everyone.

For Reflection

- Have you ever noticed your own cultural lens regarding humour? If so, describe.

- Think of a time when someone who is older or younger than you thought something was funny and you did not (or vice versa). What was it that you didn't find funny? Why do you think you perceived it differently than they did?

Examples of Societal Culture

Organizational Culture

The research paper entitled *Organizational Culture in Higher Education: Learning from the Best* (2016) by Adela Coman and Catalina Bonciu, states the following about organizational culture:

> An organizational culture is an integral part of the general functioning of an organization. A strong culture is based on shared values and beliefs that ensure that everyone in an organization is on the same track (Robbins, 1996). The role of an organizational culture may be inferred from the general functions and influences that organizational culture exerts on the organization's different processes.

For Reflection

- What have you noticed about the culture of your campus?
- How do you feel the culture is formed?
- Do you feel like you and your fellow students get to contribute to the culture?

Popular Culture, Subcultures & Counterculture

Popular (Pop) Culture

This is a definition of pop culture from the LumenLearning website:

> The term popular culture refers to the pattern of cultural experiences and attitudes that exist in mainstream society. Popular culture events might include a concert, parade, a baseball game, or the season finale of a television show. Rock and pop music – "pop" is short for "popular"–are part of popular culture.

Popular culture is usually spread and expressed in commercial media like TV, movies, music, books or corporate websites. Pop culture tends to be known or at least familiar to most people (if they have media access) and tends to represent mainstream cultural ideas. Most often, representation of marginalized groups is lacking in popular culture.

> *What are some aspects of pop culture that you like?*

Subcultures Are a Minority Culture Within a Broader Culture

Like-minded people who often feel left out of the dominant culture sometimes come together and create subcultures. A subculture will have symbols that differentiate themselves from the dominant culture. These symbols support the subculture's identity. These symbols show up in style, image, tastes, and perceptions.

A subculture can function quite well within the dominant culture.

Here are some examples of groups where subcultures form:

- Music (punk rockers, goth, grunge, hip hop, rave...etc.
- New age wellness
- Yoga
- LGBTQ2+
- Hippies
- Minimalists
- Outdoor special interest
- Religious

- Surfers
- Skaters
- Trekkies

Counterculture Is Both Similar and Different to a Subculture

Counterculture groups are also smaller groups of like-minded people who gather within a more dominant culture. However, different from a subculture, a countercultural group goes against the mainstream culture. In fact, the key difference between a counterculture movement and subculture is the strong desire to change the dominant culture. These groups are created to fight against the pervasive values of a larger culture. They are formed around interests, dislikes, and disdain.

Sometimes these small groups can grow and gather momentum, and eventually become a larger movement.

Some examples of countercultural groups that have become movements are:

- Hippie protesters in the 1960s
- Civil rights activists
- Peer movement
- Feminist groups
- LGBTQ2+ groups
- Environmental groups

- Can you think of other counterculture groups?
- Who are some leaders you can think of who led some of these groups?
- Developing cultural sensitivity involves deepening our own understanding of our culture and worldview. Besides what is mentioned above, list some other ways that you may see someone's culture reflected (e.g., their way of dress, food preparation, communication styles, political beliefs)?
- Often, we have involvement in many different cultures. What are some of the cultures in which you are involved?
- How have those cultures influenced you?
- Do you feel deeply aligned and connected to any of the cultures you are connected to? Why or why not? Has that shifted over time?
- Have you ever felt oppressed by your culture? Describe.

Impact of Colonization on Indigenous Peoples' Culture

Colonization is the practice of domination. Colonization is when a country violently invades another and claims the land as its own. New inhabitants move in and forcibly push out, control and oppress people who are indigenous to the land. Not only is *land* stolen in the colonization process but the colonizers also steal much of the indigenous people's *culture*.

Canada exists as we know it today because of colonization.

Here in BC, 95% of the land belonging to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples is unceded. This means that the land wasn't legally signed away to the Crown. When the land was taken, there was no compensation or treaties. The land we live on was stolen. Alternatively, Alberta was broken up into Treaties 6, 7, and 8, meaning that the land was ceded (or signed away) by the First Nations peoples. That's not to say that there wasn't immense pressure or coercion from the government throughout that process.

Colonization is what set the DNA, or pattern of North America. Like we mentioned earlier, culture is connected to history. The way something begins (such as a country), sets the direction for centuries to come. Though the act of officially colonizing Canada was hundreds of years ago, the damage of colonization continues to this day.

Colonization was both a cultural and literal genocide (as we have seen from the residential schools).

We will look at the historical and ongoing impact of colonization, and its impact on culture.

The Process of Decolonization Today

We discuss some of the impacts of colonization in other modules, including Module Eight: Healing-Centered Connection: Principles in Trauma-Informed Care and Module: Nine: Social Determinants of Health, but we want to spend some time looking at the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization. In particular, we want to look at it in relation to culture and cultural humility, and the process of decolonization.

Decolonization is about dismantling oppressive practices while supporting Indigenous peoples to reclaim land, culture, language, community, family, history, and traditions that have been taken away during the process of colonization.

In a way the word "decolonization" can be confusing. We are not saying that settlers need to move back to England or wherever they came from. That would be impossible. When we use the word "decolonization" we are talking about dismantling and deconstructing the systems that continue to cause harm to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. As Canadians we can do this by supporting our nation's genuine efforts for reconciliation, and we must do what we can to support the shifting of harmful systems so that healing can begin to happen.

In order to create an environment where people feel safe to look for and receive support, we must commit to practicing cultural humility and to providing culturally safe spaces and practices. It's about offering a space (physically and emotionally) that is free of racism and discrimination. This is something that takes personal commitment, as well as policies and government rulings, to ensure it turns into direct action.

"In 2015 the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, the First Nations Health Authority and provincial health authorities signed a Declaration of Commitment to cultural safety and humility. This is a commitment that each signatory will have an action plan and make advancements within their organization to ensure health care in BC is culturally safe and appropriate for those who reside here." – Tripartite Committee on First Nations Health Annual Report

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) ran from 2008 to 2015 as a part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The purpose of the TRC was to document the history and severe damage done to Indigenous peoples by the residential school program in Canada. During this program, indigenous children were taken from their families and sent to government-run schools. The children were victimized in so many ways including having their culture and everything they knew ripped away from them. This program ran for more than 160 years. The last residential school in Canada wasn't closed until 1996.

Residential schools are a part of Canada's history, and one of the ways in which our country committed cultural genocide. It is essential that we as a nation talk about this – that we listen to and share stories from those who were affected by these atrocities. We can only change as a nation if we understand the severity and ongoing impact of our past. We must collectively and individually learn from our history and do better.

See more about the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#).

Though the Commission is over, we have much work to do in our country with regard to reconciliation. Colonization of Canada – including residential schools – has created much

individual, collective and intergenerational trauma for Indigenous peoples. We as individuals and together as a collective have much work to do.

Why We do Land Acknowledgements

Land acknowledgement is becoming increasingly common these days, however it's important to understand why we do it. Land acknowledgement is about recognizing the damage done by colonizers, historically and in the present day, in stealing the land from Indigenous peoples. It's about recognition of the hurt and pain that was caused. It is about humbly acknowledging those who have been impacted. It is important that we deeply respect the process of a land acknowledgement and that we don't just spout off words. It is important that we appreciate the deep meaning in what we are saying.

There are different ways to do a land acknowledgement. It can be different depending on the province, and how detailed you want to get in your acknowledgement. To find the territory acknowledgement information for your area, check out Native Land Digital.

Here in BC, we use these words:

- **Traditional**: we recognize how this land was traditionally used or occupied by Indigenous peoples.
- **Ancestral**: land that is handed down from generation to generation.
- **Territory**: is the geographic area traditionally occupied by Indigenous peoples
- **Unceded**: this means that the land was never legally signed away to Canada.

Your campus will have a sample of a land acknowledgement on their website. Look it up and write it down here:

Have you lived in a different province, or do you live outside of BC now? Do you have a different way of doing land acknowledgements based on the colonization history of that province?

Culture and Colonization

Let's look a little closer at the impact of colonization on Indigenous culture. To understand this more clearly we must look at the Indian Act, which is still legal today.

Canada became a country in 1867. The Indian Act became law in 1876. Amendments were made to the act in 1951 and 1985. This act was designed to control every aspect of Indigenous life, from language to the right to vote. It made practicing First Nations culture illegal.

Indigenous people were considered savages by the colonizers, and the government wanted to strip them of their ancestral culture and assimilate them into the colonizers' culture. Canada's first Prime Minister said this regarding the Indian Act:*"The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change."* – John A Macdonald, (1887)

The Indigenous Corporate training Inc. website has a great article called, *21 Things You May Not Have Known About The Indian Act.* Founder and President of this resource, Bob Joseph, has published a book by the same name. In this article Joseph lists the 21 sections of the Indian Act. Let's look at a few here that directly relate to culture.

- **Introduction of residential schools**

  From the UBC Indigenous Foundations website:

  > Residential schools systematically undermined Indigenous, First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures across Canada and disrupted families for generations, severing the ties through which Indigenous culture is taught and sustained, and contributing to a general loss of language and culture. Because they were removed from their families, many students grew up without experiencing a

nurturing family life and without the knowledge and skills to raise their own families. The devastating effects of the residential schools are far-reaching and continue to have a significant impact on Indigenous communities. The residential school system is widely considered a form of genocide because of the purposeful attempt from the government and church to eradicate all aspects of Indigenous cultures and lifeworlds.

Karen Chaboyer, an Indigenous woman from Ontario who lived in a residential school as a child says the following in her book, They Called me 33: Reclaiming Ingo-Waabigwan (2020):

> When I left residential school, I became confused and saw life from a different perspective. I was not aware of society. I was now living in the world, seeing people other than priests and nuns. I was ashamed of who I was. After nine years of having negative messages drilled into my head at residential school, my mind was tattered by the time I was released. I had been taught that to be Native meant I had no value: that I was not human. I felt defective and did not know how to change this. I was overflowing with shame.

- **Indigenous people were renamed with European names**
- **Indigenous people were forbidden to speak their native language**
- **Practicing Indigenous spirituality was forbidden** (this included the use of traditional medicines and practices)
- **Wearing traditional regalia was forbidden**
- **Potlatches and other cultural ceremonies were declared illegal** (this ban was not lifted until 1951)

Considering everything we have covered so far about culture and well-being, what do you think the repercussions of these laws are for Indigenous people today?

Regaining the culture that was stolen is an important part of healing for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

There is so much more to learn about this topic that we couldn't include in this module. Please seek out First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives on the topics of decolonization and culture. Part of our personal work in decolonization is taking responsibility to learn the history on our own, while considering what we can contribute to breaking down the harmful systems of colonization.

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Cultural Humility

Like we discussed in previous sections of this training–we are not wired to be objective. By nature all human beings think that their truth is the "right" truth. While feeling like we are "right" may have been helpful in ensuring the survival of the human race, it hasn't added to a more peaceful world.

What We Mean by "Humility" in Relation to Culture

Humility is freedom from pride and arrogance. When we are humble, we realize that our value isn't higher than anyone else's. **Cultural humility** means that we don't approach other cultures from a position of superiority. We recognize that there is much we don't know, and we choose to not make assumptions.

It is important to recognize that we have biases because of our own worldview and cultural lenses, and we mindfully choose to put those biases aside. We are intentional not to raise our sense of importance over another person's.

When we practice cultural humility, we approach other cultures from a position of "not knowing;" we don't elevate our importance over theirs, and we are willing and open to learn from another culture.

We must actively choose humility.

That means that we must engage in an internal wrestle that challenges the way our brain processes differences. It is easy to listen to others in a way that may "look" like we are humble, but underneath we still think ours is the better way. We must challenge performative humility. When we engage with people who have different cultural backgrounds than us, we must actively choose to listen from a place of not knowing, with genuine humility, and kind curiosity.

Cultural humility is a lifelong process of learning that takes mindfulness and self-reflection. It also includes mitigating power imbalances and institutional accountability (Miyagawa, 2020).

The Oxford dictionary defines humility as this: the quality of not thinking that you are better than other people; the quality of being humble.

The Practice of Cultural Humility

The Psych Hub video "*What is Cultural Humility?*" on Youtube states that to be culturally aware

means to be aware of power imbalances and biases, to respect others' values and beliefs and to continuously reflect on our own biases.

The video also shares the following ways we can practice this:

- **Recognize that no culture is better than another**
- **Continuously engage in self-reflection (about our own biases and mistakes we've made)**
- **Practice vulnerability: Be honest when you are not sure of something**
- **Learn about other cultures, but know that you can't possibly know everything**
- **Find support systems and accountability**

A key component of cultural humility is that no one gets it right all the time. In fact, a huge part of cultural humility is openness to understanding that there is much we haven't learned yet. This creates opportunity for more learning, and potential for more equity and inclusion in our communities.

What is Ethnocentrism?

Being ethnocentric means believing your own culture and behaviour is the only valid one.

An example of ethnocentrism often shows up in attitudes towards food. For example, in some cultures, it's normal to eat guinea pig or dog meat, but many other cultures would view this as disgusting, even though they wouldn't question their own diet that also includes eating animals, just different ones like cows or pigs.

Another example of ethnocentrism would be thinking that immigrants should adopt the culture and practices of the country in which they now live, abandoning the practices and beliefs of their country of origin. This implies that their country of origin's culture is inferior and that to succeed or be a 'proper' citizen in their new country, they must assimilate.

The early colonization of Canada was deeply rooted in ethnocentrism; this was shown in the belief of British colonizers that they were superior to Indigenous peoples. In 1907, R.B. Bennett (Canadian Prime Minister from 1930-35) told British Columbians that their province "must remain a white man's country." These attitudes can and do still surface today.

Self-Reflection & Cultural Humility

Our experiences shape the way we see the world. That means that our worldview is grounded in our beliefs and the culture(s) we identify with personally. Unless we very **intentionally** choose to do the work to understand a culture different from our own, we will not even begin to

understand it. We need to take a humble position of 'not knowing' in order to begin to understand other cultures.

Standing in a place of cultural humility when connecting with someone helps us create space that is safer, more respectful and freer from racism and discrimination. This takes practice.

"Cultural humility is a process of self-reflection to understand personal and systemic biases and to develop and maintain respectful processes and relationships based on mutual trust. Cultural humility involves humbly acknowledging oneself as a learner when it comes to understanding another's experience." – First Nations Health Authority (FNHA), *Creating a Climate for Change*

Cultural Appropriation

The topic of cultural appropriation can be controversial at times. There are many layers to it, and approaching this topic requires humility, sensitivity and kindness.

Before we dig in, please pay attention to what you feel as you think about the concept of cultural appropriation. Is it a term you've heard before? Does it cause some resistance in you? Why? Have you heard other people's opinions about this, and either agreed or disagreed? Do you feel indifferent about this topic?

Let's consider everything we have covered up to this point:

- The importance of culture to our well-being
- Your involvement in culture
- The damage colonization had and continues to have on Indigenous culture
- The way history interconnects with culture, and the need for people groups who have been oppressed to have a strong sense of culture

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How Do You Know When It's Cultural Appropriation?

One of the big arguments that comes up with the topic of cultural appropriation, is that nothing is original. It often sounds like this: "All cultures borrow from each other." "Sharing ideas is unavoidable." In this way, some people try to reframe cultural appropriation as a form of cultural appreciation. It is true that ideas are shared between cultures. A lot of us are grateful that the Italians shared pizza, bolognese, and espresso! The furniture industry is very influenced by Scandinavian style. The British have very much influenced the music scene throughout the years. Many pop bands today are influenced by the Beatles, 80s British pop, and the 90s Manchester music scene. Is it a big deal if you pick up a Beatles, Rolling Stones, or Ramones knock-off t-shirt at your local big box store just because you think it's cool, even though you're not a fan? Likely not. Your purchase probably won't affect the band members or their descendants. A key factor here is that they do not have a history of being oppressed by society.

However, when we steal or borrow ***from an oppressed culture***, especially for financial gain, it is a different story altogether. That is cultural appropriation.

Getting Clear About Cultural Appropriation

The following is a great definition of cultural appropriation. It's from an article by Christine Nguyen (chef, writer, and activist) called *Not Just a Sandwich: A Cultural Perspective on Banh Mi*:

> Cultural appropriation happens when a dominant culture adopts the practices of another culture for monetary or societal gain. The marginalized culture however, remains stigmatized for maintaining their cultural practices and are constantly pressured to assimilate into the dominant culture.

It is likely to be cultural appropriation when a practice, art, or even food that is considered sacred to a marginalized culture is borrowed from, or changed for personal gain without understanding the cultural significance of the practice for its originators.

For example, let's look at the First Nations cultural practice of smudging.

Smudging is a sacred, powerful practice.   According to the Indigenous Corporate Training website, smudging is traditionally a ceremony for purifying or cleansing the soul of negative thoughts of a person or place.
There are four elements involved in a smudge.   Tobacco, white sage, cedar, and sweetgrass are used for smudging, and they are considered sacred medicines.   Do other cultures practice smudging? Yes, other cultures practice the burning of sacred plants. However, the term "smudging" is used by the First Nations peoples of North America.
The Indian Act made cultural ceremonies illegal (including smudging) until the act was amended in 1951 in Canada. In the US smudging was illegal until 1978 with the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.
Point 22 in the Truth and Reconciliation call to action states this: *We call upon those who can effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders where requested by Aboriginal patients.*

Smudging is a deeply sacred practice that has a rich history. Many people from the dominant culture in North America are likely (perhaps unconsciously) noticing that colonization has destroyed many ties to sacred practices. This has created a desire for people to start practicing smudging and other sacred Indigenous practices. However, they are missing the cultural element and the breadth and depth of its history. Smudging is a trend by influencers on apps like Instagram. Big chain stores like Sephora, Anthropologie, Urban Outfitters, and Amazon all sell

smudging kits. Who is benefitting from the sales of these kits? Essentially big companies are capitalizing off sacred Indigenous spirituality.

The smudging trend has also led to overharvesting and shortages of white sage. Many big companies are illegally harvesting it from protected areas (especially in California). This issue of overharvesting directly affects Indigenous peoples.

In a HuffPost article entitled, *Indigenous People Want Brands to Stop Selling Sage and Smudge Kits* (2018), Kory Snache (Giniw), who is Anishinaabe from Chippewas of Rama Mnjiknini First Nation states:

> People who utilize sage spiritually have a very different concept of what sage is, and that should be respected," said Snache, who organized a medicine walk in Toronto over the summer. "It is deep rooted with medicinal and spiritual understandings that are reinforced with teachings passed down through generations.

For Reflection

- Knowing that not long ago practices such as smudging were considered illegal, and people had to do them in secret, how do you think it would feel for an Indigenous person to see dozens of smudging kits selling on Amazon for $30.00?
- Do you think that smudging is always considered cultural appropriation? Why or why not?

More Examples of Cultural Appropriation

Let's look at some other examples of things that can be considered cultural appropriation:

- **Clothing and fashion:** This can show up in both costumes and high fashion.
- **Food:** No one culture can own a food or even one way of preparing food. However, certain foods can be deeply tied to a culture and the history of a people group. When the dominant culture takes elements of that cultural food and adapts and changes it to fit the palette of the dominant culture, even food can have elements of cultural appropriation. This is especially the case if businesses or restaurants owned by someone of the dominant culture take business away from someone who is actually from that culture. (For more reflection about

this, consider reading the Medium article *Not Just a Sandwich: A Cultural Perspective on Banh Mi* by Christine Nguygen).

- **Artifacts** such as dreamcatchers and teepees.
- **Movies** that are about an oppressed people group but are written by people from a dominant culture.
- **Hairstyles:** The article A *History Of African Women's Hairstyles* (2020) on the Africa.com website, states:

> Hair played a significant role in the culture of ancient African civilizations. It symbolized one's family background, social status, spirituality, tribe, and marital status.
>
> Hair was considered a sacred part of the body, and was treated accordingly. Styling hair was a social activity. Some tribes used beads and shells in their hair. Different hairstyles (such as cornrows, braids, and dreadlocks) were – and are – deeply connected to culture.
>
> Here in North America many Black people have experienced discrimination because of their hairstyles including dreadlocks or braids. Yet when a white person has dreadlocks or braids, it can be considered fashion forward. Because of the history of oppression here in North America, taking traditional Black hairstyles can be considered appropriation.

- **Tattoos:** when people tattoo symbols from a culture that is not their own.

Cultural Appropriation and Language

Intentionality around culturally appropriating language is important as well. Some examples of this are:

- Using the term "pow wow" for a meeting
- Using the term "spirit animal" flippantly or out of its cultural context. Spirit animals are sacred to some Indigenous cultures. When people who don't understand or care about the significance of spirit animals use this term, it is appropriation
- Using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) when you are not black, or using a "Blaccent"

Can you think of any other ways the use of certain phrases can be problematic?

Nurturing Cultural Appreciation

Cultural appreciation is when we earnestly seek to engage and understand another culture. It is when we seek to understand others, outside of our own personal gain. Cultural appreciation always comes with an attitude of deep respect and humility.

We must think about how we can engage with those cultural practices in a way that does not appropriate them but instead honours, respects, and learns from them.

Some examples of cultural appreciation:

- Appropriately engaging in a tradition such as a sweat lodge, led by Indigenous peoples
- Attending a smudging ceremony led by Indigenous people
- Eating traditional food at an Indian restaurant
- Visiting a Mosque or other place of worship
- Attending a wedding or event for someone of a different culture and asking what is expected with regard to attire . Many Indian weddings encourage all women to wear traditional saris

What are some other ways you can engage in cultural appreciation?

Is it always easy to figure out if something is cultural appropriation, or cultural appreciation? No, it's not. However, if we do some research and reflection, we will be better equipped to make that distinction.

For Reflection

- How does all of this sit with you?
- Which do you feel is more important?:

    - the **intent** of one's actions
    - or the **impact** of the actions on an oppressed people group

- Why or why not?
- Do you feel like cultural appropriation is complicated with many layers? Does it seem simple and straightforward?
- Do you think there are times when a situation would be considered cultural

appropriation and a situation where something similar leans more towards cultural appreciation?

Newcomers to British Columbia

While acknowledging its history of colonization, Canada has a long, rich history of multiculturalism. According to the 2016 Census, 28.3 percent of BC's population (almost 1,293,000 people) are immigrants. The 2016 Census also tells us that more than 1 in 5 people living in Canada were born outside the country. That's a significant segment of our population.

How does that affect peer support work? Are we choosing to create safe, welcoming spaces for people who are not from Canada? Are we aware of the barriers that immigrants may be facing? Or the challenges that are impacting their lives as they adjust to a new country, language and culture?

Many new Canadians may be living with trauma, grief and loss. They may have had to leave family behind and may be experiencing a loss of connection while battling feelings of not belonging. Language barriers can also cause feelings of disconnection and isolation. They may also be experiencing culture shock, which can impact their well-being.

Culture shock can include a range of emotions as people try to adapt. People may experience excitement, fascination, and a romanticizing of the new culture (a bit of a 'honeymoon' phase), homesickness, physical challenges as their body adjusts to new food or water supply, frustration, depression, or fear of the unknown as they try to adjust.

Cultural Mosaic vs. Melting Pot

A society that values a cultural mosaic sees the beauty of honouring each individual culture that makes up the whole. Imagine a beautiful mosaic art piece hanging on a wall in a museum. The mosaic features all nationalities represented in the country, and each group has a section of the mosaic to represent their culture through art. It would be beautiful!

In societies that value cultural mosaics, immigration is seen as a collective value, and people are generally encouraged to keep their own cultures when they move there. The underlying belief is that the country is stronger when we embrace cultural diversity.

However, the metaphor of a melting pot suggests that all cultures should blend together and assimilate into the dominant culture. In societies that value melting pots, unity – and uniformity – are of utmost importance and individual cultures can be lost within the dominant culture.

Cultural Displacement

Cultural displacement occurs when people are separated from their cultural roots, which can happen when they immigrate into a different country.

Cultural displacement can also come from gentrification. Gentrification is when a city, developers and homebuyers decide to take an older area and fix it up. Affordable housing and shops get replaced by new, trendy homes and shops. This is happening now in most major cities. The downside is displacement, and it tends to negatively affect poorer people, and many who are immigrants.

Cultural displacement is a central tenet of colonization

Dehumanization

Dehumanization happens when people are denied the acknowledgement of their inherent positive human value, and when they are denied recognition of their human qualities, personality, or dignity, being viewed and treated as 'less than human'.

As the Merriam-Webster Dictionary explains, it also means

1. "to subject (someone, such as a prisoner) to inhuman or degrading conditions or treatment"
2. "to remove or reduce human involvement or interaction in (something, such as a process or place)"

"Dehumanization is a psychological process whereby opponents view each other as less than human and thus not deserving of moral consideration. Jews in the eyes of Nazis and Tutsis in the eyes of Hutus (in the Rwandan genocide) are but two examples."
~Maiese and Burgess, (2020)

Dehumanization usually starts with language and is reinforced in imagery. A common example is comparing a people group to animals or insects. This dehumanization can be absorbed deeply into culture and begin to shape the way people are viewed and even the way they view themselves.

As Brené Brown explains, "During the Holocaust, Nazis described Jews as *Untermenschen*—subhuman. They called Jews rats and depicted them as disease-carrying rodents in everything from military pamphlets to children's books. Hutus involved in the Rwanda genocide called Tutsis cockroaches. Indigenous people are often referred to as savages. Serbs called Bosnians aliens. Slave owners throughout history considered slaves subhuman animals."

The Power of Language in the Fight Against Dehumanization

It's essential that we realize the power our language has on others. When we think of cultural humility, we need to reflect on our language. One of the best antidotes to dehumanization is to be mindful of our language, willing to make changes and rejecting any and all dehumanizing imagery. It's important to remember that all dehumanizing language and imagery is harmful, even if the person being dehumanized may not be someone with whom we agree.

It's also important to stand up and challenge others who use dehumanizing language or depictions of others.

Remaining aware of language regarding people and cultural groups is so important. Preferred terms shift and change over the years. It can sometimes feel hard to keep up with the changes, but it is important to approach this with kindness and humility. People directly affected by language choices feel the effects of language very personally.

Language can also impact systemic racism; either by adding to it, or by deconstructing it.

In our role as peer support workers, it's important that we remain sensitive to the impact of language. We must continue to challenge our own biases and examine our own worldview and cultural lenses.

International Students

Each year students travel from countries around the world to attend post-secondary institutions in Canada. Moving to a new country can come with many challenges. Not only are international students adjusting to a different academic system than they are used to, potentially studying in a second language, but they are faced with the challenge of learning a different culture. Attending post-secondary can be hard for people who are born in the city where they attend school. Adjusting to a new culture on top of everything else makes it even more difficult!

Let's look at some things that we have covered previously in this module that our international students might be dealing with:

- **Getting used to a new set of social norms.** This includes the social norms of Canada, and the social norms of the school itself. Every community, or institution will have its own individual set of social norms. This is a lot for a new student to adjust to. Often with social norms they aren't explicitly talked about. Instead they are implicitly referred to. This can be hard for someone who is from a different part of the world.
  What are some of the social norms you have noticed on your campus?
- **Feeling distanced and disconnected from their own culture.** It can feel safe and comfortable to be surrounded by others who have similar cultural backgrounds. There is an "I get you" understanding that is shared. When we are surrounded by people who don't understand our culture, it can feel scary, and disconnecting. Not only are people missing their culture, but they are likely missing their friends and family too.
  Have you ever been somewhere and felt disconnected to the culture, kinda like a fish out of water? How did that feel? What helped you to feel more comfortable?
- **Sensing ethnocentrism from people in the community who are a part of the dominant culture.** International students might deal with stigma and prejudice when they are out in the larger community. This is not just uncomfortable, but it can feel unsafe. Many new immigrants share stories of the stigma they face, not to mention potential racial profiling, when they come to a new country.
  If you have grown up in the country where you attend school, what can you do to provide a safe space for international students?

Different Approaches to Supporting International Students

Most, if not all, post-secondary institutions across British Columbia have several services and programs to support international students. Many of these programs are nestled under student/peer services. Your school may have a program like that.

Groups for International Students

Lots of schools offer groups for international students where topics related to culture are addressed. Some schools offer workshops on topics like finances, learning English as a second language, or cooking. They might also offer groups with the simple intention of meeting new people through playing games, chatting, or engaging in exercise together.

You might choose to help facilitate some of these groups. If you do, it's a good idea to work through the whole cultural humility module, and also get some training on facilitation. The Peer Leadership module in this curriculum covers some training on how to facilitate groups.

One-to-One Mentorship for International Students

Many campuses also provide one-on-one support for international students. Some programs offer ongoing support and others offer one-off drop in support.

Let's look at the role definition for international mentors from the Standard of Practice document:

International Peer Support Mentor: This worker is an international student who has had some time to adjust to life on campus and has settled into the local community. They work with new international students and share their lived experience of adjusting to a new culture with them.

International Student Peer Mentor: This is a student who is local to the area, or from another city in Canada. They are not peers in the sense that they have a similar lived experience. However, they are interested in supporting new international students to get comfortable on campus and want to support them to get plugged into student life.

Some campuses might match an International Student mentor who has grown up in Canada, who has a similar cultural background to the new international student. This way there is a shared understanding of language and culture.

Honouring Other Cultures in Peer Work

A big component of peer support work includes recognizing, respecting, and honouring cultural background and beliefs. This is an active process that must be at the forefront of our minds as we support people.

As we desire to have our own cultures respected, we must also respect the cultures of others.

It can never be our goal to change anyone's beliefs, and we also never want to negate or put down anyone's culture or belief system.

There are many sentiments and behaviours around diversity that are culturally insensitive and unfortunately common. It's important that we as peer workers avoid these, and that we understand why they are so damaging. Among them are:

- Behaving as though "culture doesn't matter" because in recovery "everybody is the same" or "everybody is equal"
- Pretending that your program or approach is "colour blind" and ignoring cultural differences

We must never take a one-size-fits-all approach to any aspect of peer work, including the way we approach culture.

(The Social Determinants of Health module expands on this topic in relation to race and racism. In that module we will read the article "Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege" by Peggy McIntosh, found in the Appendix of this manual. It highlights the ways that people in the dominant culture might not notice what life is like for those who are in a minority group.)

Putting it all Together

"People of different religions and cultures live side by side in almost every part of the world, and most of us have overlapping identities which unite us with very different groups. We can love what we are, without hating what—and who—we are not. We can thrive in our own tradition, even as we learn from others, and come to respect their teachings." ~Kofi Annan

What can you as a peer support worker do to be more culturally sensitive, aware, and inclusive?

1. Personally challenge your understanding of what it means to be culturally aware, humble, and sensitive.

Again, reflecting on your own relationship with culture and belonging will remind you how you want others to respect your culture. In doing so it becomes easier to be culturally sensitive to others.

Come back and read this module regularly. As well, do your own research about cultural competency & cultural sensitivity.

If you are part of the dominant culture in Canada, the chances are quite high that this isn't a topic you've been forced to think about very often. However, if you are in a minority group, and especially if you experience oppression and/or racism on a regular basis, then this is a topic you don't have the luxury of forgetting. Part of being culturally competent and culturally aware involves a level of action, advocacy, and activism. This means paying attention empathetically to those who are different from you, putting yourself in their shoes.

This also means noticing our language and how we may – intentionally or unintentionally – put down other cultures or people groups. When we notice this happening, we need to challenge ourselves to stop the behaviour. Being culturally sensitive and competent also means calling out others who make comments that are racist and oppressive about any people group.

A great way to build the muscles of cultural sensitivity and competence is to get interested in history. Learn about the struggles other cultures and minorities have faced and continue to face. This kind of curiosity and active learning create a deeper understanding. They challenge us to step up and do something active to change the ways people are oppressed and are forced to deal with racism (or any kind of "ism" for that matter).

Like the author of the article cited above says, "the key to not repeating the past lies in knowing it."

2. Pay attention to your judgements and implicit biases.

According to a ThoughtCo.com article called *Implicit Bias: What It Means and How It Affects Behaviour*, "An implicit bias is any unconsciously-held set of associations about a social group."

As we have discussed in previous modules, we all make judgements and have biases.

The first step is to create space so that we can mindfully pay attention to our biases. This is not easy to do, but it's essential. When we notice our biases, we need to challenge them. Perhaps

talking to a friend or colleague about this would be helpful. There are many books available, and online supports that can help us work through our biases.

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."
~Viktor Frankl (Man's Search For Meaning)

3. Work with other cultural groups. Get involved. Talk to people.

Find out what cultural groups are within your campus and the larger community. Figure out ways to partner with them! Perhaps you can sponsor an event together or support each other in different ways.

Can you think of some potential groups you can work with?

List some ideas of how you might be able to work together:

4. Get curious about other cultures that are different from yours.

Continue to learn about other cultures. You don't need to know everything about all cultures of the world. Studying ALL cultures would be a lifetime worth of work and exploration. Understanding the importance of culture and honouring that in your work is the most important thing.

As you meet people from other cultures, choose to be respectfully curious. By respectful, we mean an awareness not to ask so many questions that someone feels like they are being interrogated. Pay attention to their social cues when you are asking them about their culture. Ask them if they are comfortable sharing, and if they are not, be respectful about their answer.

We can also learn a lot from books, documentaries, and movies. Get curious and find some good resources to learn about other cultures.

If you come across something within another culture that makes you think, "gosh, that's odd" – challenge that thought. Instead of judging it, try to understand why that culture might approach something differently than yours does. Simple practices like this will help to challenge your implicit biases, when you engage in them regularly.

5. Celebrate other cultures.

Celebrate different holidays and traditions. Plan fun events on campus! You could do things like

have a potluck and everyone brings a dish that represents their cultural heritage. Or go out together to a local cultural community event.

What are some other ideas of how you can celebrate other cultures?

6. Choose to dialogue regularly with your team about cultural humility and the importance of being culturally sensitive.

Make this a topic that you regularly talk about. Ask the question, "how can we improve our cultural sensitivity?"

7. Be aware of the physical environment. Does it reflect cultural sensitivity and diversity?

Does your meeting space reflect an organization that celebrates and respects other cultures? Are there things that might be considered culturally insensitive?

Perhaps you can choose to display art from different cultures, with care that it is not cultural appropriation. *(Cultural appropriation is when a dominant culture takes the art or customs of another potentially disadvantaged culture and modifies it to fit in with the dominant culture).*

Be aware of language barriers. Perhaps you might have some of your organization's material translated into another language.

What are some other things you can do to be culturally sensitive in your environment?

The bottom line is this: Trust is central to peer relationships; we don't want to erode the sense of trust we develop by mishandling the issue of culture. We want to make it a priority to recognize, honour, and respect other cultures.

For Reflection

- Have you ever run into difficulties with someone and realized the issues were related to cultural differences? Were you able to overcome them?
- Briefly list a few ideas that you have about what it means to be "mentally healthy."

Then consider the perspective of a different cultural group in your community—would their list look different from yours?

- If you had to sum up how people with mental health struggles have been treated throughout history in 25 words or less, how would you do it?
- Now consider how that history has impacted the mental health of our First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, who have experienced colonization, and theft of culture. What are your thoughts about that?

"We owe the Aboriginal peoples a debt that is four centuries old. It is their turn to become full partners in developing an even greater Canada. And the reconciliation required may be less a matter of legal texts than of attitudes of the heart."
~ Romeo LeBlanc (Former Governor General of Canada)

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." ~ Nelson Mandela

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

BOUNDARIES

Purpose of Module

Boundaries are an essential part of healthy human connection. The peer support relationship is no exception. When people in a relationship are clear about what is OK, and what is not OK, they have a deeper capacity to build empathy, connect and stay out of resentment. Boundaries and boundary creation within peer support will look different than in other professional roles within the mental health and substance use fields. Mutuality is foundational to peer support, so we will explore how to approach boundary co-creation from the perspective of mutuality.

Learning Objectives

1. You will be able to recognize the difference between boundaries and ethics (including Peer Support Canada's Code of Conduct).
2. You will be able to integrate a mindset of mutuality in the co-creation of boundaries with the people you support.
3. You will recognize the importance of, and be able to integrate, boundary creation into your personal self-nourishment practice.

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. *If you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.*

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

Life Application Stories

Callum had just started meeting up with his new peer, Jared. As they sat on a bench with their coffees and watched the crows picking up breadcrumbs, Jared explained part of what was stressing him out. "My roommate has a new boyfriend and he's over pretty much every single night. I wouldn't mind, but it's a small flat and I just want my own space every now and then! They also watch movies in the living room all the time and put the volume up super high so I can't sleep or focus on studying. I'm ready to lose it!"

"That's so frustrating!" said Callum, "I feel your pain… I had a lot of difficult roommates until I found my current one. But we still have issues… like the other day she left a huge mess in the kitchen despite knowing I was having friends over for a dinner party. Have you tried talking to your roommate about what's bothering you?"

"Well… I kind of got really upset the other day and told him he should go over to his boyfriend's house instead, and now we're not really talking."

"Yeah… sometimes when we bottle things up, they can burst out a little too harshly."

"Yeah. I mean, I'm glad I stood up for myself, but now it's so awkward and we barely talk."

"Do you think there's another way you could have approached him?"

"I mean… I guess I could have communicated what I was feeling sooner. Like, at least asked them to turn the volume down. Or maybe let me have my own space every couple of days, or at least have the living room to myself a couple nights a week."

"Yeah that sounds reasonable. Setting boundaries is stressful! It's hard to know when you're being too assertive, or not assertive enough."

Later, Jared asked if they could follow each other on social media. Callum didn't really like adding peers on social media, but didn't want to be rude. He added Jared on TikTok and Instagram but wished he hadn't. That night, Jared messaged him on Instagram to ask his advice on what he should say to his roommate. Callum was tired from a long day, and it was already 10pm. He tried to relax before bed and avoid being on his phone too much, because sometimes he had a hard time sleeping. He wished he hadn't added Jared to social media, but he also wanted to be helpful. He thought about the conversation they had that day about boundaries, and how he could express his needs in a respectful way.

Hey Jared. Sorry to hear things are still stressful with your roommate. I'm just about to head to bed,

but I'm free next Tuesday and Thursday afternoon if you want to meet up again? Let me know a time that works. Thanks!

Reflecting on the day, Callum thought about how he could have been clearer about his boundaries without being rude. Perhaps telling Jared that he had a policy of not adding peers on social media would make it less personal. The next time Callum started working with a peer, he explained that he didn't add peers on social media, but was happy to share his cell number for organizing meetings and chatting. At first, he felt awkward expressing this, as he didn't want his peers to feel like they weren't important enough to be added to his social media accounts, but he soon realized that as long as he was upfront and explained that it was for privacy reasons, no one really minded. He asked Jared about his preferred means of communicating, and Jared explained that he didn't like talking over the phone but was fine with texting.

Introduction

What do you feel when you hear the word boundary? Does the word resonate with you, or do you feel resistance to it? Does the word "boundary" feel firm like borders between countries? Or do boundaries feel more fluid and flexible?

Simply defined, boundaries are a clear guideline of what is Ok and what is not Ok.

Your campus peer support work will require you to have good boundaries and to honour your personal needs and limitations. As a student you are balancing a lot of responsibilities and it's important for your own well-being that you don't overextend yourself. Honouring your energy level, capacity, and time constraints is important.

Maintaining professional boundaries, like respecting confidentiality, is also very important when you take on any official volunteer or paid role. Boundaries and ethics are there to protect the people you serve, and to protect you, too!

You may also find yourself in a position of supporting someone else to figure out their personal boundaries. Many post-secondary students find themselves in a time of significant transition and change; there may suddenly be countless new things vying for their attention, time and energy – assignments to complete, places to go, people to get to know, activities to try. . Learning about and establishing boundaries will serve someone both now and into the future. If we are supporting someone to understand and create boundaries, it's important that we also know and respect our own boundaries.

This training is all about working with people, so we will focus primarily on interpersonal and relational boundaries. However, establishing boundaries goes beyond relational when we consider our personal boundaries around what we choose to do with our time, our thoughts, and our personal limits. This is a topic that many people struggle with. For your own personal growth, it deserves some extra thought and reflection. There are many books, papers, and articles published on the topic of boundaries. Check out the library, or talk to your supervisor and ask about recommended reading for your program. We have also referenced some good resources within this module.

Peer support is about mutuality. It is essential that boundaries are clear, defined, and shared with others in a kind and respectful way. In ongoing relationships, it's important that both participants in the relationship have input in the creation of the relationship boundaries. You will find that the boundary work we will tackle in this module will also have application in your friendship, family, and work connections.

Boundaries can be tough to navigate. Especially in the campus setting where there is a high likelihood of running into and interacting with people in multiple contexts – classes, coffee shops, libraries, teams, social gatherings, residence, peer support work, etc. In the clinical world, practitioners are never permitted to be friends with clients . Peer support is not clinical; it differs in so many ways! The ethics within peer support aren't as firm as they are in a clinical setting. Getting clear about your own boundaries as you begin peer support work is valuable and important – especially given the social nature of campus life. . You may have had interactions with someone you are assigned to do peer support work with. However, you should never provide peer support services to someone who is a friend, roommate, or relative.

Often, we find ourselves wishing there were clear answers for the difficult decisions we must make. However, life is messy, and relationships can be messy too. Often there isn't one clear "this is the right thing to do" answer. This module is meant to equip you with some tools you can use when you find yourself in any grey areas that require clear boundaries.

We will cover the following topics in this module, as they are all important elements to navigating boundaries:

- **The Core Values of Peer Support**
- **The BC Peer Support definition of recovery**
- **The Peer Support Canada Code of Conduct** (*similar to ethics*)
- **Defining boundaries**
- **Reminders about worldview and differing perspectives and how they inform boundary creation**

For Reflection

- Do you have a hard time with creating boundaries? If yes, why do you think this is?
- Do you have a hard time accepting other people's boundaries? Why or why not?
- Do you see the value in having clear boundaries? Why or why not?

Core Values and Boundaries

The Core Values are the intrinsic motivators to everything we do in peer support. They guide us when we might be undecided about what to do in a challenging situation. We can reflect on these core values when we need to make hard decisions. Read through the core values again below with boundary creation in mind.

Hope and Wholeness for All

This is the overarching value of peer support.

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known–to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save us.
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	This curiosity isn't fueled by personal gain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support.
	We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption[1] to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

For Reflection

- Why do you think it's important to check in with our core values in a dialogue about boundaries?
- Which of these core values feels like it may be harder to hold to when you are working on boundaries?

Integrating Core Values when Establishing Boundaries

Whenever you are navigating a peer support relationship, whether that looks like having a simple

1. **Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the Glossary of Terms:** Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

conversation with a student asking about services or sitting with someone who is in distress–it is essential that you connect in with these core values.

While this may seem repetitive, it's essential to remember that the Core Values should always be at the forefront of your approach to the work. When you feel confused or unsure about what to do in a certain situation, they can be a guidepost for you to be able to make tough decisions. They are meant to be a tool to support you.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself as you work on boundaries:

- Does this decision encourage **hope and wholeness for all** (*for the person I am working with,* AND *myself, because I am a mutual participant in this relationship*)?
- Am **I acknowledging** both my needs, and the other person's needs in this conversation? Are both sets of needs a priority? If this is an ongoing relationship, are we both clear, and comfortable talking about what we need in the relationship?
- Am I approaching boundary creation from a place of **mutuality**? Are both/all of us co-creating these boundaries while respecting the policies and procedures of the peer support program I am working within?
- Is this conversation as **strength-based** as it can be? Are we moving towards where we want to go, rather than away from where we don't want to be?
- Are we making **self-determination** and intrinsic motivation key components in this process?
- Am I offering **respect** to the other person? What does respect mean in terms of peer support? Am I creating an environment that encourages respect for all? (*For example: how do I speak about others who aren't present? Do I speak badly about people who aren't there? Do I complain about others?*)
- Am I respecting the other person's **dignity**? Am I approaching this conversation about boundaries with a trauma-informed lens? Am I clear? Does this feel safe for all involved? Am I aware of my personal biases around this topic? If there is conflict, do I choose to be aware of my assumptions? Do I choose to offer generosity of assumption?
- Am I aware of **equity** issues in this conversation about boundaries? When I am aware of equity, I realize that some people have barriers that I might not have. *For example, if I say: my boundary is I don't take phone calls. I only want to receive texts or emails. What if the person only has a landline with no texting ability, and they have limited access to email? If that is the case, this boundary is inequitable. I will need to adjust so that communication can work for both of us.*
- Does this conversation encourage a sense of **connection and belonging** with the person? Is my tone kind and accepting? Am I intentionally choosing not to speak with unnecessary harshness about this topic? If I feel disconnection happening during this conversation, do I acknowledge the disconnect, and begin to reconnect?
- Am I approaching this conversation with the spirit of **curiosity**? Am I asking the right

questions to uncover anything that might be lurking under the surface? Am I engaging from a place of wanting to understand the other person?

Fundamental Principles Within Peer Support

Code of Ethics vs. Code of Conduct

Let's start this section by looking at the differences and similarities between a code of ethics and a code of conduct.

Both provide guidance on how people behave.

A code of ethics can be more general and abstract in nature and is meant to provide support with decision-making. A code of conduct on the other hand is a set of clear directives, often influenced by a code of ethics – that are meant to guide specific behaviours.

It is likely that your school has both a code of ethics and a student code of conduct. You may even have to sign a code of conduct when you work, or volunteer.

Action: *Take a few minutes to research your school's code of ethics and student code of conduct.*

> *For Reflection*
>
> - Did you notice a difference between the two documents? If so, what is the difference?
> - Why do you think the code of conduct exists?
> - How do you think a code of conduct influences boundary creation?

Peer Support Canada's Code of Conduct

Peer Support Canada has published a code of conduct for peer support services across Canada. We have chosen to use their code of conduct for both the community and Post Secondary Institution (PSI) peer support trainings. We hope that organizations in BC integrate it into their policies and procedures.

The statements and expectations within a code of conduct are not as fluid or flexible as boundaries. In fact, they are rigid and are considered non-negotiable for everyone in peer support work.

Below is the Peer Support Canada Code of Conduct (shared with permission):

1. I will act ethically, according to the values and principles of peer support
2. I will treat all people with respect and dignity
3. I will respect human diversity and will foster non-discriminatory activities
4. I will honour the rights, beliefs and personal values of individuals
5. I will behave with honesty and integrity in providing support to peers
6. I will respect the privacy of individuals and maintain confidentiality within the limitations of program policies and the law e.g. potential harm to self or others
7. I will not knowingly expose a peer to harm
8. I will not take advantage of the peer relationship for personal benefit, material, or financial gain
9. I will respect the boundaries of peer support work and will not engage in romantic or sexual relationships with the peers that I support
10. I will not provide peer support in a manner that negatively affects the public's confidence in peer support.

For Reflection

- How would you elaborate on the above statements?
- Do you think these statements are easy or hard to live out? Why or why not?
- Out of all the statements in this list, which do you think will be the hardest to follow?

Post-Secondary Institution (PSI) Standards of Practice

Before moving on into a more detailed look at boundaries within peer support work, take a

moment to look back at the Peer Support Core Values listed above, and refresh in your memory the five standards of practice in the PSI Standards of Practice document listed below. As we begin co-creating boundaries within peer support relationships, it's important to keep these in mind.

The five standards for peer support work are:

    A. Peer Specialized Proficiencies

    B. Principles of Supporting Wellness, Wholeness, Recovery and Social Belonging

    C. Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity

    D. Facilitating Communication and Connection

    E. Collaboration and Ethical Practice

How do you think these standards would influence boundaries within peer support?

What relevance do you think they have on your campus peer support work?

Clarity on Boundaries

We must make our boundaries clear if we want others to respect them.

There is little room for vagueness with boundaries. If we are vague and unclear with our boundaries in relationships, then people are left guessing and are unable to honour or respect them. Boundary creation can be hard for many people, especially if we didn't learn about boundaries as children, or if we haven't felt like our boundaries have been respected by people in our life so far.

There is a strong correlation between our boundaries and our well-being. Many of us have missed out on learning how to identify and express our boundaries, and that can cause us much suffering. Engaging in constructive co-creation of boundaries with the people you support is a great learning opportunity for everyone involved.

Sometimes our boundaries change. We can find ourselves in a situation that brings awareness of new boundaries we need to create. We might also find that some boundaries that were necessary for a season are no longer needed. Shifting and changing is part of being human. This means that our boundaries are very likely to change as well.

In peer support we often need to have a few very clear boundaries, and we must be comfortable talking about them with others. Though it often feels awkward and uncomfortable, it's essential. Getting used to both preventing and addressing boundary issues will serve us well in the long run.

When people step outside the boundaries we have created, there is a disconnect that happens in our connection. When boundaries are crossed it is important to have open and respectful conversations.

Some peer support workers who have ongoing relationships choose to give the people they work with a document at the beginning of a one-on-one relationship that outlines the parameters of their role and what they can and cannot do. The document can also outline things like their preferred forms of communication, availability of time, and any other important boundary items. If you choose to do this, it is essential that it is written in language and a tone that upholds the core values. It is also essential that there is room for the person you are working with to participate in the dialogue and be able add what they need to the conversation.

If your program is more of a drop-in program by nature, and you don't have ongoing connections with people, then this kind of form is not needed.

It is also necessary to have open dialogue about boundaries with the people on your team who you volunteer or work with. Talking to your program supervisor about boundaries can be helpful to clarify difficult situations and to ensure that all peer support workers are setting boundaries that are consistent across the program.

The Fluidity of Boundaries

Boundaries are not rigid like ethics. Like we talked about, boundaries are more fluid and can shift and change as we move into different seasons of life, and when we experience growth. Your boundaries will look different with people depending on how close they are to you. For example, one day you might feel good about a hug from a friend and another day you might not be ok with it. If you are someone who goes to bed early, you might say no to studying late with a friend on a weekday night. However, there might be another time when after assessing your priorities, you might decide it's necessary.

Boundaries change. Sometimes they need to be firm. Other times they are more fluid. You have a right to change your mind about what works for you and what doesn't.

Assessing where we are emotionally at any given time, is an important piece of boundary creation.

You always have a right to change your boundaries.

For Reflection

- Do you have fluidity with your boundaries? Have you noticed yourself creating different boundaries with different relationships? Are some of your boundaries non-negotiable?
- What are some potential boundary situations that can come up at work?

Role Clarification and Boundaries

In peer support, clarity around roles is essential.

When you take a paid or volunteer position on campus it's important to be aware of expectations that come with your position. Knowing your job description will support you in getting a handle on the boundaries you need to have in place.

If you have a drop-in peer support position that includes offering empathy and emotional support, then it is within the scope of your role to listen deeply to someone's struggles. If that is your role, you will have training on deep listening, and communication. You will be clear on when the concerns the person is sharing moves beyond your scope. It's important that you are confident about where your boundaries end and when you need to refer them to the counselling department.

If you have a role where you support students with campus resources, or anything academic, you will likely have a different type of training. Moving into mental health or emotional support could be outside of the scope of your training and experience. If you feel unequipped to respond in those situations, it's important to have clear boundaries when someone discloses something that is outside of your job description. Be clear on what the next steps need to be in referring them to someone else. It's important that you are clear with people about what you can do to support them, and what you can't do.

Each campus will approach peer support work differently, so it is important that you get this clarification from your direct supervisor.

For Reflection

- How does it feel for you when someone shares their personal struggles with you?
- Do you feel equipped to be able to listen? If not, what do you think you need?

Creating Boundaries in Ongoing Peer Relationships

Together with the person you will be supporting, you have the opportunity to come up with the

boundaries you wish to set. The following list provides examples of boundary topics that some peer support workers and the people they support have discussed in boundary creation. (This is by no means an exhaustive list.)

- Meeting places–where do both of you feel comfortable meeting? Are there places that feel uncomfortable?
- What topics are Ok to discuss?
- Are there topics that are NOT OK to talk about together? If a topic makes you uncomfortable, for whatever reason, be clear on that.
- How will you get in touch with each other?
- Are there any forms of communication that are not ok for either of you?
- Are there any cultural, religious or spiritual considerations to keep in mind?
- How will we address each other outside of peer support work? For example if we see each other at a party, or if we have a class together?

For Reflection

- What are some other topics you think would be important to discuss when co-creating boundaries together?
- Some people find conversations around boundaries difficult. What challenges can you see happening in the relationship if this dialogue never happens?
- Why do you think some people struggle with boundary creation?

Worldview and Biases in Boundary Creation

As we talked about in Module 3, your worldview is the lens through which you see the world. Your worldview is a cumulation of all your life experiences. We also all have biases, which comes with being human. Becoming more aware of our assumptions and biases will go a long way with boundary co-creation.

Because of our past experiences we may have formed some rigid categories of "right and wrong." However, someone else has a different experience, and may perceive the very same thing quite differently. The most important thing we can do when we find ourselves engaged in this kind of either/or thinking is to ask questions, such as:

- What has led me to believe what I believe?
- Is there any flexibility in my own belief? Why or why not?
- Can I make room for a different perspective on this?
- Who can I talk to who believes differently than me? How can I listen to them to understand rather than try to convince them that I am right?

Creating space for a different perspective does not mean that you have to change your belief about something. You will always have the freedom and right to believe what is right for you.

The goal is not to change your belief but to also have space for other people to have different perspectives. Others may have had different experiences, different treatments and approaches may have worked for them, and they may also come from different cultures. In this work it is essential that we give up the desire to convince someone we are working with that we are right. When both people in a conversation seek to understand, rather than seek to convince the other person they are right, both people often find their perspectives expanding. Expanding perspectives leads to growth and learning. Think of a time you may have really listened to someone with a different perspective and thought, "interesting...I hadn't thought of it that way." Community and connection is about embracing diversity, and that includes diversity of thought and perspective (*even when we think we are right, and the other person is wrong*).

All of this means that people we work with will have a different approach to their wellness, and recovery than we do. This will show up in boundary co-creation.

Below are some examples of how different perspectives can show up in the work we do:

- You have a strong belief and grounding in harm reduction, and the person you are working with is having success with AA. *(Or vice versa.)*
- You are a vegan, and the person you are working with eats meat. *(Or vice versa.)*
- You have strong religious beliefs and the person you are working with is an atheist. *(Or vice versa.)*
- You take a natural approach to your wellness, and you don't believe in taking medications. The person you are working with takes medications and expresses satisfaction with them. *(Or vice versa.)*
- You have had a ton of success with a certain treatment like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and the person you are working with had a negative experience and doesn't want to try it again. *(Or vice versa.)*
- You are very against ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), but the person you are working with has had success with it. *(Or vice versa.)*

Social Media & Digital Communication

We live in a digital age. So much communication happens digitally. When you take on a professional role, it's important to have clear boundaries with social media and its intersection with your work.

Please read your campus peer support program's policy on social media usage.

It's important to remember that anything you share or send digitally has the potential to be spread far and wide, even if you don't share it publicly. People can screenshot your texts, emails or posts, and once something is online, it's essentially impossible to delete it completely. When you sign up for social media accounts, you are giving media companies permission to keep your data. Some things get cached and stored around the internet.

Social Media

Considering everything mentioned above, and the fact that as a peer support worker you are representing your program and your campus, it's important to be intentional and thoughtful about how you manage digital communication, including social media usage. We obviously know that it is never ok to post blatantly racist, homophobic, defamatory, indecent, hateful, sexist, or vulgar things on the internet. However, even posting something we know is humorously inappropriate in an ironic or flippant way can be quite problematic. We know that people receive and interpret information differently, and especially when taken out of context, it can cause harm. We might post a meme thinking it's hilarious, and someone else can be very offended by it.

Consider how social media usage intersects with peer support work. Many campus peer support programs, and community organizations discourage peer support workers from sharing personal social media accounts with program participants. Other programs may have strict policies around this. **Know your program's policies on social media usage and email usage,** as each program has different policies on these topics. It's important to discuss this with your peer support supervisor as you begin this work.

If your program doesn't allow connecting with people over social media, consider setting your accounts to private. You might find it best to avoid friending or following people you directly support. If your program allows social media, you might consider creating a work-only account that you use only for that purpose. That could make it easier to be very intentional about what you post, and how you choose to comment.

Social media can also be a great tool! Some campus peer support programs use social media to

connect with other students and to let people know about their services. It can provide opportunities for connections with other students, and with people from all over the world. If your campus has any social media accounts, consider encouraging people to follow those accounts, rather than your personal accounts.

As you can see, there are many things to consider around social media use and peer support. It certainly can be a bit of a grey area.

As you explore these ideas, here are some helpful questions to consider before posting something on social media:

- *What is the purpose of social media in my life?*
- *Why am I sharing this? What is my intention with this post? (Is it to make people laugh, educate people, create awareness, share my opinion, encourage people, tell people about my life?)*
- *Who will see this post?*
- *How is my tone in this post or comment?*
- *Could people be offended by this post?*

Regardless of what your program's policies are, and what you are comfortable with, it is highly likely that you will need to have clear and direct conversations with people you support about social media, and communication.

Be Clear how People can Communicate with you

Another boundary with digital communication is creating clarity on how someone should communicate with you. Most programs encourage campus peer support volunteers or staff to use a special campus email as the primary means of communication.

Know what your campus policy is on giving out your personal information including phone number, email address and social media accounts. If you are not permitted to share them, it's very important to respect that professional boundary.

If someone tracks down your phone number and texts you, or private messages you, remember to be clear about enforcing this boundary in a kind and friendly way. Let them know that they need to contact you in ways permitted by your program instead and you will get back to them as soon as you are able.

This protects your own time, energy and privacy, which is very important when you are balancing so many responsibilities already.

Additionally, your program's guidelines around communication have been created for a number of institutional and safety reasons; it is important to follow these and seek guidance when needed in order to ensure everyone's safety.

Respecting Privacy

It is important that you treat digital communication with the same respect and confidentiality as in-person communication. That means that if you use email for communicating with peers, you should never forward or cc an email with personal information in it to anyone else without that person's permission. There may be exceptions to this if you feel like the person is a danger to themselves. However, talk to your supervisor about this so you have clarity on the policies.

Be Clear in your Communication with Others

Communicating digitally, whether by text or over email, can create many opportunities for misunderstandings. Most people tend to type quickly, without putting much thought into the wording, tone or inflection of the message. Online communication, especially when using phones, also increases the chance for typos; certain typos can change the meaning of a sentence completely. When we read a message when we are distressed or distracted, it can be easy to make assumptions – sometimes completely inaccurate – about the meaning or tone of a message. These interactions and assumptions about digital communications can have a very real impact on our peer relationships and is something to stay mindful of.

Have you experienced someone misunderstanding a text or email you have sent? If so, what happened, and how could you have approached that differently?

Have you misunderstood a text or email someone sent you? If so, what happened?

Here are some tips for digital communication (e.g. email, text, other messaging platforms) to ensure healthy boundaries and help prevent miscommunication and misunderstanding:

- **Always re-read your message before sending**. Put yourself in the other person's shoes and ask yourself if you'd like to receive the message.
- **Wait before sending if you are feeling heightened emotions**. Overall, try to keep digital communication as basic as you can with people you support. Save the in-depth communication for in-person conversations.
- **Don't use digital communication to engage in or to resolve conflict**.
- **Give yourself space and time to respond**. Don't feel like you must respond to everything quickly. Not only does that create a disconnect if you are hanging out with friends, but it creates more opportunity for miscommunication with the person with whom you are

communicating. Take your time. Tell people that you will respond when you get a chance to do so properly.

- **No digital communication is fully private**. Emails can be forwarded and printed. Texts can be screenshotted. It is important to be mindful of that when we are communicating digitally.
- **Consider calling someone instead of texting when you are communicating something that is more than a few sentences**.

Can you think of some other tips?

What are some other things to consider with digital communication?

Communicating Our Boundaries

Having healthy boundaries means that there is clear, honest, direct, and respectful dialogue about what is Ok and what's not Ok within a relationship. When we have good boundaries and know our value, we aren't shy about being clear on those boundaries because we know that clarity supports the relationship to be stronger. When we have poor boundaries, it's a recipe for conflict, resentment, and relationship breakdown.

Resentment from Lack of Boundaries

"Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They're compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment."

~Brené Brown

It's likely that most of us can relate to feeling the kind of resentment Brené Brown is speaking of in the above quote.

For example: Consider that you need to be asleep by 11:00pm. If you don't get to bed at that time, you feel groggy in the mornings and it's hard to get through the day. You find that staying up late affects your grades. What if your housemate, who works evening shifts, frequently enters your living space at 10:30pm to vent about their day? You understand that they need to talk, so you feel uncomfortable telling them that you need to sleep. If you continually avoid expressing your boundaries, over time resentment towards them will build. Not to mention the lack of sleep will affect your well-being.

The resentment can start to build slowly, until something small can trigger anger or frustration. If we aren't clear about our boundaries, people are left guessing, and it ultimately affects our communication and connection. In this way, not having clearly defined boundaries affects connection.

You can't control how the people in your life will treat you (including those you will be working with in your peer support role), but you can control your own boundaries.

When boundaries are crossed, talking about it in an honest, direct, and respectful way is important. Most of us have been in relationships where we haven't been clear on our personal boundaries, and the relationship has derailed and fallen apart. Lack of boundaries can show up in things like conflict that can't be managed, disrespectful and rude language, yelling, or even resentment that comes from doing what we perceive as "too much."

Having said that, it's important to note that all relationships can be messy since we human beings are imperfect. If, however, a relationship is not working for both people involved, then it's just not working. Boundary clarification is essential to relationships. Talking about boundaries, even if it is awkward, keeps the relationship healthy and on track.

When we are clear on our boundaries and they still get crossed, it's important to talk about it. Depending on how the boundary was crossed and how many times it has happened, sometimes we can learn from it and get past it, and sometimes we can't.

If in your peer support role, you find yourself working with people who consistently disregard your boundaries, it is important to talk to a supervisor and plan to step away from the relationship for a time, or perhaps permanently.

Conflict, Boundaries, Worldview, and Communication

We can't ever know someone's whole story. However, since we have a need to make sense of what we don't know, our brains often mindlessly fill in the blanks. We make assumptions. Our brains naturally create stories about people & situations, even when we don't have all the pieces to the puzzle.

Generosity of assumption, especially in conflict, is about giving people the benefit of the doubt, and believing that they were doing the best they could at the time.

> As you consider communication and conflict within peer support work, it can be tricky to balance all the principles we've outlined. It is important that we keep the following in mind:
>
> - **Believe that people are doing the best they can.**
> - **Know that you may have misunderstood something.**
> - **Offer compassion for the other person.**
> - **Offer self-compassion for yourself. At the same time,**
> - **Have good boundaries.**
> - **Know that the relationship might not work out.**
> - **Some things can't be repaired.**
> - **Sometimes you might have to walk away.**

A certain level of messiness in any relationship is totally normal, and even expected. Having good boundaries helps us handle the storms that can come in our relationships. If you feel the

messiness has moved beyond what you're comfortable with, remember to seek support from your supervisor.

Personal Boundaries

"Boundaries define us. They define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership. Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility for gives me freedom." ~Henry Cloud

This small section is about how boundaries affect us in our personal life. Your personal boundaries affect your well-being and your work.

*Remember that an important part of boundary work is honouring other people's boundaries. We must recognize that other people have as much right to their boundaries as we have to ours., Even though it might be hard when someone shares a boundary with us, we must honour and respect them by accepting their boundary.

An example of this would be asking if a friend has time to help us with something, and if they don't, we honour that without trying to push them into doing it anyway. We can then look for someone else to help us.

For Reflection

Consider these questions when establishing your boundaries:

- What do you value in life? What is non-negotiable? (Ex: Good health. Having downtime, away from school and work. Time to be creative. Time to be with my friends and family.)
- What activities give me a sense of purpose?

Healthy Boundaries and Well-Being

When we keep healthy boundaries and nourish our own well being we often experience the following benefits:

- We preserve and protect our energy and capacity for connection
- We support our mental health
- We can be compassionate, and we can be a better support to others.
- We feel equipped to say no when something doesn't work for us, and yes when it does, which keeps us aligned with our values
- We don't take on more than we can, and we give ourselves permission to say no, or to ask for support
- We feel more secure in ourselves, and have a greater sense of well-being
- When we have good boundaries, we look less to others for approval
- We know that our worth is not conditional on our behaviors
- When we have boundaries and we practice self-compassion we know that we still have value even when we aren't perfect, and we mess up
- Healthy boundaries combined with compassion for oneself allows us to be humble and admit when we mess up, because we know our value isn't conditionally based on an unattainable perfection
- We are not ruled by shame.

A shame response is when we beat ourselves up for messing up and we feel unable to let it go. It's when we do something wrong and then we constantly berate ourselves saying things like, "I'm such an idiot," "I always do this. I will never learn." This can perpetuate getting stuck in a shame cycle. Shame is destructive to our sense of well-being.

A healthy self-compassionate response to making a mistake is to sit with the pain and discomfort for a bit without ruminating or shaming ourselves. We can ask ourselves, "what can I learn from this?" We profoundly understand that mistakes are a part of life for everyone. We decide to do our best to do better next time.

When we have healthy boundaries and a sense of wholeness, we are also able to offer that same kindness, compassion, and understanding to others. We are careful never to shame anyone, and we are mindful of our words. We understand the power of our words and we intentionally choose to speak with compassion. However, when our wellness is suffering because of someone else's

treatment of us, we might need to take a break from the relationship either temporarily – or perhaps more permanently.

Kindness with Boundaries

"Your boundary need not be an angry electric fence that shocks those who touch it.. It can be a consistent light around you that announces: "I will be treated sacredly."
~Jaiya John (Freedom: Medicine Words For Your Brave Revolution 2020)

When setting boundaries is a newer practice for us, we can sometimes struggle with enforcing them. We can either be too passive, or too aggressive. We can find ourselves reacting in anger, rather than responding thoughtfully. When we react strongly (like an electric fence) to someone who has crossed a boundary, it can really sting the other person and potentially create a fracture in the relationship. We can be in danger of crossing someone else's boundary if we react in anger. This can be especially troublesome if we haven't clearly expressed our boundary with them yet, and they crossed it unintentionally. A kind, respectful, and firm approach will likely be received better, while preserving the relationship.

In both friendship and peer support work, it's important that both people get to weigh in on what works and what doesn't within the relationship. As we have discussed, boundaries need to be clear, and they must be respected by both people in order to preserve the sanctity of the individuals and the relationship as a whole.

Both people in the relationship need to be treated sacredly by the other.

For Reflection

Consider how you would respond to the following situations that are crossing one of your boundaries. Write down how you can respond to them in a kind, respectful, and firm way.

- Another peer support worker is desperate to get a day off. They ask you to take an extra shift for them. You don't have plans, but you are very tired, and have homework. How do you respond to them?
- You have told your peer that you will only respond to text messages about scheduling, but they keep texting you long messages about things happening in

their life – how do you respond?

- You have told your peer that you do not want to talk about mental health outside of your appointment times, but the peer keeps bringing it up during a class that you have together – what do you do?
- You work in a drop-in peer support role and the program does not want peer workers to give out any personal contact information to students seeking support. But one student keeps returning when you are on shift and shares how much they like talking to you, and keeps asking if they can have your phone number to contact you at other times. You've told them the program won't allow this, but they keep asking – what should you do?
- You have a lot in common with a peer that you are working with, and you get along very well. You know that your support relationship will come to an end with this person soon, and you wonder if the two of you could stay friends – what should you do?
- You are studying and another peer support worker from your team wants to vent to you about something. You only have a few hours before your exam, and you don't feel ready yet. How would you respond?

Empathy and Self-Determination

As we've discussed, a lack of boundaries opens us up to burn out, compassion fatigue, and disconnection with others while holding strong emotional boundaries and nourishing our own well-being leads to a greater capacity for compassion and empathy.

Empathy

In her book *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't)* (2007), Brené Brown references nursing scholar Teresa Wiseman's four attributes to empathy:

1. The ability to see the world through another person's perspective
2. Staying out of judgment
3. Paying attention to, and doing our best to understand another person's emotions
4. Communicating your understanding of that person's feelings

If we drain our "empathy account" without healthy self-nourishment practices, we can become emotionally exhausted.In other words, if we take on other people's pain without healthy emotional boundaries, we run the risk of overextending ourselves.

We must remember that it's not possible to take away someone else's pain. We can listen and bear witness to someone's pain, but we have limitations to what we can do. If we continue to take on too much, over time we will find ourselves shutting down. That might look like distancing ourselves from listening to people's struggles because it is just too much to bear. We may find ourselves pulling away because we can't handle the difficult feelings. No human can handle taking on the pain of everyone around them.

Practicing compassion while taking care of your emotional needs is very important in your peer support role.

Self-Determination

Let's review the core value of self-determination and consider its intersection with boundaries:

- Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions and have freedom from coercion.

- We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation.
- Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.

When we support someone's self-determination, we choose to shine a light on their inner resources so they can tap into their intrinsic motivation. It is not our job to fix or save anyone. When we effectively support someone else's self-determination, a benefit for us is that it creates a healthy boundary, because we don't take on the responsibility of fixing someone else's problem.

We can learn to be empathetic and compassionate AND have boundaries that support our own well-being!

In the Greater Good UC Berkeley article called *Just One Thing*: *Be at Peace with the Pain of Others* (2014), Dr. Rick Hanson says the following in regards to doing what we can within our limitations:

> Let the pain of the other person wash through you. Don't resist it. Opening your heart, finding compassion – the sincere wish that a being not suffer – will lift and fuel you to bear the other's pain. We long to feel received by others; turn it around: your openness to another person, your willingness to be moved, is one of the greatest gifts you can offer...Do what you can—and know that you have done it, which brings a peace. And then, face the facts of your limitations, another source of peace...When you recognize this truth, it is strangely calming. You still care about the other person, and you do what you can, but you see that this pain and its causes are a tiny part of a larger and mostly impersonal whole...This recognition of the whole—the whole of one person's life, of the past emerging into the present, of the natural world, of physical reality altogether—tends to settle down the neural networks in the top middle of the brain that ruminate and agitate. It also tends to activate and strengthen neural networks on the sides of the brain that support spacious mindfulness, staying in the present, taking life less personally—and with those changes come a growing sense of peace.

Hanson is saying that when we recognize that we can't fix or save anyone else, it creates a sense of peace within us. We are effectively creating an emotionally healthy boundary that supports our own sense of peace. With this recognition, we don't take on too much because we recognize that as a peer support worker, we are in someone's life for just a short season. We can come alongside, listen, bear witness to their struggle, while not taking it on.

When we establish this boundary, our capacity for empathy grows!

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

PRINCIPLES IN TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Purpose of Module

Trauma is pervasive. One in five Canadians have a history of trauma. This means that as you engage in peer support work on your campus, you will most certainly encounter people who have experienced trauma, even though you may not know their history. Because of this, we must serve everyone with the underlying assumption that they are coming to the table with a trauma history. Emotional safety is paramount as people are more likely to experience retraumatization when they feel unsafe.

It is essential that all peer support environments are built on principles of safety, predictability, and choice. In this module we focus on creating environments that are trauma-informed. When we create a trauma-informed peer support environment, we support the calming of the nervous system for everyone present, which allows people the safety and capacity to heal and grow. We also understand that trauma is almost never caused in isolation, and healing can never be done in isolation either. We need a systems approach to healing. In this module, we will be focusing on healing-centered relationships and their importance in the creation of trauma-informed peer support environments.

Learning Objectives

1. You will be able to define and articulate clearly what it means to be trauma-informed and the importance of putting it into practice.
2. You will be able to recognize and articulate the significance of systemic trauma.
3. You will be able to identify key components of trauma-informed care and their application in campus settings.
4. You will be able to examine and articulate the impact of trauma on health and learn simple practices that support the calming of the sympathetic nervous system.

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. *If you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.*

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

We will be digging into some challenging topics in this module. If you have a history of trauma it could bring up some discomfort for you. If you find it triggering please take a step back, and reach out to your supervisor or your campus counselor if you need some support.

Life Application Story

Nadia and Amy had been meeting up at the park near the campus student union building for the past few weeks, and Nadia, a peer support worker, thought they were ready for a change. They were supposed to meet there again that afternoon, but given the grey day, being indoors seemed like a much better option to Nadia. She texted Amy, certain she would be excited about the change in plans.

Hi Amy!! It looks like it's going to rain today. Instead of meeting up at the park, how about we head to the student union building? We can just grab a tea and hang out. How about I meet you by the entrance at the same time?

Okay. Texted Amy

Great! See you soon.

Nadia waited at the meeting spot for 45 minutes, but Amy never showed up. Amy also didn't respond to any of her texts. Nadia was upset because she had taken time out of her study schedule to meet and was really looking forward to spending time with Amy and grabbing a bite to eat at the student union cafe.

When she got home, Nadia texted Amy again: *Hey! Is everything okay? I waited for you for 45 minutes today. I was worried.*

Amy: *Yeah sorry. I wasn't feeling well.*

At first Nadia was annoyed. Couldn't Amy have texted that earlier? She felt that Amy wasn't respecting her time. Nadia thought about it for a while. Amy had talked to her a bit about a bad breakup she had with a fellow student, and how it impacted her sense of safety. She didn't mention anything over text about having a problem with the change in plans, but maybe she wasn't ok with it. Nadia also realized that layers of communication can be lost in texting, so maybe she was just assuming that Amy was okay with the change.

Nadia: *Okay I'm sorry to hear that you're not feeling well. Is there anything else? I know I changed plans at the last minute. Please let me know if that didn't work for you.*

Amy texted back: *Thanks. Yeah… at first it sounded like a good idea, but to be honest being in the crowded student union building where my ex might be stressed me out. I felt like I didn't have a choice in the plan, and I was also really looking forward to going for a walk. I really feel comfortable at our usual place, and there's a café beside the park if it rains. I also don't do so well with spontaneous changes to plans.*

Nadia: *I'm really sorry that I changed the plan at the last minute. I wish I had texted you my thoughts earlier. I also realize now that I didn't give you a choice in the decision. That wasn't right. I'm glad that you feel comfortable at our usual place. We can for sure keep meeting there if that feels good for you. I really like it there too, and maybe we can head into the café if we're feeling up for that.*

Amy: *I'm good with that. I would like to go somewhere new sometime, but if we can plan for it ahead of time that would make me feel a lot more comfortable. I would like to be emotionally prepared. I know it sounds silly, but it's important to me.*

Nadia decided to give Amy a call. This was an important conversation, and she didn't want to risk misunderstanding by continuing to text.

Amy answered the phone and was glad to chat about it.

Nadia said, "I do hear what you are saying, and I understand. Thank you so much for letting me know how you are feeling. I'm grateful that you felt comfortable telling me. I am sorry for not considering your needs. I'm hearing that this is one of your needs to feel safe, and I really want to support you in the best way I can. I get that! I have needs like that too. We talked about boundaries when we first met, and we defined what we both needed – I'm really glad to know now that this is one of your needs, too. I will remember this and do my best to respect it."

Nadia continued, "I'm really looking forward to meeting up next week. Would it work for you if we check in 3 days before and see what the weather forecast is supposed to be like, so we can decide between meeting at the park entrance or the café you mentioned?"

Amy: "Yes! That works for me! Thank you so much for understanding Nadia! I feel so much better."

Let's Start with Hope

Trauma is a difficult topic. In this module we are looking at heavy and complex issues that affect us both as individuals and as communities. Trauma can have a systemic component; supporting people who have experienced trauma must include both an individual and a systemic approach. This means recognizing the impact of both personal trauma and of harmful systems on the people we work with. We must intentionally avoid adding to the harm while we support individuals in any capacity (from one-to-one mental health focused peer support work, group work, academic/resource support, to working with international students).

As we look at trauma and healing, we must remember the mutual approach of peer support. We all come to the table with our own wounds. Together, we all get to support each other towards healing those wounds through connection. It is a community endeavour. We live within systems that are flawed and will continue to cause harm, but we also have a hand in changing them. Healing is a mutual and intentional practice. Peer support is a movement that changes systems!

Trauma is common. Creating a trauma-informed lens is one of the important steps we can take collectively towards creating safe ecosystems within campuses and workplaces that will support people to heal and flourish. This means we acknowledging the prevalence of trauma and doing everything needed to avoid retraumatizing people.

But that is just the beginning.

In order to create healing centered connections within peer support, we need:

- Clarity of purpose
- Mutuality
- Grounding in core values
- A clear strength-based direction for moving towards where we want to be.

Also essential to this work are:

- Prioritizing building resilience in others
- Acknowledging strengths
- Addressing inequity
- Cultivating hope and joy

The biggest message we want to share before we dig deeper into this topic is that **healing is possible**. Many people heal from their trauma. Experiencing healing-centered connections is a

key element of the healing process. Besides relationships, there are many therapeutic supports that can support the healing process -with new modalities of healing being discovered all the time! Be encouraged by that.

In this module we will be talking about how a trauma-informed approach is an important starting point for healing. It is a set of principles that is recommended for every organization, campus, and business to embrace.

For Reflection

What are some things about which you need to feel safe and connected when you are with other people?

SAMHSA's Definition of Trauma-Informed Care

Here in Canada, we don't have an agreed upon definition of trauma-informed care. Most Canadian agencies borrow the following definition from the US government's Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

According to SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach (2014), trauma-informed agencies:

- **REALIZE** the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for healing.
- **RECOGNIZE** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, staff, and others involved with the system.
- **RESPOND** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices, and settings.
- Actively **RESIST RETRAUMATIZATION**.

- You'll notice in the second bullet point it says "clients, staff, and others involved within the system. That means everyone. Why do you think it is important to assume that everyone can come to the table with trauma?
- How do you think that will affect the way a program is run?
- In the previous section we mentioned racial trauma, and microaggressions. What must an individual, and agency do to make sure they aren't unconsciously perpetuating microaggressions that cause trauma in BIPOC peoples?

Media Attributions

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SAMHSA's Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration of the USA (SAMHSA) also identifies the following six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

1. Safety

We must ask people what safety means to them. If we don't challenge our own worldview, assumptions, and life experience regarding what safety means to us, we will not be able to ensure a sense of safety for ALL. We will simply be creating safety for people like us. We must ensure that we create safety for those who have different experiences from our own.

This means that we consider all ages, cultures, races, demographics of people served. We must also consider the safety of staff, co-workers, and stakeholders. Safety means awareness of physical, emotional, and interpersonal safety.

Dr. Sandra Bloom from The Sanctuary Model defines safety in following domains:

- *Physical*
- *Psychological*
- *Social*
- *Moral*

How do you think boundaries fit in with creating safety?

Organizations that are trauma-aware tend to offer critical incident debriefing following a traumatic incident that staff and volunteers witness. Processing the event right away is very important.

2. Trustworthiness and Transparency

In trauma-informed care, operations and decisions must be made with transparency at the forefront. The goal must be to build and maintain trust with service recipients, staff, and stakeholders. Sometimes organizations must make hard decisions, especially around funding. When we uphold trustworthiness and transparency, that means that we are open about the process of making those difficult decisions, and we invite other voices to participate. Valuing and

listening to other students and committees can support the maintenance of trustworthiness. Keeping secrets and withholding information is not trauma-informed.

Trustworthiness and transparency in an organization starts with a culture of connection in relationships. Everything matters from a simple warm smile when you greet someone to approaching conflict in safe and respectful ways. Conflict is a normal part of human relationships, but how we deal with conflict can be very damaging and can cause trauma. Many people have experienced trauma in the educational and work settings because of this. Establishing strong relationships that have the resilience to move through conflict in a transformative way is essential.

Do you think consistency is important? Why or why not? Can you give an example?

3. Peer Support

Organizations that are trauma-informed prioritize practices like peer support. This principle is about integrating the culture and values of peer support into the whole organization. It's about creating opportunities for the mutuality of peer support to integrate into many aspects of the organization, including initiatives to support admin and staff. A campus, or organization that promotes peer support focuses on mutuality and possibility. Authenticity and vulnerability are essential to this work. An organization that creates opportunity for deeper mutual connections between and among all staff is trauma-informed.

4. Collaboration and Mutuality

A collaborative approach is necessary for everyone in an organization or on a campus. In a trauma-informed organization there is an intentional shoulder to shoulder approach and a focus on breaking down hierarchies. We can't avoid the fact that there are different roles with different levels of responsibility. However, power differentials can be broken down, and though people have roles, there is a spirit of mutuality and standing together.

An organization that is focussed on being trauma-informed on and creating healing-centered connections, also supports their staff and stakeholders to reflect and attend to their own well-being. All policies should support the well-being both of those served by the organization and of the staff. When staff feel whole and engage in reflective, contemplative healing practices themselves, it is easier to create connection with others.

How can you create this kind of collaboration in your peer program?

Have you noticed this kind of collaboration in other areas of campus life? If so, do you think it is something that can be replicated in other areas?

5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

An important aspect of this principle is that organizations must believe in the possibility of recovery from trauma. Trauma survivors are already resilient. Empowerment means that they continue to support people's inner resilience. We think of empowerment as coming from the person's own inner wisdom and strength, rather than *power given to them* from an outside "expert." As supporters, we get to shine a light on the strengths and abilities we see in someone, that they may not be able to see for themselves.

Many people with past trauma have experienced coercion. Therefore, choice is really important. A person must always have choice.

Peter A. Levine Ph.D, author of the book *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (1997) says the following:

> Resilient strength is the opposite of helplessness...Empowerment is the acceptance of personal authority. It derives from the capacity to choose the direction and execution of one's own energies. Mastery is the possession of skillful techniques in dealing successfully with threat.

6. Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues

The SAMHSA's *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach* says this about an organization with a trauma-informed approach:

> The organization actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, geography), offers gender responsive services, leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections, and recognizes and addresses historical trauma.

We choose to see through a trauma-informed lens every day, doing everything we can to ensure we do not unintentionally retraumatize someone.

What Trauma-Informed Care is not

Trauma-Informed Care is NOT:

- **Trauma therapy.** You don't need to be a clinician to support someone. Some people may also need trauma therapy, and that needs to be offered by a trained trauma therapist. However, there are many things that are therapeutic that can be just as transformative, or even more so. Building healing-centered relationships is an essential part of thriving.
- **A focus on the negative.** On the contrary, trauma-informed care should focus on healing and resilience. A trauma-informed approach educates service providers to be aware of how their words, attitudes, and behaviours can deeply affect someone who has experienced trauma and works to avoid retraumatizing people.
- **About justifying poor behaviour.** Trauma-informed care doesn't justify poor behaviour because someone is experiencing trauma. Trauma-informed care steers away from punishment, but supports accountability, personal responsibility, and expectations around conduct. It supports people with compassion and empathy, and boundaries are also very important.
- **Just about being nice and kind.** Compassion is at the forefront of this work, but compassion isn't soft and flimsy. A compassionate approach is firm, has clear boundaries, and is grounded in love and empathy.
- **Babying people.** The goal of trauma-informed care is to avoid unnecessary retraumatization. However, stress can't always be avoided. Attending post-secondary has some stressful elements that can't be avoided. It's also important for people to learn tools to cope with stress and difficult situations.
- **Just focused on the individual.** Trauma-informed care supports individuals, but it is a systems approach.

What is Emotional and Psychological Trauma?

Often when we think of the word trauma, we think of it as a particular event. A stressful event can *cause* trauma, but emotional and psychological trauma is *the result* of a stressful event. We define trauma as the emotional response following an event. Psychological and emotional trauma can leave someone feeling scared, unable to cope, helpless, overwhelmed, numb, and/or disconnected from self and others, and distrustful.

Trauma can be caused by a threat to one's physical or psychological safety. Sometimes simply witnessing someone else's harm can also cause emotional and psychological trauma.

The website *Help.org* says, *"It's not the objective circumstances that determine whether an event is traumatic, but your subjective emotional experience of the event. The more frightened and helpless you feel, the more likely you are to be traumatized."*

This is why two people can experience the same event, and one of them can continue with life as usual, and the other can be left to deal with significant trauma.

The document called *Engaging Women In Trauma-Informed Peer Support*: A *Guidebook*, (Blanch, Filson, Penney, Cave, 2012) defines trauma this way:

> Trauma occurs when an external threat overwhelms a person's coping resources. It can result in specific signs of psychological or emotional distress, or it can affect many aspects of the person's life over a period of time. Sometimes people aren't even aware that the challenges they face are related to trauma that occurred earlier in life. Trauma is unique to each individual—the most violent events are not always the events that have the deepest impact. Trauma can happen to anyone, but some groups are particularly vulnerable due to their circumstances, including women and children, people with disabilities, and people who are homeless or living in institutions. (April 2012)

Types of Trauma

Before we dig into this section, it's important to mention that as a peer support worker you will not be providing clinical treatment, or therapy. We are only sharing this information with you so that you can understand how trauma affects the body, and why it is so important to be intentional about not triggering someone's past trauma.

The following are the three ways trauma is typically categorized:

- **Acute:** Results from a single overwhelming event. (This could be a car accident, single act of abuse, natural disaster, sudden major loss, or witnessing violence.)
- **Chronic:** Results from events that happen repeatedly, for prolonged periods of time. Can be the same event or different events. (This could include domestic violence, the effects of poverty, neglect, bullying, ongoing treatment needed for an illness such as cancer.)
- **Complex:** Similar to chronic trauma, complex trauma results from events that happen repeatedly for longer periods of time. The difference is that these events were perpetrated by a trusted caregiver, so there is a sense of betrayal. Complex trauma often originates in childhood.

A note about complex trauma: Complex trauma often impacts a person's sense of worth, can lead to deep feelings of shame and distrust as well as symptoms including disassociation. These can occur with acute and chronic trauma as well, but are more common with complex trauma. This can make it hard to address or work through issues. Again, as a peer support worker, treatment will not be something you work on with people. Know that if someone you are supporting has complex trauma, your connection and support can be really important to their well-being.

Outside of these three categories, there are several other types of trauma that people can encounter:

Microaggressions

Dictionary.com defines microaggression this way:

1. a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a member of a marginalized group, especially a racial minority, that is often unintentionally offensive or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype:
   microaggressions such as "*I don't see you as Black.*"
2. the act of discriminating against a marginalized group by means of such comments or actions:
   The diversity committee discussed the issue of microaggression toward women on campus.

Though microaggressions are subtle, when they happen often the impact is cumulative, and can cause trauma in an individual.

Small words can wield great power to cause harm.

The journal article *Challenging Definitions of Psychological Trauma: Connecting Racial*

Microaggressions and Traumatic Stress, (Nadal, Erazo, King, 2019) highlights the importance of mental health professionals taking the impact of microaggressions seriously. The article states that the effects of racism create trauma, and professionals should use culturally-informed, trauma-focused supports to "normalize and empower people of colour."

They state, *"By not naming racism or other forms of oppression as a legitimate type of trauma, people of color (and others) continue to internalize that they are not coping with discrimination effectively, instead of externalizing the role of historical and systemic oppression in their lives."*

The following is from the study:

> Future researchers can further examine racial trauma and microaggressive trauma as concepts that negatively impact the lives of people of color and prohibit their ability to thrive in all aspects of their lives. Researchers can examine if microaggressions can perhaps trigger past experiences of racial trauma similar to retraumatizations. Scholars have found retraumatization to be detrimental to psychological health (see Duckworth & Follette, 2012), while others have supported that accumulative or complex trauma and revictimization often results in greater symptomology (Courtois, 2008). So, while racial microaggressions may appear innocuous or harmless, they may trigger memories of intensity or frequent racial discrimination, which may exacerbate trauma symptoms. (2019)

Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress, and Retraumatization

Both vicarious trauma and secondary trauma are indirect trauma. They occur when someone is a witness to another person's trauma. Retraumatization is when something happens, and a person is reminded of their own personal trauma (more on this below).

Vicarious Trauma

The term "vicarious trauma" was coined by Pearlman & Saakvitne in 1995. It refers to an indirect trauma that can happen when a clinician/practitioner is constantly exposed, and a witness to other people's trauma. It is different from burnout. Burnout happens when we don't attend to our well-being through restoring and refueling. Burnout can stem from many different things including lack of boundaries, and attention to one's well-being. However, vicarious trauma is different from burnout.

For example, a domestic violence worker *(who hasn't experienced domestic violence personally)* might begin to question if any relationship can be safe, because the amount of violence they hear about from their clients is affecting their perception of safety in intimate relationships. Being a witness to other people's trauma begins to affect their own worldview and causes a traumatic response within them.

Vicarious traumatization can also happen when someone is overexposed to detailed traumatic stories in other roles and capacities (for example, working in the criminal justice system, court workers, police officers, child and youth social workers, overwatching the news, etc.)

Secondary Trauma

Like vicarious trauma, this occurs when someone supports someone who is experiencing a serious trauma. The trauma is not first-hand, although the person can develop PTSD-like (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) symptoms.

Vicarious traumatization happens slowly over time while secondary trauma happens quickly and unexpectedly.

Retraumatization

Retraumatization occurs when someone is exposed to a situation that consciously or unconsciously triggers a memory of a previous personal trauma. The body reacts with a stress response that feels as intense as the original trauma.

One of the main goals of trauma-informed care is that we want to do as much as we can to prevent retraumatization for people we work with.

As a peer support worker, it is important to have good connections with your campus team so that you can debrief and get the support you need after a potentially triggering event occurs. Awareness of your triggers and stressors is important so you can avoid certain situations when possible. However, we aren't always able to avoid triggers. Sometimes they come out of nowhere, but we can learn about and develop practices that will support your nervous system when you've been triggered.

Systemic Trauma

We tend to look at trauma as a problem that is strictly individual by nature (which may be, in part, due to the hyper-individualistic nature of our society as a whole). Sometimes an experience of trauma is very much individual, but often there is more going on beneath the surface. Systemic problems such as poverty, poor healthcare services and ineffective education can create conditions for traumatic situations to occur.

Though there usually is a specific person or situation that caused a traumatic event, and we must address that, often we neglect to see how deeply flawed systems are perpetuating the trauma.

For example, when a child is bullied in school. It is necessary for the child who is bullying to be accountable and experience consequences for their behaviour.

support and bullying

Child Bully

Child Being Bullied

Support

Look at Child's Home Life

Necessary Consequence

Temporary Change in Behavior

Home life may reveal
the root of behavior

Is it a nurturing environtment?

Are their basic needs being met?

Are they experiencing abuse or neglect?

Are there systemic issues relating
to social determinents of health?

This child needs support too. Their support plan
must include addressing the needs of the child's family

Lasting Change in Behavior

However, to make a lasting change we must **also** look at the child's homelife. Are they experiencing abuse? Are their basic needs being met? Are they living in a nurturing environment?

Are they living in poverty? Is the family dealing with a systemic issue related to social determinants of health?

A systems approach is needed if we want the child who is bullying to recognize the harm in their behaviour. This means that the needs of the child's family must be addressed too.

The truth is that we are a traumatized nation–a traumatized world. Trauma gives rise to more trauma. It's cyclical and will continue to cycle until we are collectively much more deliberate about disrupting the cycles.

Starting Where We Are

So what can be done about systemic trauma? Is there a way we can do our part? YES! Doing our own work to adopt a trauma-informed lens, building healing-centered connections, while integrating the core values of peer support into our work will make a difference in people's lives.

In general, as a society we are not good at addressing systemic trauma. The systems can seem so big, and the scale of the problem so overwhelming. So we create band-aid approaches to deal with the aftermath of trauma, but we tend not to focus on healing or prevention.

We live in an individualistic society that doesn't often consider the collective needs of people – we tend to each tree without recognizing the threats to the whole forest. In a more interconnected society, we would be working hard to change the systemic conditions that both create trauma and continue to retraumatize people.

Both as a society and as individuals, we need to learn to perceive and address trauma differently. It is essential that we learn to see and interact with the world through a trauma-informed lens. Unless we intentionally work to change these traumatizing systems, history will continue to repeat itself.

> *What are some ways you see systems creating or perpetuating cycles of trauma?*

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Examples of Systemic Trauma

Racialized Trauma

The Indian Act

Here in Canada the "Indian Act" came into law in 1867. In the book 21 *Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act*, author Bob Joseph shares details of the Act that created the colonial system that continues to traumatize Indigenous peoples today. The Indian Act included things like:

- Creating reserves
- Mandating residential schools
- Restricting First Nations from leaving their reserve without permission from a government official
- Forbidding First Nations peoples from forming government, or even voting
- Forbidding First Nations peoples from speaking their language, practicing their religion, or any form of culture–from potlatches to wearing traditional regalia

This is just a sampling of the Indian Act. Basically, the act treated First Nations people as non-human. Over time the act has shifted and changed, but the stage was set in 1867 for an unjust system that oppresses Indigenous peoples. The Truth and Reconciliation movement is working to break down the deeply racist colonizing roots we still experience today. However, in order for any kind of lasting cultural shift to occur, all of society needs to participate in creating change.

Impact of Slavery on the World Today

Similarly, if we consider the roots of slavery in North America, we can become aware of why our society still struggles with systemic racism. Canadians tend to think that Canada wasn't involved with slavery. However, this is not fully accurate. Canada became a sovereign country in 1867, 33 years after slavery ended within the British Empire, of which Canada was part. . Abolition happened later for the US, and in those years in-between Canada did give safe haven to enslaved people from the US through the Underground Railway. However, slavery was also legal here for 200 years. Enslaved people had no legal rights and were not considered fully human under the law.

Because the slave trade was intrinsic to the development of North America, it has deeply impacted the system of government we know today. Slavery – and later segregation – meant that laws governing our lands elevated the value of white lives over black lives. This problem

continues to be systemic, because it is so ingrained in the way laws are written. This is something we still struggle with today.

Patriarchal Systems and Trauma

Sexism, and the oppressively patriarchal nature of Western society are systemic problems that can perpetuate trauma for all genders. For centuries, Western society and culture has favoured the white heterosexual male over anyone else. That has created constant and ongoing opportunity for systemic trauma to affect people outside of that demographic.

Most women in Canada were only allowed to vote after 1916, with Quebec being the last province to allow women to vote in 1940.

Until 1985 (when there was a change to the Indian Act), Indigenous women did not have autonomy of their own status. Before 1985, an Indigenous woman who married someone non-indigenous would lose their status.

We could go on and on, but the point is that there are many deeply entrenched racist and sexist policies that have contributed to systemic issues that continue to affect people today.

Today women and girls are still more likely to experience sexual assault. The #MeToo movement helped to bring awareness to the issue, but we still have a long way to go. Women tend to have more barriers that keep them in poverty, and there is still a wage gap between women and men in the workplace. Today there is still an imbalance of women in leadership positions. Statistics tell us that girls are more likely to have adverse childhood experiences that can result in mental health issues. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), women are twice as likely to experience mental health issues as men are. Further, white male-dominated culture creates conditions that increase the possibility for women to experience systemic trauma.

These same systemic conditions have also led to widespread homophobia and transphobia. Many LGBTQ2+ people experience microaggressions, mistreatment, aggression, and violence that can cause trauma.

The War on Drugs and the Opioid Crisis

Consider the opioid crisis we are currently experiencing. There are so many layers of trauma involved in this issue. We will dig into this more in the Substance Use module, but we will touch on it briefly here. Many issues have converged to create the opioid crisis we are dealing with today. The War on Drugs in the 1970s, and the accompanying criminalization of drugs put people into cycles of crime and incarceration with no real view towards – or impact on – eradicating

drug use. Incarceration has little impact on misuse rates. Research has since told us that harm reduction principles are much more effective in supporting people struggling with substance use. The criminalization of drugs created a major systemic problem. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) have been disproportionately incarcerated, which has contributed to racialized trauma, and the ongoing trauma of the opioid crisis.

Dislocation, Attachment and Trauma

Perspectives related to trauma and addiction come from two famous doctors who hail from right here in B.C.! Dr. Bruce Alexander (*a former professor at Simon Fraser University*), and Dr. Gabor Maté (*who worked for many years at The Portland Hotel Community in Vancouver*) have both made a significant impact in the field of trauma and addictions with their work.

Through his "Rat Park" experiment, that has been replicated many times since, Dr. Alexander theorised a connection between dislocation and addiction. Meaning: when a person loses their sense of belonging and has their culture taken from them, they are more likely to experience addiction later in life. Alexander proposes that connection to others is a key aspect in recovery, and prevention of addiction.

Dr. Gabor Maté shares his perspective that there is a connection between early childhood trauma and addiction in adulthood. For many years he worked in the downtown east side of Vancouver with people struggling with severe addiction who were also experiencing homelessness. He states that during that time he never worked with someone who didn't have childhood trauma. Though his message is heavy, there is still so much hope in it. Like Alexander, Maté talks about how the need for connection and attachment is essential to recovery. Basically, his work is about how to heal from trauma through attachment and connection to others.

*Note that both Alexander and Maté look at addiction beyond drugs and alcohol. In their work they include all addictive behaviours, such as gambling, shopping, video gaming, sex, internet use–basically any behaviour that becomes compulsive and uncontrolled.

Trauma in the Mental Health System

As we discussed in numerous modules, many people have experienced trauma through the very system that is trying to help them. Qualitatively, things within our mental health system are definitely better than they were in the 60s and 70s, but we still have a long way to go. Many people still have traumatic experiences in hospital settings. Because of the way the Mental Health Act is written and enacted, some people still get taken to a hospital handcuffed in a police car. As you can imagine, these experiences are retraumatizing for people with existing trauma e. Our system is in need of ongoing reforms to be sure; in the meantime, if all people involved with those

who are experiencing a mental health crisis were to engage with a trauma-informed lens, that would make a big difference.

Hope for our World

Interconnection and Systems

Consider the aspen tree, native to Canada. In a forest of aspens, we see a gathering of single trees. However, aspens are not solitary trees. Beneath the surface of the soil they are an interconnected community of trees that share nutrients through their roots. All the roots interconnect and create one singular root system. Together, they are survivors. The strength of the community allows these trees to thrive, while the forest regenerates for many years.

We often forget that – like the aspen tree – as human beings we are also inextricably interconnected.

interconnection and systems
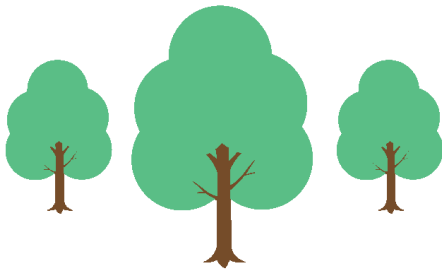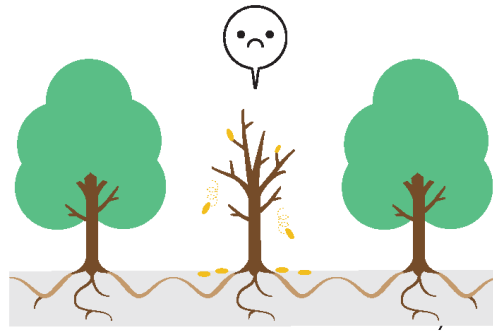
A forest is not a gathering of single trees

All roots interconnect to create one root system
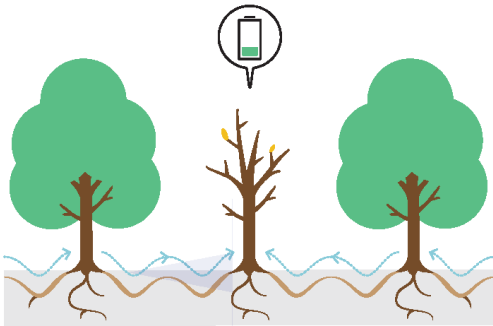
An interconnected community of trees that share nutrients through their roots
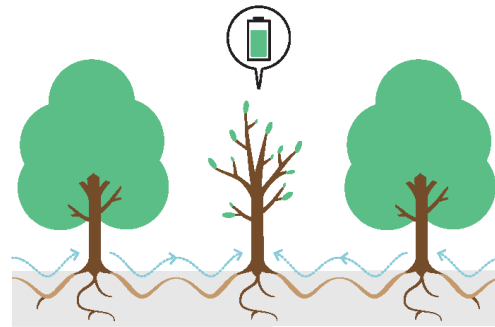
The strength of the community allows these trees to thrive while the forest regenerates for many years
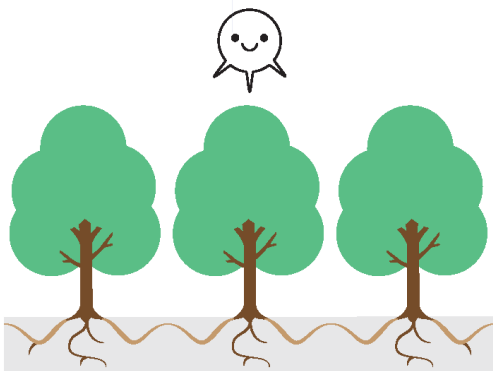
Together, they are survivors!

PERSONAL WELL-BEING IS LINKED TO

COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY WELL-BEING

[Image description]

When we look at the world through a lens of interconnection, we see how we all impact each

other in profound ways. Our well-being is so connected to our communities and the societies we are a part of. The results of our actions don't just affect us–the effects of our choices and actions ripple out and impact others (directly or indirectly).

We see this impact in systemic trauma. When someone is mistreated by one system, it trickles down and impacts many, including the people working within the system, family members of the person impacted, and the people with whom they all connect.

The encouraging part of this is that interconnection means we can also impact systems in a positive way! Consider all the people you interact with in your life. When you impact someone in a positive way, that kindness radiates out and spreads to others. And when you challenge an injustice, the same thing happens.

collective healing / planting a forest

An individual working on healing their trauma

Can help support others' healing process

With a consistent nurturing environment, we can create communities built on healing and support

The collective healing process of systemic and individual trauma on a large scale will take decades, even generations
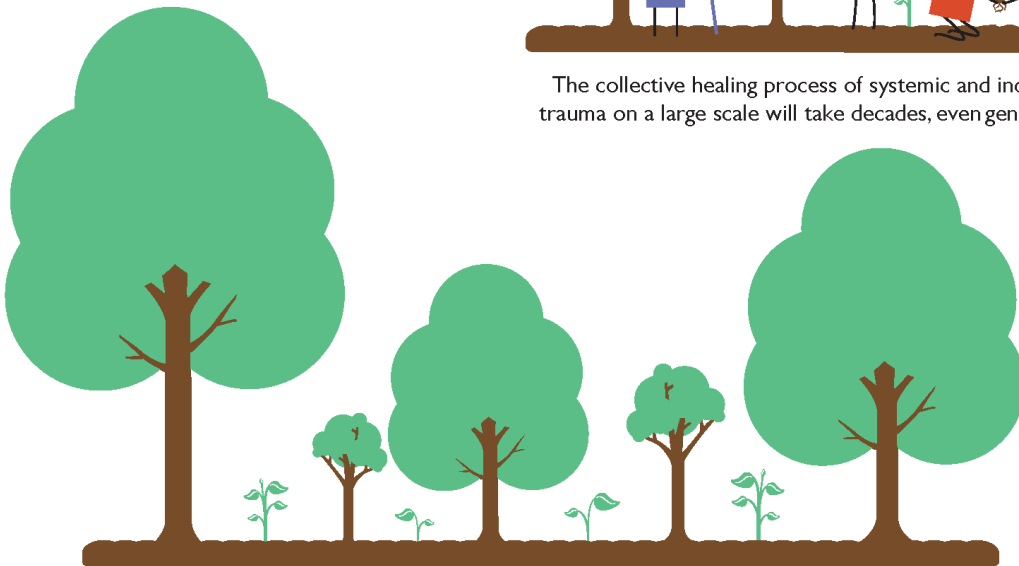
Shifting systems is a marathon, not a sprint, in which we must all work together to keep growing

[Image description]

This is how we begin to repair these flawed, harmful systems. When we each do our part,

however small it might seem to us, it has a powerful cumulative effect on others. We can't forget that shifting systems is a marathon, not a sprint. We can make an impact, but in order to keep going, we need to maintain collective inspiration, hope, connection, and endurance.

Hope Through Trauma-Informed Care

There is hope for those of us who have experienced trauma, and there is hope for the systems that traumatize and retraumatize people. That hope expands into new possibilities when we focus on building strengths and resiliency in ourselves, the people we support, and all stakeholders.

We can be encouraged by people who are championing this cause. A little town in Florida called Tarpon Springs has declared themselves the first trauma-informed city in North America. In 2010 the community learned about what it meant to be trauma-informed, and many community leaders came together to collaborate on a new approach to service that included a trauma-informed lens.

As a community instead of asking "what's wrong with them?" when someone perpetrates a crime, they are asking, "what happened to them?"

This is the Mission of an initiative of community leaders that have gathered to support community members:

> *Tarpon Springs Trauma Informed Community Initiative's mission is to provide everyone in our community with information on the causes and consequences of trauma, public and provider education, resource assistance and advocacy for appropriate prevention and intervention services. To effect long-term community improvement, we work to increase awareness of issues facing members of our community who have been traumatized to promote healing.*

This is so hopeful! Over time perhaps many cities will take this stance, and in the meantime, we can take a trauma-informed approach in our work in peer support.

ways to effect change as an individual
that can lead to systemic change:
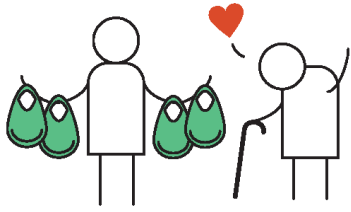
BEING KIND TO YOUR NEIGHBOUR

GETTING INVOLVED IN YOUR COMMUNITY
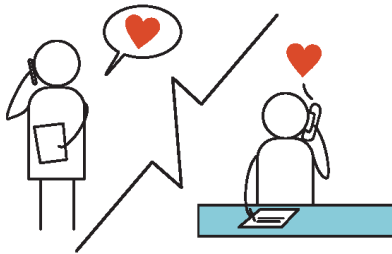
CONNECTING WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS
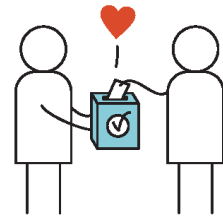
VOTING

CHOOSING HOW YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY
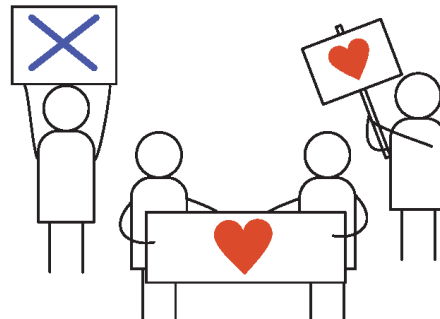
PROTESTING AND ACTIVISM

[Image description]

You Can't Fix Everything, and That's ok

It's important to note that there might be times in our own journey when we are in the thick of our own struggle, and we may not be able to practice activism. That is ok! We may need others to come alongside to support and advocate for us. This is one of the beautiful aspects of peer support–the MUTUALITY of support!!

Preventing and healing trauma is a systemic issue, and it needs collaboration and a systems approach to fix it. Know that you can't do it alone.

Image Descriptions

Interconnection and systems

A series of illustrations of trees with text explaining interconnection and systems.

- A forest is not a gathering of single trees
- All roots interconnect to create one root system
- An interconnected community of trees that share nutrients through their roots
- The strength of the community allows these trees to thrive while the forest regenerates for many years
- Together they are survivors!

Personal well-being is linked to community and society well-being.

[Return to place in the text]

Collective healing/planting a forest

A series of illustration of planting a forest explaining collective healing

- An individual working on healing their trauma
- Can help support others' healing process
- With a consistent nurturing environment, we can create communities built on healing and support
- The collective healing process of systemic and individual trauma on a large scale will take decades, even generations
- Shifting systems is a marathon, not a sprint, in which we must all work together to keep growing

[Return to place in the text]

Systemic change

Ways to effect change as an individual that can lead to systemic change:

- being kind to your neighbour
- getting involved in your community
- connecting with government officials
- voting
- choosing how you spend you money
- protesting and activism

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Trauma and Its Impact on Health

ACE Study

Our childhood experiences have a strong influence on the health and well-being we experience as adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study was a longitudinal study funded by the United States Center for Disease Control, and Kaiser Permanente. They examined the patterns of adverse childhood experiences and later life well-being. More than 17,000 people were recruited in the mid-nineties for the study and they have been followed ever since.

The study has proven that there is a significant link between adverse childhood experiences and health and social issues in adulthood.

ACE is a tool that assesses a person's adverse childhood experiences by asking 10 questions. The person gets a score between 0 & 10. As the ACE score increases, so does the person's risk for chronic disease. With a score of 4 or higher, a person's risk for certain health issues increases–such as diabetes, heart problems, mental health issues, cancer, addiction, etc.

*It's important to note that the ACE study involved mostly white, middle-class, college educated people who had health care coverage through Kaiser Permanente insurance.

The Nervous System and Trauma

It is important to know a little about the biology of trauma, as it can support us to understand how we can avoid retraumatizing people.

Trauma is stored both in our conscious and subconscious. The memory lives in the body and the brain. We have evolved to survive and learn from situations that hurt us, as a means of protection. However, the trauma response is extremely taxing on the body and overall health if it is engaged regularly.

We humans are complicated. The science of trauma, including why one person experiences Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following a traumatizing event and another person doesn't, isn't definitive. However, there are some well-accepted theories.

As we mentioned earlier in this module, a common theory is that a person is more likely to experience trauma after a traumatizing event if they feel threatened, helpless and alone in a way that overwhelms their ability to cope and affects their sense of self. Some experts say that the

more support a person has during the time following a traumatizing event, the less likely they are to experience PTSD.

The American Psychological Association webpage *Children and Trauma Update for Mental Health Professionals*, says this:

> On a positive note, individual, family, cultural, and community strengths can facilitate recovery and promote resilience. Social, community, and governmental support networks are critical for recovery, particularly when an entire community is affected, as when natural disasters occur. (2011)

There is no rule as to what constitutes a traumatizing event. The trauma might be directly caused by another person, a system, an accident, some kind of natural disaster, etc. For example, some people have managed fine throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and depending on their circumstances, others may have experienced it as a traumatic event.

It's important that we don't judge other people's trauma. It can be easy to make a judgement like, "that person is so messed up, but I know so many people who went through way worse, and they are ok." We can't possibly know or understand the entirety of someone's situation. Part of being trauma-informed is learning to let go of our own judgments so we can focus on making people feel safe.

Bessel van der Kolk M.D., a trauma expert, says the following in his book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014):

> The brain-disease model overlooks four fundamental truths: (1) our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being; (2) language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we know, and finding a common sense of meaning; (3) we have the ability to regulate our own physiology, including some of the so-called involuntary functions of the body and brain, through such basic activities as breathing, moving, and touching; and (4) we can change social conditions to create environments in which children and adults can feel safe and where they can thrive.

Have you experienced some difficult situations in your life? How did support from others affect your healing?

The Autonomic Nervous System

This system regulates all body processes that don't require conscious awareness or effort. These

processes include bodily functions such as digestion, heartbeat, breathing, and healing and restoration.

The 2 main components of the **Autonomic Nervous System** that are important aspects of trauma and healing from trauma are:

- **Parasympathetic Nervous System** conserves and restores, manages our "rest and digest" state
- **Sympathetic Nervous System** prepares the body for emergency situations by releasing adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol

When one system is engaged, the other takes a more submissive role.

The Parasympathetic Nervous System

This system focuses on health and restoration. The job of this system is to create homeostasis—a stable internal state. It allows us to digest our food, regulate blood pressure, build strength, relax, and recover. Healing occurs when our parasympathetic nervous system is engaged.

This system functions best in a calm, relaxed state. Much of it happens at night. The more we are in this relaxed state, the healthier we are overall. Our health suffers when the parasympathetic nervous system is not able to do its job.

Conditions, in addition to trauma, that can cause the disruption of the parasympathetic nervous system are autoimmune disorders, cancer, diabetes, substance abuse, Parkinson's disease etc.

The Sympathetic Nervous System

The purpose of this system is to prepare the body for an emergency. This system is all about protecting the body from external harm. The stress response (fight, flight, freeze, fawn) plays a very important role in our survival.

When a person senses physical or emotional danger, the sympathetic nervous system is engaged. The "stress" hormones (*adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol*) are released. This causes the heart rate to increase, muscles get stronger, the airways widen, the body releases extra energy and the body goes into a fight or flight state. When the stress response is engaged, regular body processes of the parasympathetic nervous system that aren't needed in an emergency are paused—such as digestion, the need to drink, or urinate. That's why someone might throw up when they get bad news or see something traumatic. The stress response causes the digestion process to halt. If the sympathetic nervous system is constantly engaged, over time it will affect

the digestive system, as well metabolism, and the endocrine system (manages hormones in the body).

The Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn Response

The fight, flight, freeze, fawn response is a function of the sympathetic nervous system, which, as discussed, is part of the autonomic nervous system. Understanding the effect of trauma on the brain and body and how re-traumatization occurs, first means understanding a little about the anatomy of the autonomic nervous system.

Fawning is when people escape harm by pleasing the person who is threatening them. It can feel much less threatening to give up one's personal boundaries, in exchange for then temporary relief of abuse or harm.

The purpose of trauma-informed practice is to prevent the activation of the sympathetic nervous system.

Effects of Chronic Engagement of the Stress Response

The stress response has been essential to our survival as a species. It gives us a burst of energy to be able to react quickly to the danger at hand. In the hunter/gatherer days, it was essential that there was a very quick reaction when one heard a wild animal rustling in the bushes. The fight, flight, or freeze response gave our ancestors a necessary edge to fight predators.

As the sympathetic nervous system protected our ancestors, it also protects us.

However, our bodies can't differentiate between a life-or-death emergency (a wild animal ready to attack), and a non-physically threatening psychological emergency (this could be anything from conflict, a loud noise, self-deprecating thoughts, or emotional stress).

The sympathetic nervous system is involuntarily engaged in the same way regardless of the stressor. The system is intended to protect human beings from imminent danger. Our stress hormones are powerful, and this system supports us best when it is not constantly engaged. If it is activated too often, it is too much of a "good thing," and has negative long-term effects on our health. Remember that when the sympathetic nervous system is engaged, then the restorative parasympathetic nervous system takes a more submissive role.

Chronic secretion of cortisol, a stress hormone, can cause many health problems such as depression, anxiety, heart problems, insulin resistance, calcium loss from bones, hypertension, suppressed immunity, and reduced sleep quality.

The stress response is a normal and natural human response to perceived danger. However,

retraumatization can happen when we experience a negative event that triggers those feelings of helplessness we had when we first experienced trauma. And the stress response in our body after an incident of retraumatization is just as powerful as it was after the original traumatic event.

For someone who is dealing with a major trauma in their past, a seemingly harmless experience can re-traumatize the brain. Though a person's basic safety might not actually be in danger, the brain responds automatically to the possible threat by releasing the stress hormones.

Examples of Things that can Cause a Stress Response or Retraumatization in a Campus Setting

- Conflict, loud voices, angry tones, and arguing
- Not being believed by professors or administrators
- Failing a course
- Lack of choice
- Impersonal approach: feeling like a number in a system
- Rude and dismissive tones
- Curt and dismissive emails
- Coercive or oppressive behaviour
- Feeling invisible: not being heard or seen
- Violation of trust
- Not being in a safe space (being in a room without access to a door)
- Hearing details of someone else's trauma
- Power dynamics
- Lapse in confidentiality
- Jokes that are sexual or racist
- Sexual harassment

What are some other behaviours that you think could be retraumatizing for someone with a trauma history?

The Vagus Nerve

The vagus nerve is the longest nerve in your body, and it plays an important role in your nervous system function. It runs from the brainstem to the colon. Here is a very simple explanation of a very complex system: the vagus nerve is the main component of the parasympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system is in charge of restoring and rebuilding the internal body.

There are things we can do to stimulate the vagus nerve. Stimulating the vagus nerve can support a calming in our body and can shift the body away from a stress response. The following are some things that can stimulate the vagus nerve:

- **Hum**: The vagus nerve passes by the vocal cords, so humming stimulates the nerve.
- **Practice Deep Breathing**: The breath is the fastest way to stimulate the vagus nerve.
- **Movement**: Stretching, yoga, and movement tones the vagus nerve.
- **Exposure to cold**: Sympathetic nervous activity declines in the cold, so something like a cold shower, splashing cold water on your face stimulates the nerve.

What Does it Mean to be Trauma-Informed?

SAFETY: When an organization is trauma-informed, creating a sense of safety for ALL (people served, staff, and stakeholders) is ESSENTIAL.

To reiterate, the purpose of this module is to develop a trauma-informed lens and to expand our philosophy to include healing-centered connections. Trauma-informed care involves both honouring and standing up for human rights and social change.

The goals of a trauma-informed approach include:

- Preventing traumatizing events from happening in the first place
- Preventing situations that can retraumatization people who are already dealing with trauma
- Creating new practices that create healing ecologies, and build on people's already existing strength and resilience

When an organization is trauma-informed it means that all staff and volunteers understand the pervasiveness of trauma, and intentionally create safety for all.

In a post-secondary institution, this includes administrators, professors, teaching assistants, volunteers, service staff, and leadership. Working under the umbrella of peer support/student services means that you must understand what it means to support people with a trauma-informed lens. Being trauma-informed means not only having a trauma-informed approach with those we serve, but also with and among all team members.

When we are trauma-informed, we move away from a worldview that asks, "What's wrong with you?" to one that instead asks, "What happened to you?"

What are some ideas that a team, such as your peer support team, can do to deal with collective stress, so that you can be present with people? (Examples: open communication, regular meetings, laughter, connection…)

Intergenerational Trauma

Unprocessed trauma can be passed down from generation to generation. This can occur in families, and it can have a huge collective effect on society as a whole.

Resmaa Menakem is a Black trauma therapist who is devoted to educating about white body supremacy and working with individuals and systems to unpack systemic trauma. In his work, he calls attention to the body when he speaks of racism, because as is the case with all trauma, it lives in our bodies. Healing needs to happen in part through processing the pain in our bodies.

In his book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* Menakem speaks of intergenerational trauma:

> All of this suggests that one of the best things each of us can do—not only for ourselves, but also for our children and grandchildren—is to metabolize our pain and heal our trauma. When we heal and make more room for growth in our nervous systems, we have a better chance of spreading our emotional health to our descendants, via healthy DNA expression. In contrast, when we don't address our trauma, we may pass it on to future generations, along with some of our fear, constriction, and dirty pain." (2017)

In regards to pain, he defines it either as clean or dirty. The following are related excerpts from his book:

> I tell clients there are two kinds of pain: clean pain and dirty pain. Clean pain is pain that mends and can build your capacity for growth…Clean pain hurts like hell. But it enables our bodies to grow through our difficulties, develop nuanced skills, and mend our trauma. In this process, the body metabolizes clean pain. The body can then settle; more room for growth is created in its nervous system; and the self becomes freer and more capable, because it now has access to energy that was previously protected, bound, and constricted…Dirty pain is the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial. When people respond from their most wounded parts, become cruel or violent, or physically or emotionally run away, they experience dirty pain. They also create more of it for themselves and others. (2017)

Menakem suggests that trauma is passed down from generations to generations a few different ways:

- Through family behaviour
- Through traumatized systems that are unsafe and abusive, and/or cultural norms of a

society
- Through our genetics. Research suggests that trauma can be passed down through our DNA

We see the reality of intergenerational trauma very clearly with the impact of colonization on Indigenous people. Today, many people continue to be greatly impacted by this long-standing and ongoing trauma.

Likewise, the trauma of slavery in the US and Canada has, over centuries, morphed into the trauma of an insidious systemic racism that many, including the Black Lives Matter movement, are working to dismantle.

The Importance of Safety, Predictability and Choice in Our Peer Support Interactions

In your work as a peer support worker, it is essential that in everything you do and say, you maintain an awareness of the need to create safety for the person you are supporting, and to offer them predictability and choice.

Some specific examples of maintaining this awareness of safety, predictability and choice are:

- Offering options and choices in everything you do
- Staying aware of how safe the person feels–make sure to ask
- Letting people know ahead of time if there is a change with a meeting

This is a content-rich module, and there is a lot to remember. If you just remember these three words you will be doing great: **Safety, Predictability, and Choice.**

For Reflection

- What can you do to ensure safety when you are supporting someone?
- What can you do to ensure predictability when supporting someone? How will you navigate change when it comes up?
- What can you do to ensure choice in your relationships?

Radical Healing & Connection

"When someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good... When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. It is astonishing how elements which seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens. How confusions which seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is heard."
~Carl Rogers

Trauma-informed care is necessary. This lens supports the healing of individuals. When we are trauma-informed we understand the pervasiveness of trauma, and we are intentional about doing what we can to avoid retraumatizing people.

Relationships and meaningful connections are essential to healing. Healing happens in community. Healing is an ongoing process, because we live in a society made up of systems that are perpetually causing harm.

Dr. Shawn Ginwright, a leading thought leader on African American youth, youth activism, and youth development, and Professor of Education in the Africana Studies Department at San Francisco State University, uses the term "Radical Healing" when he speaks about the direction we need to move towards when supporting people to heal from trauma.

Dr. Ginwright stresses a mutual approach that works so well within the paradigm of peer support. In fact, he states that these philosophies need to extend throughout an entire organization. Instead of working with someone, we partner and learn with them. As we have talked about throughout this training, that means taking a mutual approach to healing. When we are open and honest about our own journey of healing, we create deeper connections and we break down hierarchy. When we make relationships the center of our work, we disrupt the old status quo, and we work towards healing our traumatized systems.

In his powerfully transformational work, Dr. Ginwright shares five principles of healing:

- Culture
- Agency (acting on one's own behalf)
- Relationships
- Meaning
- Aspirations (and creating possibility)

We cannot support radical healing if we ourselves don't first work on our own healing. Doing our

own work must always be the starting point of all work we do in this field. It is essential that organizations create a culture that encourages staff to engage in their own healing. We all have wounds. We all have pain. Healing work is essential for all of us. When we can talk about that, we can release the toxicity and shame that come with trauma.

A sense of humility is needed every step of the way, as we can't possibly have all the answers. Together we can create supportive communities where we equip each other to navigate the challenges of healing, so we can all flourish.

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

CONNECTION & COMMUNICATION

Purpose of Module

As we talked about in the first module, human beings are inextricably interconnected. Yet today, we live in a hyper-individualistic society and are facing an epidemic of loneliness. In this training module, we will focus on cultivating compassion and empathy, listening deeply to understand, and asking powerful questions to increase reflection and connection. These are foundational to good communication. We will also weave in content from previous modules around worldview, self-determination, cultural humility, boundaries, and creating safety in connection and communication.

We will look at how to reduce the fear and shame that can come with disconnection and conflict, and what to do when they arise. As human beings we aren't perfect, and conflict and disconnection are bound to happen at some point in all our relationships. Shifting our mindset to view those instances not as failures but instead as opportunities to connect on a deeper level can be an antidote to shame and deeper disconnection. We will look at harnessing the electricity of connection. We will tap into the magic that comes when we approach our relationships with possibility, compassion, and a desire to understand.

Learning Objectives

1. You will observe and assess your listening skills, practicing new ways to strengthen your capacity to listen.
2. You will demonstrate the importance of caring, curiosity, and mindful presence in your communication with others.
3. You will be able to draw on tools you've learned when conflict arises in your peer support work.
4. You will be able to distinguish between compassion and empathy, understand how they interconnect, and be able to further integrate both into your practice as a peer support worker.

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. *If you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.*

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

Intentional Communication

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply." ~ Stephen R. Covey

"Listening is about being present, not just about being quiet." ~ Krista Tippett

We come into relationships with so many assumptions and ideas about communication. In addition to our worldview, our assumptions and biases, we have also been conditioned to approach communication in particular ways depending on our exposure to communication styles over our lifetime. Our upbringing, along with the cultures and subcultures we have belonged to, impact our approach to communication. It is so easy to come into a relationship with unexpressed expectations and unclear boundaries, which can turn into miscommunication and conflict, and that can even grow over time into disconnection and resentment. All these things impact our ability to genuinely connect with another person.

This module is focused on human connection, and specifically how our communication impacts that connection. We will be tying in many concepts from other modules in this training, as there is much intersection between the ideas.

Although we will touch on non-verbal communication and the mechanics of communication (body language, paraphrasing, etc.) in this module, we won't be focusing on them. Awareness of these communication dynamics and techniques can certainly support connection, but they are not our focus here.

Misconceptions About Non-Verbal Communication

There is a misnomer circulating around the world that says communication is 93% non-verbal. This statistic is almost akin to an Urban Legend, and it's amazing how deep into culture it's gotten. The statistic comes from one main 1967 study by Mehrabian and Wiener. The study was centered around single words (words such as dear, honey, thanks, really, don't, terrible), tone of voice, and the meaning the hearer of the word put to the intent of the communication. The results of that study have been misinterpreted by the masses over decades.

In a 2020 Psychology Today article called *The Body Language Myth*, author Tania Luna refers to the 1967 study and shares some comments made by researcher Mehrabian years after the study:

> As study co-author Albert Mehrabian later wrote, "When there are inconsistencies between attitudes communicated verbally and posturally, the postural component should

dominate in determining the total attitude that is inferred." In other words, when someone's words seem to match their nonverbal signals, we'll likely fully pay attention to the words. It's only then we suspect that someone's words don't match their nonverbal signals that we "listen" to nonverbal communication. (2020) *Posturally refers to our bodily posture.*

What the study did say is that congruence between our words and our body posturing is important. What it **did not** say is that 93% of communication is non-verbal. Intent is very important, and intent shows up both in the words we choose, and in the tone and delivery of those words. It is important to be aware if we are scowling when we are speaking to someone, especially if the words are meant to be encouraging. Does it matter if you cross your arms, put your hands in your pockets, or cross your legs? Crossed arms could indicate a closed attitude, but it could also mean that someone is cold, lacks arm support, or is trying to concentrate (there is a study that links crossing arms and concentration). If you are genuinely engaged with the person, then crossing your arms likely won't matter all that much.

In the dominant Western culture, it is generally considered to be respectful to look someone in the eyes (rather than say, at our phone) when talking to them. ,. It is also very important to realize that different cultures have different customs around non-verbal communication. In some cultures, some non-verbal forms of communication considered acceptable in Western culture might be considered deeply disrespectful. If our intention is connection, then we will approach connection with people from other cultures with a spirit of humility, seeking to learn from them and pivoting our approach where needed rather than getting stuck on a set of "communication rules."

Intent

Words are important. Tone is important. Even more important than words and tone are the intentions beneath the words we use. We don't expect you to be a perfect communicator. In the Building Personal Resilience module, we will cover self-compassion, an important concept and practice that comes with the understanding that we are not perfect, and no one is. We need to create space to offer grace and compassion toward ourselves and others when we mess up, which we are all bound to do.

The goal of this module is to focus on the deeper level of INTENT. We believe if we address communication at the level of intent, many of the other aspects of communication will be much easier to work out. After all, our goal is more about deep connection than it is about effective communication.

You can do all the non-verbal "to-dos" correctly, and still not connect with someone else. This is because connection is more comparable to the flow of energy than the ticking off of items from a communication "to-do" list.

"I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."~Brené Brown (The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are, 2020)

Communication may seem simple yet is incredibly complex. Some academics and researchers study communication for their whole lives. There are many PhD programs that focus on different aspects of communication. Clearly, we can only cover some basics in this module, so we have chosen to cover what we feel are the most important aspects of communication as they relate to connection.

- Deep listening skills: because LISTENING is the most important thing you can do, and something that is really misunderstood
- Mutuality and vulnerability
- Connection, disconnection, and reconnection
- Understanding how perception and worldview affect conflict and connection, and questioning our assumptions

- What are your thoughts about non-verbal communication?
- From your perspective, what do you feel are important aspects of communication?
- How do you feel after reading the debunking of the 93% nonverbal communication theory?

Self-Disclosure - Sharing About Yourself

From the Core Values

Mutuality: *The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.*

If connection is about energy exchange flowing back and forth between two people, then a big piece of connection is about sharing and reciprocity. In any relationship we can only know others and be known by them if there is mutuality. This is especially true in peer support.

What and how much you choose to share about yourself within your peer role will depend on how often you see the people you're serving. If you just see someone once, then you will probably be mostly listening, and won't likely share much about yourself. If you see someone on an ongoing basis, you may share more.

It's valuable to remember that people feel heard and validated when they hear "me too" and "I get that." So, even when you only meet with someone once, there will still be opportunity for some sharing. Afterall, the mutuality of the peer approach is what makes this work so unique.

Guidelines for Self-Disclosure

Let's explore:

1. Sharing from the Framework of Building Connection

Consider some of your past experiences of meeting someone new. Can you think of times when you met someone and just didn't click, maybe you even felt put off by someone? What about times you met someone and felt an instant connection?

- *What are some behaviours or words that put you off when you meet someone new?*
- *What are some things about a person that make you feel connected to them?*

Now, imagine meeting someone new and they tell you a little something about their life.

- *What does it feel like to be privy to a little bit of someone's inner world?*

Next, consider a time when you have heard someone teach or speak in front of a group. Perhaps this is in a class, at a workshop/conference, or even watching a YouTube video.

- *Do you feel connected to that speaker/teacher when they keep to only the facts of what they are teaching about?*
- *How do you think you would feel when the person shares some personal details about their life, that supports application of the material they are teaching about?*
- *How do you think you would feel about the person (speaker) if they shared something about a personal struggle they faced, along with a transformative moment when they were able to triumph over the struggle?*

When someone shares something about themselves, they give us a little glimpse into who they are. We can't help but feel a sense of connection. This "knowing" supports the building of trust, respect and connection.

2. Sharing Personal Stories Can Be Encouraging and Hopeful

We often watch and read stories of people's struggle and overcoming difficulty because it is so hopeful when we get to bear witness to the strength of the human spirit. We are drawn to people's experiences of "slaying their dragons" because they inspire us to feel like we can, in turn, slay our own. This is one of the big reasons we share our stories in peer support.

*Note that depending on the type of peer support you are doing on your campus, sharing your story of struggle might not be applicable.

- *Reflect on a moment (or maybe a few moments) of struggle that you got through. Did anyone support you through that struggle? What helped?*

These moments are the small windows when hope creeps into our lives. These small little glimpses of hope can change everything for us.

3. Safety – Always Avoid Sharing Things That Could Be Triggering

Creating a sense of safety is paramount in peer support environments. We must recognize that certain things can be triggering to people, and we must do everything we can to avoid sharing traumatic details or specific experiences of violence, abuse, details of suicide, assault or other experiences that could be triggering.

You can't always predict what someone will find triggering. Do your best to avoid graphic details.

Pay attention to the facial expression and body language of the person you are speaking to. If you notice them flinch or pull away after sharing something, talk about it.

If you are facilitating a group, and a participant shares something that is triggering to other participants, it's important that you very kindly and respectfully redirect the person. Perhaps having some community guidelines set up at the beginning of the group will help prevent that kind of sharing from happening.

Remember that some people coming into a peer support setting might be in a very raw and sensitive place in their life. They may not have tolerance for details around suicide or abuse, because of their own situation. Consider how to talk about those things in a way that doesn't go into traumatic detail, but shares enough that your listeners understand.

Generally, people can safely relate to feelings. Sharing how you felt at a particular time of struggle in your life can be very relatable to people, without sharing details that could be triggering.

4. Discern What Is Safe for You to Share, and What You Would Prefer to Keep Private

It's important that you do your own emotional assessment before you share. If something feels too raw, you don't have to say it. If we share something with someone (especially if we haven't built trust with them), and we are not emotionally ready to share, it can bring up difficult feelings afterwards. It can feel vulnerable in a way that is unsafe.

- *What parts of your life experience feel safe to share?*
- *What are you not comfortable sharing?*

5. Navigating the Risks of Over-Relating to Someone Else's Experience

Over-relating means that because we have commonalities with another person's experience, we assume there are more similarities than there actually are. We fill in the blanks of what we don't know with assumptions that stem from our perceptions and worldview.

The connection of "me too" can start to break down when we assume that someone else's experiences are the same as ours. We risk disconnection when we don't create space in our peer support relationships for different perspectives and approaches.

When we are sharing our personal stories, we want to make sure we aren't trying to sneak in some advice or making assumptions about someone else's experience.

We can become aware of some of the frustrations or annoyances of over-relating when we share something with someone, and they say, "Oh yes, me too!" And then instead of continuing to listen to our story they launch into a long story about themselves. It can feel invalidating when this happens, and it can cause disconnect in the relationship.

When someone is telling us something personal and meaningful about their experience, it is often best to just listen – to bear witness to them. Honour them by fully, empathetically listening, and letting go of the need to reply.

It is important to remember that though we have commonalities, none of us will experience life in the same way. We need to create space in our connection for exploring the unknown, without assumptions getting in the way. When we say things like, "I know exactly what you're going through," we negate someone's unique individual experience, and perhaps make them feel unheard and unknown. While we might say such things thinking they show understanding, we are doing the opposite; we are unintentionally choosing not to listen fully to the other person.

When we remind ourselves to be aware of our worldview, assumptions and biases, and when we honour the principles of self-determination, we are more apt to stay peer, listen empathetically and avoid advice-giving.

- *Have you ever been in the position of someone over-relating to you? If so, how did it make you feel? Is empathetic listening hard for you? If so, why?*

Listening to Understand

We live in the information age. Social media gives everyone a platform, and it's easy to find a voice and say things. But in all the speaking, it seems that our culture is struggling to listen.

Listening seems simple. In fact, most people think they are good listeners, yet so many of us feel unheard. The truth is that listening is more of a learned skill than we tend to acknowledge. One of the keys to empathetic listening is that we listen to understand, rather than to reply.

If both people in a conversation are only concerned about what they want to say, then neither are making understanding the other person a priority. As a result, both are left feeling unheard and unseen. Deep connection can only happen when we focus on listening. When we are listened to, validated, and heard, we feel a connection.

Can you think of a past conversation you had with someone when you walked away still feeling very alone and unheard?

What about a time when you really felt heard? How did that feel?

It's important to remember self-determination in communication. Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions and have freedom from coercion. In the context of communication, this means we are aware of the words we use, we choose not to give advice, and instead we shine a light on the person's inner strength.

In his book, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey calls this type of listening "empathic listening." Covey speaks about empathic (or empathetic) listening this way:

> When I say empathic listening, I am not referring to the techniques of "active" listening or "reflective" listening, which basically involve mimicking what another person says. That kind of listening is skill-based, truncated from character and relationships, and often insults those "listened" to in such a way. It is also essentially autobiographical. If you practice those techniques, you may not project your autobiography in the actual interaction, but your motive in listening is autobiographical. You listen with reflective skills, but you listen with intent to reply, to control, to manipulate.

> When I say empathic listening, I mean listening with intent to understand. I mean seeking first to understand, to really understand. It's an entirely different paradigm. Empathic (from empathy) listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel...

In empathic listening, you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for behavior. You use your right brain as well as your left. You sense, you intuit, you feel. (1989)

When we are listening to understand, and we are honouring self-determination, we let go of the pressure to fix or save someone. Please breathe a sigh of relief and let go of any need to have all the answers or to be an "expert." This leaves a whole lot more space to listen without replying.

Princeton University conducted a study on listening in 2010. The study was called "Speaker–listener neural coupling underlies successful communication," and it concluded that there is a lag time between what we hear and what we understand.

What this means is that processing information requires more time than the time involved in simple listening. We must take time to process what we hear. When we don't take that time, and instead we jump into replying to someone, comprehension breaks down. This breakdown can lead to misunderstanding, misconnection, and conflict. So listening to understand requires patience and focus, and letting go of the pressure to reply.

"Empathetic listening is so powerful because it gives you accurate data to work with. Instead of projecting your own autobiography and assuming thoughts, feelings, motives, and interpretation, you're dealing with the reality inside another person's head and heart. You're listening to understand. You're focusing on receiving the deep communication of another human soul." ~Stephen Covey

Tips for Empathetic Listening

Below are some practical suggestions for how to practice empathetic listening:

- Intentionally let go of your desire to get your own message across. Instead concentrate on and listen to what the other person is saying.
- Anytime someone is speaking there is usually a deeper narrative. There is often so much that is not being said. Pay attention to what is happening underneath the words they are saying. Notice their presence and their tone.
- Ask powerful, open-ended questions when you don't understand, and even – especially? – when you think you understand.
- Be curious while being respectful and humble.
- Pay attention when someone puts up a boundary, and respect that boundary.
- Notice any judgments or biases that are bubbling up within you as you listen. Be mindful to suspend them.

- Be OK with silence. Remember to take a minute to process what the person is saying before you speak.
- When you're about to start responding, check in with yourself using the helpful acronym: W.A.I.T (Why Am I Talking?)
- Listen with all the empathy you can muster at the time. The more empathetic we are, the more generosity we have available to give, and the less likely we are to judge and assume.

ACTION: Fill out the deep listening self-assessment form at the end of this module.

Exercises

- Which of these tips do you think is the easiest for you to practice?
- Which is the hardest for you to practice?
- Were you surprised by your deep listening self-assessment results? Why or why not?
- What do you want to work on?

Compassionate Curiosity - Asking Good Questions

"Listen with curiosity. Speak with honesty. Act with integrity. The greatest problem with communication is we don't listen to understand. We listen to reply. When we listen with curiosity, we don't listen with the intent to reply. We listen for what's behind the words."
~Roy T. Bennett

From the Core Values

Curiosity: *We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.*

This curiosity isn't fueled by personal gain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support.

We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption* to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

Fostering a sense of curiosity within relationships supports connection. Curiosity is a powerful force in so much of our well-being, playing an important role in connection and communication.

Some benefits of cultivating curiosity:

- Curiosity calms the nervous system
- Curiosity supports us to seek out new possibilities, which makes way for HOPE
- Curiosity is the antidote to a fixed mindset. It supports us in thinking differently and more mindfully while shifting our perspectives
- Curiosity supports us to challenge our assumptions and biases
- Curiosity encourages us to get to know other people better

Learning to ask powerful questions is important to peer support work. When we ask good questions, we are helping someone to tap into their inner wisdom and reflect in a new way. When

we ask questions rather than give advice, we are acknowledging that we don't in fact have the answers.

When we talk about curiosity, we want to make sure that we are clear on the purpose of our questions. If we are asking something to satisfy a self-focused curiosity or our own desire for information, it's best to refrain from asking those types of questions. To assess whether or not a question is good for you to ask, we need to consider:

- Who is benefiting from this question?
- Is this question supporting the person to engage in self-reflection?
- Does this question support connection?

Traits of Powerful Questions

Below each point, write your thoughts on why you think they are important.

1. Powerful Questions Are Always Open-Ended and Promote Reflection

An open-ended question is one that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

Think of how you might start an open-ended question. Most often, strong questions start with WHAT, as they are neutral and encourage people to self-reflect. That's not a hard and fast rule, though. A good question can also start with HAVE/HAS, HOW, IF, or CAN.

It's important not to ask a question to which you are looking for a specific answer, because then it's not open-ended.

Questions that promote reflection create opportunities for people to tap into their own knowing and insight. We can ask past-focused questions to help discover or uncover, and then future-forward questions to invite dreaming and planning.

Here are some examples:

- "What has worked for you in the past when this has happened?"
- "Have you noticed that before?"
- "What do you think is the best for you?"
- "What might _____?
- "What does _____ feel like?"
- "What is your dream for that situation?
- "How would you do _____ if you had the confidence to do it?"

If someone tells you they are feeling anxious today, asking a powerful question can help them to figure out more specifically how they are feeling and what potentially made them feel that way.

However, it's important to note here that a WHY question is often best avoided in a peer situation. A WHY question is a different kind of question, as it tends to ask people to analyze their situation. "*Why did you do that?*" Or "*why are you always so hard on yourself?*" "Why" questions slip into more of a counseling type of situation, and we want to avoid that.

2. Powerful Questions Are Fuelled by Curiosity and Aren't Focused on an Agenda

Sometimes when we ask a question with a hidden agenda, trying to elicit a specific response, it can feel really uncomfortable for the person we are asking. They can often sense that we are trying to guide the conversation, rather than approaching it with genuine curiosity.

When having a heart to heart, asking a question like "*have you ever thought about going for counseling?*" is not an open-ended question. In a way, we are really just offering a bit of underhanded advice disguised by a question. A better, more powerful question might be, "What have you done in the past that has helped you?" Some people respond well to "what's worked in the past, and what didn't work?"

3. Powerful Questions Stimulate Reflection

When given the gift of space to reflect on a situation, people are more likely to find the answer within themselves.

Be ok with silence. Don't feel like you have to fill up the space with talking. The space of silence can be a powerful opportunity for reflection–for both the person you are talking to, and also you yourself!

What can you do to get more comfortable with silence?

4. Powerful Questions in Peer Support Are Always Trauma-Informed and Safe.

Remember – be cautious not to ask questions that will cross into a therapist role.

In peer support, using powerful questions that are trauma-informed and safe means:

- **We know that a whole lot of people have a history of trauma, so there is a good chance the person you are talking to does, too**.

- **We make safety the utmost priority**
  Don't ask triggering questions. Before you ask something, reflect on whether or not it is a safe question, and whether it could be harmful to someone in any way.
- **Choice is always paramount**
  Remember that people always need to have choice. That is huge for anyone, and especially a trauma survivor. If you are noticing that they aren't engaging in answering questions, let them know that they have the choice not to answer your questions.

Connection, Disconnection & Reconnection

Connection

Connection is the goal of peer support. Like electricity, we need energy to flow in a circuit between both people in order to experience real, meaningful human connection.

Connection is like a dance with give and take, where each person gives and each one receives. When this occurs, we can't help but feel a sense of well-being and belonging.

However, we are imperfectly human, living in an imperfect world, and sometimes we just are not able to connect. We can be having a crummy day, and that affects our ability to connect. There is no shame in that. So it's important to give ourselves and others compassion when we miss the mark on connection.

Disconnection

Sometimes something gets in the way of that energy flow between people, and ***disconnection*** happens. Disconnection can come from a misunderstanding, misinterpretation, miscommunication, or simply from one person becoming distracted.

Let's look at an example. Jesse is a peer working a shift at the peer support drop-in center. Sam comes in to talk, and is quite distressed about a family issue they are dealing with that is affecting their schoolwork. Sam feels quite comfortable with Jesse. At one point in the conversation, Jesse excuses himself for a washroom break. When he comes back, his mood is different. He is quieter and more distracted. Sam notices, and wonders if it was something they did to upset Jesse. After a few minutes Sam decides to leave.

Clearly Jesse's mood changed after he came back from the bathroom. That created **disconnection.**

When Jesse left to use the washroom, he took a moment to check his texts. He read a text from a friend that contained some difficult news, and it stirred up a lot of worry and anxiety. He tried to put it out of his mind, but he couldn't distract himself from it.

Jesse was so worried about his own situation that he didn't realize that his mood had changed and affected Sam in the way it did.

Reconnection

When **disconnection** occurs, it is important that we acknowledge the disconnect, and work towards **reconnection**.

The goal is that we become more attuned to our emotions and how they may impact others. We are not saying that you should stuff or repress your emotions. Rather, we invite you to become aware of the fact that the emotion is there, and consider communicating about how it's taking up a lot of space in your mind.

Consider this…What if Jesse came back to the table and noticed that he was distracted? He could tell that Sam also noticed, so he decided to tell Sam that he got some difficult news and was experiencing stress about it. Just saying that may have diffused the situation, and let Sam know that the disconnection they were feeling was not about them. Sam would have known what was going on, and the disconnection would be addressed.

This is **reconnection**.

For Reflection

- Can you recall a time when you have been in Sam's position? If so, how did it feel?
- Can you recall a time when you have been in Jesse's position? If so, how did it feel?
- There are many other ways disconnection can occur. Perhaps someone says something that triggers a reaction in the other person. There's an infinite number of things that could happen. What would you do if you, as the peer support worker noticed a disconnect in the person you were with? Would you address it? Ask about it? If so, what would you say?

Safety in Communication

Let's look at some other things we can keep in mind to support safety in communication:

Be Honest and Kind

Approaching communication in an honest way means that we are open, and we don't stuff or hide things. We are intentional about being thoughtful and kind. When we stuff or hide our feelings, they will often come out at some other time as anger or a passive aggressive comment. Honesty involves openness, but does not mean being "brutally honest." Your feelings are your own. They are not facts.

Be Direct

Beating around the bush, or leaving out crucial information can cause confusion, and it is not safe. Consider if you get an email from a supervisor that says, "I have something important I need to talk to you about that came up after your last shift. Please come see me when you are in on Friday." Andddddd....you got this email on Tuesday. Most people will read a message like that and worry about it until Friday, imagining worst case scenarios, building it up to be worse than it might be. That doesn't feel safe. It's important that we consider safety when we communicate things that could cause a stress response for others.

What could that supervisor have done differently?

Along the same lines, passive aggressive communication feels unsafe to the receiver. This can show up in back-handed compliments, avoidance, or saying something like "Whatever you want. I don't care" when you really do care. An honest and direct approach is much kinder and creates safety.

Be Aware of Tone and Avoid Curt Language

Most humans are sensitive to tone. When someone is curt with us it can trigger a stress response. It's normal to get irritated; we must, however, do what we can to take care of ourselves so that our irritation doesn't spread to those around us. *What do you notice happens within your body when someone is curt with you? How do you react?*

Don't Be Patronizing

A patronizing tone can make someone feel unseen, or small. It can be just as problematic as a harsh tone. Some people (e.g. your aunt, or a dear friend) can call you honey, and it feels good. However, if someone you barely know calls you dear or honey, that can feel patronizing. *What are some other ways tone can be patronizing?*

Check Your Assumptions

We will dig into this a bit more in the next section on conflict, but a conversation filled with assumptions feels unsafe. Curiosity can diffuse those assumptions. Think of some ways you can use curiosity to challenge your assumptions.

Avoid Judgmental Phrases Like "You Always" or "You Never"

While you may be feeling strongly, as soon as you use a phrase like "you always" or "you never", the other person will feel misunderstood and get defensive. When someone is defensive, they are not able to listen in the same way they can when they are in a calm and open state. *How can you state your feelings using "I" language? How can you create space for your worldview and remember that you may be making assumptions. Remember that we filter everything through our worldview.*

Remember That You Are Not a Therapist. Establish Boundaries That Keep Both of You Safe.

You may be working with someone who really trusts you. They might start sharing some big, deep issues with you. It's important to remember the scope of your role and training. Avoid moving into territory that begins to look and feel like therapy. You can listen deeply, but you are not trained to help people process trauma and it's important to know when you begin to feel out of your depth. In those situations, the best thing you can do is refer them to more specialized resources on your campus, such as counselling services.

This might feel like a grey area, because perhaps processing is what they feel they really need at this point. However, be aware that when you are acting in the capacity of a campus staff or volunteer it is a different dynamic than a conversation with a friend. The person might have a harder time understanding the difference between the peer role, and a counselling role, so it's up to you to be clear on your scope and have a clear boundary.

If someone is looking for you to provide counseling for them, it's important that you are aware of

when it seems to cross the line. Speak with a supervisor if you feel like you are struggling to know where that line is. If we lead someone into a place where they are unpacking trauma, and we are not trained as a trauma therapist, we can cause harm. *What will you do if you notice this happening? What boundaries will you set? What will you say, and how will you say it in a kind, respectful and humble way?What are some other things you think we can do to ensure safety in communication?*

Deep Listening Self-Assessment

Please honestly assess your own strengths and weaknesses as a listener.

Question	Assessment: 1 – Most of the Time, 6 – Rarely
In conversation, I easily remember that everything I think is coming from my own worldview & experiences.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am aware of my judgments and biases in conversation.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am able to suspend those judgements and biases when I am in conversation with someone else.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am able to stay focused on what the other person is saying.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am able to listen empathically to someone else. (*This means that I am doing the best I can to experience their frame of reference, vs filtering what they are saying through my worldview.*)	1 2 3 4 5 6
I ask questions so that I can understand their perspective. (*I am not asking questions so that they can see my perspective.*)	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am aware that I might be tempted to over-relate to what the person is saying. (*This focuses the conversation on me, rather than supporting the other person.*)	1 2 3 4 5 6
I can share a sense of "I get it" or "I've been there" without making the conversation all about me.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am aware of how advice-giving steals the other person's self-determination.	1 2 3 4 5 6
Instead of giving advice, I ask powerful questions to access the person's inner teacher.	1 2 3 4 5 6
When I don't agree with the person, I still work to see things from their perspective.	1 2 3 4 5 6
When I am listening to someone else, I am listening to their untold story.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I can pay attention to the things not being said, such as tone, body language, eye content, so that I can try to "hear" what is **not** being said. (*While I do this, I take care NOT to make assumptions. Instead, I ask powerful questions.*)	1 2 3 4 5 6

I am OK to sit with silence, to give myself time to process before I reply.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I can stay PEER when I am listening and avoid slipping into a more clinical role or perspective.	1 2 3 4 5 6
People feel comfortable talking to me because I listen well. I have received this feedback from many.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I can listen deeply even when I sense that someone is agitated or angry.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I can listen deeply to people who are different from me.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am curious, and respectful of the person to whom I am listening.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am curious about the life experiences of people I don't know.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I am curious about the life experiences of people I do know well.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I still feel curious about someone when their worldview is really different from mine.	1 2 3 4 5 6
When I am listening to someone with a different worldview, I take care to not make assumptions.	1 2 3 4 5 6

What are your strengths as a listener?

What are your opportunities for growth?

What benefits do you see in improving your listening skills?

What is one specific action you will make to deepen your listening?

Working Through Conflict

Conflict is hard. Many of us are averse to conflict, we would rather turn around and run the other way than face a conflict. Often, conflict can tap into our past trauma, and that can feel unsafe.

Conflict is a topic that needs mentioning in this training, as it affects all of us. Your peer support work is no exception. However, conflict is a massive topic. It has so many layers and complexities. It affects us on a global scale and on a very personal level. This section takes a high level look at dealing with conflict, and primarily interpersonal conflict that you might face in your per support role. It's important to note that there is much more that can be said about this topic. *Do you see conflict as a bad thing? Have you ever had a good experience as a result of conflict?*

Here's the million-dollar question for all of us who avoid conflict: Can we change how we perceive and experience conflict? Can we approach conflict differently?

Perception and Conflict

It is very easy to misunderstand each other. At any given moment, we have so much information coming at us that our brains need to categorize it to help make sense of the world. When we don't intentionally work to expand our thinking and challenge our biases, we can become lazy and rigid about the process of categorizing. That's a breeding ground for assumptions and judgements to get stirred up.

comes to conflict. This is where it can get messy.

We can't help but filter what we hear, see and experience through our own worldview. This can make it difficult to understand someone else's worldview, because we tend to get stuck in our own perspective and often believe ours is the only "right one." This can lead us to mishear and misinterpret the meaning of someone else's words. When we're not working to check our own biases and thinking, our communication gets all muddled.

If two people are approaching a conflict, each stuck in their own worldview, unwilling to move, wanting the other person to see their side rather than trying to understand. Well when they reach that point, it's checkmate. Game over. And in this case, conflict wins, and the relationship suffers.

The goals of peer support are connection and building relationships, so it is essential that we check our perceptions when we communicate with others. When we are mindful of our own perceptions, we reduce the opportunity for disconnection.

Checking our Perceptions

Any time we experience feelings that tell us conflict is starting to bubble, it is helpful to pause and check our perceptions. This means examining our worldview and biases while trying to understand someone else's. It means considering how your worldview may be influencing how you are hearing the other person's words, realizing that their story is different from yours.

Don't Believe Everything you Think

Thoughts and feelings come and go all the time. Sometimes we have a thought that seems to come out of left field. It's important to realize that our thoughts aren't always tied to our core beliefs. We don't have to be defined by all our thoughts, just as we don't need to be defined by all our emotions. Often, if we dig deeper, we discover that there is something else going on underneath that initial thought.

Iceberg...What is the Untold Story?

When we see an iceberg, it's amazing to realize that though it's huge, 90% of the iceberg is underwater. The same is true with people. We only see a small bit of other people's lives. And even then, everything we do see is filtered through our worldview. So as much as we think we see the whole picture, we don't. We just can't.
Learning what is underneath the surface is the most important as we build relationships. We can make all kinds of assumptions about other people but they are just that–assumptions that are informed by our own biases and judgements.

Awareness of the fact that 90% of the iceberg is invisible to us is the first step in acceptance, tolerance, grace and connection. There is so much in life we will never know. Understanding and accepting that fact is the beginning of wisdom.

Wired to Survive, not to see Reality

In another section of this training, we covered how our brains categorize things to make sense of the world. Of course, it's important that the main goal for our brains is survival; we remember what we need to remember so that we can have the tools we need to survive. In any given moment, our brains do not have the capacity to see true reality in all its complexity, because – for evolutionary reasons – that would be overwhelming. We are not wired to be objective. It is only with reflection, mindfulness and a lot of work that we can get past our preconceived and long-held beliefs.

We see reality filtered through our own past experiences, our emotions, our judgements and

biases. The narratives we use to make sense of the world are strong, and we can really get stuck in them.

It is especially important that we challenge those narratives when we walk into conflict, because just as we are filtering the situation through our experiences, the other person is too!

Becoming curious and asking powerful questions (including questioning own assumptions) is the only way to think differently.

Have you ever had a conflict with someone where they seemed so stuck in what felt like a false story about you? Why do you think your perceptions of the situation were so completely different?

When this happens, it's especially hard if the other person doesn't seem open to listening to your perspective. It is frustrating. However, it can be so helpful to remember that the brain – including theirs – is wired to do that. And as much as that behaviour is infuriating, we do it too!

The result of that misunderstanding is reactive thinking and speaking. If left unaddressed, it leads to conflict and relationship breakdown. The only way around it is to:

- Create intentional pause
- Understand that we are in our own story/narrative, and so is the other person
- Know that our perspective isn't objective, it's based on our perceptions
- Question our assumptions
- Seek to understand the other person

How do you feel about this?

Does it feel like there is always a right and wrong in a conflict?

How can you challenge your thinking to try to see the other person's perspective?

"Conflict can and should be handled constructively; when it is, relationships benefit. Conflict avoidance is *not* the hallmark of a good relationship. On the contrary, it is a symptom of serious problems and of poor communication."
~Harriet B. Braiker (Author)

Binary Thinking in Conflict

"Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." ~Bryan Stevenson

It is very easy to get into the binary thinking of good and bad, right and wrong, especially when dealing with conflict. However, there is so much grey, so much in-between. No one person is all good or all bad–*even the worst and the best people you can think of.* Human beings are all flawed, and we are all capable of greatness. We are all moving between the two poles all the time.

Getting sucked into binary thinking is the first step toward dehumanizing others. Dehumanization is when people are thought of and classed as "non-human." Historically, every genocide has begun with simple steps of dehumanization – using language that separates a people group from their humanity.

We must be mindful that binary thinking in conflict is dangerous.

There is a tendency to see ourselves as complex beings while viewing others in very simple terms. We don't see them as being as complex or having many layers, because we simply don't know them as well as we know ourselves. This is problematic. We can be less apt to offer empathy and compassion when we see someone as "just a jerk."

This isn't to say that people should not be accountable for hurting others, or their complexity used as an excuse for poor behaviour. Accountability is important. We just need to remember that no person is all good or all bad, and there is so much freedom and opportunity for forgiveness there.

For Reflection

- Have you ever been put in a box like that (either all good or all bad)? How did that feel?
- Consider that it's just as problematic when we put someone in an "all good" category and put them up on a pedestal. One day they will disappoint us, because no one is perfect. When that day comes, how does that affect the relationship?

Reframing the Idea that all Conflict is bad

There are some situations when conflict has disastrous consequences. Some conflict moves into physical or psychological violence. However, is the problem the conflict itself? Or, is the problem the way we choose to enter conflict (with the need to win) and the way we react to it (anger)? Is it the fact that we don't see eye to eye on a particular issue , or is it because we have lost capacity for perspective taking, empathy and compassion?

What if we challenge ourselves to reframe the way we think about conflict? Let's begin by acknowledging that conflict is a given. It will happen. No community of people is immune to conflict. Conflict comes with being human and it has an important role to play in connection and communication.

Stephen Pocklington, a leader in the peer support movement in the US, once said in a workshop: "If you and I think the same way about something, one of us is redundant."

Consider any book you have ever read, or movie you have ever watched. There wouldn't be a story if there wasn't conflict. It would be as boring as watching a yule log recording on TV. It might get a wee bit interesting when the guy stokes the fire, but without conflict there is no growth or transformation.

"There's no story if there isn't some conflict. The memorable things are usually not how pulled together everybody is. I think everybody feels lonely and trapped sometimes. I would think it's more or less the norm." ~Wes Anderson (filmmaker)

If everyone always thinks the same way, that is a recipe to stay stuck. Growth requires us to seek out other thoughts and opinions. The brain only expands when there is movement. We will not learn and grow if we stand still. Consider confirmation bias, when people are constantly only exposing themselves to things they already believe – it keeps people stuck inside echo chambers. The only way to break out of that is to move and choose to expand our thinking and beliefs, and that will involve some conflict *(both internal and external).*

In the video A *Better Way to Deal with Conflict*, neuroscientist Beau Lotto says that we tend to enter conflict with the aim of shifting the other person towards us. We want to prove that the other person is wrong. If both people approach a conflict this way, they are stuck because no one is willing to move. Lotto suggests that instead, we approach conflict with a question instead of an answer. If we approach conflict with the goal of learning rather than convincing, we are less apt to have it escalate to a place of harm.. Like we talked about at the beginning of this module, what if we challenge ourselves to understand the other person when we are in conflict, rather than trying to convince them that we are right?

Doing this does not mean we will necessarily move to the other person's way of thinking, but we will expand our own. We will develop deeper empathy for the other person, because we will have a better understanding of where they are coming from.

It is also important to respect our boundaries and practice self-care. That may mean walking away from a conversation or conflict, or even walking away from a relationship that feels toxic.

Dr. Michelle Buck, who is Clinical Professor of Leadership at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, teaches that conflict transformation is a better goal than conflict resolution. She shared the following during an interview for the book *Braving the Wilderness*:

> "[Conflict resolution] suggests going back to a previous state of affairs, and has a connotation that there may be a winner or a loser. How will this disagreement be resolved? Whose solution will be selected as the "better" one? In contrast, I choose to focus on "conflict transformation," suggesting that by creatively navigating the conversational landscape of differences and disagreements, we have the opportunity to create something new. At a minimum, we learn more about each other than before. Ideally, we may find new possibilities that had not even been considered before. Conflict transformation is about creating deeper understanding. It requires perspective-taking. As a result, it enables greater connection, whether or not there is agreement.

For Reflection

- Have you ever thought to reframe conflict as a positive?
- How do you think you would do that?
- What will you do next time you are in a conflict if the other person is stuck in their perspective? How will you support yourself in that case?

Generosity of Assumption

From the BC Peer Support Standards of Practice Glossary of Terms:

Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of

assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words. (2019)

How do you think generosity of assumption fits with managing conflict?

Inquiry and Curiosity

This comes with approaching conflict as a learning experience. When we approach conflict with a question rather than an answer, we are more apt to transform that conflict. That requires some self-examination and sleuthing work. We can put on our Sherlock hat and start exploring.

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves:

- What is the history of this conflict?
- Is there more going on with this conflict than meets the eye?
- Do I have some unresolved resentment that I haven't worked through?
- What is underneath my need to be right in this conflict?
- Is it about _____, or is there something else? What is the emotion underneath my point? *(For example, is this conflict really about this particular policy, or for me is the reason really about the fear of being unheard, not valued, and tossed aside?)*
- What can we learn in this conflict?
- What is the desired outcome for this conflict?

Debate vs. Dialogue

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines Dialogue as "a conversation between two or more persons, an exchange of ideas and opinions." When we are stuck in our own worldview during a conflict, we can slip into a debate rather than a dialogue. In a debate, rather than listening to understand the other person, we listen so that we can refute their ideas; our goal becomes winning – rather than transforming – the conflict.

The following graphic contrasting debate and dialogue comes from diversity coach [Holiday Phillips](#). Dialogue is the goal!

debate

Assumes there is one right answer (and you have it)

Style is combative, attempting to prove the "other side" wrong

Listens to find flaws and counter argue

Critiques only the other position

Defends your own views at all costs

Encourages search for differences

Creates a winner/loser and discourages further conversation

Involves no focus on feelings, often actively seeking to belittle or offend

dialogue

Assumes others have pieces of an answer and you can craft a solution together

Style is collaborative, seeks to find common understanding

Listens to understand

Critiques all views, including your own

Allows others' thinking to improve your own

Encourages search for basic agreement

Creates an open end, leaving the topic open for further discussion

Involves a real concern for the other, doesn't actively seek to alienate or offend

Modified | Original Graphic by Holiday Phillips | @holidayphillips

[Image description]

Image Description

Debate vs. dialogue

debate	dialogue
Assumes there is one right answer (and you have it)	**Assumes** others have pieces of an answer and you can craft a solution together
Style is combative, attempting to prove the "other side" wrong	**Style** is collaborative, seeks to find common understanding
Listens to find flaws and counter argue	**Listens** to understand
Critiques only the other position	**Critiques** all views, including your own
Defends your own views at all costs	**Allows** others' thinking to improve your own
Encourages search for differences	**Encourage** search for basic agreement
Creates a winner/loser and discourages further conversation	**Creates** an open end, leaving the topic open for further discussion
Involves no focus on feelings, often actively seeking to belittle or offend	**Involves** a real concern for the other, doesn't actively seek to alienate or offend

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Empathy and Compassion

Empathy and compassion are mentioned often in this training, and it's easy to lump them together. They are similar, and there is some crossover, but they are also different in important ways.

Empathy

In her book *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't)* (2008), Brené Brown references nursing scholar Teresa Wiseman's four attributes of empathy:

1. The ability to see the world through another person's perspective
2. Staying out of judgment
3. Paying attention to, and doing our best to understand, another person's emotions
4. Communicating your understanding of that person's feelings

Compassion

A key difference is that compassion always involves a desire for action. While we first need to see someone's suffering, compassion is about channeling our empathetic feelings into action. Compassion taps into common humanity and the fact that we all have a deep understanding of what it means to suffer. Since all of us have a personal understanding of suffering, when we experience compassion we are motivated to reach out to someone in pain or struggle and to support the alleviation of their suffering.

Self-compassion is about choosing to see and acknowledge our own suffering. It is about offering a compassionate response to our suffering, instead of blaming or judging ourselves and letting our inner critic beat us up. We will look at this in greater detail in Module 14: Building Personal Resilience.

What are your reflections about the difference between empathy and compassion?

Obstacles to Communication

Most of this module focuses on connection and the ways we can increase connection in our relationships. We believe that in putting our attention on connection, we will help prevent other problems from arising, or if they do arise, a focus on connection helps us to see and address them.

However, it is still worth mentioning a few possible barriers to consider. As you read these, write down your thoughts on why you think they could be a problem within your context, and what you can do to address the issue. If you need some support as you work through this section, talk about it with another team member or your supervisor.

- Jargon and abbreviations:
- Talking too much:
- External noise:
- Your energy level:
- Shame/embarrassment/defensiveness:
- Lack of focus:
- When someone talks around an issue:
- Unspoken expectations or boundaries:
- A physically unsafe environment:

Have Fun!

Fun, laughter and play are very important parts of the human experience. Experiencing these things with someone else increases connection. Children engage with fun and play very easily; as we age, we often stop prioritizing fun and play.

Of course, when someone is deep in suffering and despair it is hard to have fun or access a sense of playfulness.

We don't always realize the importance of fun. We can feel like it's frivolous to be laughing and having fun when people are suffering so much. We can slip into a state of seriousness and feel the pressure to only work and focus on "important" things.

But the science says otherwise. We know that laughter and fun supports us in building connections. Play supports creativity, and creativity is so much more than just making art. Play helps us to relieve stress and improve brain function. Play improves energy.

Most of us desire a life with more ease, fun, and adventure. Having a sense of purpose is fun and motivating. Therefore, building fun into our work is so essential.

In the video *Play Is the Engine of Change. How Do We Harness It?*, neuroscientist Beau Lotto says, "the most adaptable systems in nature are the ones that play into adulthood."

In the video, Dr. Lotto says that play:

- **Celebrates uncertainty**
- **Encourages diversity**
- **Is open to possibility**
- **Is cooperative**
- **Is intrinsically motivated** (*think back to self-determination theory*)

Psychiatrist Stuart Brown is the founder of the National Institute for Play. Brown found that "lack of play just as important as other factors in predicting criminal behavior among murderers in Texas prisons." Play is purposeless and about pleasure – it is not about completing a goal.

In the PsychCentral article *The Importance of Play for Adults*, author Margarita Tartakovsky writes,

> But play is just as pivotal for adults as it is for kids."We don't lose the need for novelty and

pleasure as we grow up," according to Scott G. Eberle, Ph.D, vice president for play studies at The Strong and editor of the American Journal of Play.

Play brings joy. And it's vital for problem solving, creativity and relationships.

In his book Play, author and psychiatrist Stuart Brown, MD, compares play to oxygen. He writes, "...it's all around us, yet goes mostly unnoticed or unappreciated until it is missing." This might seem surprising until you consider everything that constitutes play. Play is art, books, movies, music, comedy, flirting and daydreaming, writes Dr. Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play. (2012)

For Reflection

What fun things did you do as a kid?

What can you do to add more fun play into your life?

What kinds of fun things can you add into your peer support work?

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

THE HARD STUFF: MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS, GRIEF & LOSS, AND HARM REDUCTION

Purpose of Module

Supporting people can be hard sometimes. We may find ourselves in a position where we are supporting someone as they navigate some very difficult life situations like a mental health crisis, experiencing grief and loss, self-harm or struggles with substance use.

Your campus will have resources for people who are struggling with these hard things. However, you may be their first point of contact. Therefore, it's important to have a basic understanding of what to do when someone is struggling with really hard things.

This module will walk you through some basic education about mental health and supporting someone who is experiencing a mental health crisis. We will also look at what you can do to support someone who is expressing thoughts of suicide.

Grief is something that most human beings experience at some point in our lives, yet most of us are ill-equipped to support someone who is grieving. In this module, we will take a broad look at the impact of grief and loss. As people in a supporting role, we cannot fix someone's grief; there is no magic wand that will take away someone's pain. So, we will look at how we can come alongside someone and hold space for them as they navigate their healing journey.

In the last sections of this module, we will look at substance use, addiction and the value of a harm reduction approach. Substance use can range from recreational use to addiction. While you are not a formal addictions worker, you may encounter students who are struggling with addiction, and we think it's important to be educated in the principles of harm reduction.

Learning Objectives

1. You will be able to demonstrate an understanding of some basic steps and

approaches to use when the people you support are in a crisis.

2. You will be able to recognize and identify signs that someone is experiencing suicidal ideation and understand what you can do to support them.

3. You will be able to formulate a **peer support-based (relational, mutual, non-clinical) response** to supporting someone through a crisis.

4. You will be able to explain and express that there is not one right way to manage grief.

5. In western culture, most of us are not taught to sit with pain; rather, we often want to fix it and take the pain away. You will be able to see, acknowledge and challenge the desire to "save" someone from their grief, and become equipped to sit with the discomfort.

6. You will be able to explain the basic principles of Harm Reduction, and know some basic practices you can do to support students who use substances.

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. *If you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.*

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

Section 1: Mental Health Including Supporting Someone who is Experiencing an Acute Psychiatric Crisis

VERY IMPORTANT

This module is not exhaustive; it does not cover every aspect or element of this important and complex topic.

This module is written from a relational perspective. It is meant to support you to build skills for navigating potentially difficult terrain. Do not consider this module to be protocol. There is much more to learn. **If you are able, consider taking a course like Mental Health First Aid, and a suicide prevention program like SAFER, or ASIST. Some campuses may offer these courses. If not, and you wish to take one, do an online search to see what is available locally in your area.**

- *Mental Health First Aid is offered through many different agencies throughout BC. The course provides basic training on how to support someone who is experiencing a mental health crisis. The training is focussed on providing support in the moment, as is similar to a physical first aid course.*
- **SAFER** *stands for Suicide Attempt Follow-up, Education & Research. It is a program based out of Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, and they offer workshops to in Suicide Intervention and Suicide Bereavement for mental health workers and others who live locally.*
- **ASIST** *stands for Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST). This is a 2-day suicide first aid workshop that is available for anyone over 16. It teaches participants how to recoginze when someone may be having thoughts of suicide, and teaches participants how to support someone's immediate safety. ASIST offered by various agencies around North America. Check your local area for offerings.*

Note that this training does not discuss or consider liability issues. Liability and related issues need to be explained and overseen by the campus where you work. Please know the policies and procedures of your institution.

If at any point you feel lost and don't know what to do when supporting someone in a crisis, know who you need to call – discuss this with your supervisor and know protocol for such a situation. **Always have a phone close by, and make sure to have the number of your contact ready.**

Also keep in mind that peer support workers rarely encounter an emergency. Still, our intention with this module is to prepare you, just in case something happens!

Supporting Someone in Crisis

The greatest gift you will ever give someone who is in a crisis is your presence, your attention, and your care.

It's also important to note that crisis is going to look different for everyone. What a crisis looks like for someone will depend on their life situation, school workload, family situation, potential mental health diagnosis, resources, and any health issues they may be experiencing. There is no "one size fits all" approach to supporting someone in crisis.

The goal of peer support is to come alongside someone and support them from the perspective of "I get it." However, no matter what our personal experience may be, it's important to remember that peers aren't trained as clinicians. It is not advised that you attempt to provide any kind of clinical support to the people you support.

There may be a time when you will be presented with a situation when someone is in crisis, and you will need to figure out what the next steps are. This section is designed to provide you with some skills you can use to support individuals as you navigate a situation like that.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the ethical principle of keeping information private, when acting in a service role. Working or volunteering for a campus in any capacity (including peer support), means that you need to uphold the confidentiality of anyone you may work with. Every student has a human right to privacy and confidentiality, so this is a non-negotiable expectation for anyone involved in peer services.

Your campus' peer support program will have their own protocols around confidentiality within your team, please talk to your supervisor about how best to navigate confidentiality in relation to debriefing and reporting. You will likely have to sign a confidentiality agreement when you are hired. It is essential that you read it and understand the importance of upholding it in all circumstances.

Supporting someone when they are dealing with hard things is an honour that should always be respected. We must not share any details about the lives of those we support. It can be tempting to share something about someone without giving out their name. This is never advisable; depending on the context, someone might be able to figure out who we are talking about. Even if they aren't, it is in everyone's best interest to keep everything confidential.

If you have any questions about this, please bring them to your supervisor.

Supporting Yourself

It's important to know that when you are exposed to someone else's stress and anxiety, that it can cause a stress response in you. When you notice that your stress response is kicking in, here are some ideas of things you can do to support yourself:

- Know that you are there to listen, not to fix or save someone
- Remember your own boundaries, and don't take on more than you can manage
- Know the resources on your campus, be clear about who to call for support
- Ask for support from a supervisor when you feel out of your depth
- Do some deep breathing in the moment to help you relax
- Do something good for yourself when you get home (example: exercise, chat with a friend, watch a good movie, listen to music, or something else that brings you comfort)

Throughout this module we will look at some approaches to supporting someone who is in crisis, and we'll also dig into some ideas of how you can support yourself too. Remember you are not alone. Your campus is equipped with many resources to support people, and whenever you feel out of your depth, it's important to access them.

When Someone You Are Supporting is Experiencing an Acute Psychiatric Crisis

There is a large spectrum of issues that people can be dealing with when they utilize peer support within post-secondary schools. These issues can range from stress and overwhelm with one's course load, to dealing with a serious mental illness, or even suicidal ideation.

The word crisis can have different meanings to different people. Like any mental health struggle, a crisis can affect us at any point on a continuum. When we say "**acute psychiatric crisis**" we are talking about a situation that requires professional intervention, which could mean a call to 911 or a stay in a local hospital psychiatric ward.

The free dictionary defines acute psychiatric crisis this way:

> A generic term for a situation in which a person is mentally volatile, suicidal, psychotic, or suffering from acute mental decompensation.

Notice and Question Judgements Around Mental Illness

We must always give the utmost respect to people we work with. This means that we listen deeply and give them our attention no matter what issue they're facing. It's important to remember that an issue that may seem small to you, may be felt very differently by someone else. There is so much we can't understand about another person's experience. Remember that you have a different worldview and different experiences than the other person; when you notice judgements arising, pay attention to them. It is essential that we notice and question our judgements rather than simply believing our thoughts as objective truth. When we don't challenge these thoughts they can cause harm.

Remember that it is normal to feel judgemental in this work from time to time; our goal is not to be free from judgment (as we've discussed, all humans judge!). Rather, our goal is to notice and challenge our judgements when they arise. Get curious about the judgement and remind yourself that you don't know the whole story. Put empathy and compassion into practice, and offer a generosity of assumption. It's important that we notice and suspend any of our own judgements when supporting someone else.

Something else to keep in mind is that our judgements may have been influenced by something said by someone on our team. It can be common to share information about people between team members in an effort to support each other. However, sometimes that information can

actually just be a judgement in disguise. If that is the case, we must be careful to challenge those judgements too. When we share information with others on our team we must keep our opinions, judgements, assumptions, and biases out of it and as much as we can—just share facts.

Remember the Basics

In peer support work, it's important that we learn to recognize the signs of when things are becoming unmanageable for the person, and know when it's the time to refer them to a counselor or other professional within the institution.

When someone you are supporting is experiencing a mental health crisis, please keep the following in mind:

- **Know your role and be clear on your role description**
- **Know your school's policies and procedures on what to do in emergency and crisis situations**. What is expected of you? Who do you call? When do you need to call? Who can support you if you encounter an emergency?
- Even if you know about a certain diagnosis or have experienced the same issue, **do not ever give clinical advice**
- Though you might have some education about medications and other treatments, **peer support workers never offer advice about medications or clinical treatments**
- **Consider taking extra trainings such as Mental Health First Aid or ASSIST & SAFER** suicide prevention trainings
- If someone is dealing with a crisis related to a past trauma, remember that **peer support workers aren't trained as trauma counsellors**. Do not offer support or advice that can be perceived as trauma counselling

What You Can do in the Moment

When supporting someone who is experiencing a mental health crisis, here are some of the valuable things you can do in the moment:

- **Provide emotional support and connection**.
- **Listen.** Listening, and perhaps supporting someone to reframe their thinking, is very supportive for someone experiencing a crisis.
- **If the person consents, advocate for the needs of the person you are working with, in situations where their needs are not being attended to.**
- **If it is a crisis situation, and you assess that the person is in danger of hurting themselves or others, seek support from a professional right away.**

- **Share powerful practices that can relax the nervous system during crisis** (like deep breathing exercises).
- **Offer empathy and your presence.** Just being there can make a world of difference for someone!
- **Hope.** Consider that one's hope is like a balloon. When someone is in acute crisis, they may not be able to hold their own balloon. You get to hold it for them.
- **Support your peer to access important resources** that they may be unable to access on their own, because of the crisis.

If appropriate, and the person is receptive to hearing your story–share your past experience with crisis and any transformative, hope-filled moments that supported a shift in you.

Mental Health Diagnoses

While we will not get into details of diagnoses in this training, we are offering some broad information below, as it's important to be able to notice signs and know when to refer someone to a clinician.

It is important to remember that peer support always focuses on the connection and the relationship, rather than anything clinical or diagnostic.

If you notice unusual behaviour in someone you work with, talk to your supervisor about it as soon as you can.

If you suspect that someone could be a danger to themselves or others, please contact your supervisor and reach out for clinical support right away. It's better to err on the side of caution, then miss an important warning sign.

Common Mental Health Conditions

The Mentalhealth.gov website shares this great definition of mental health:

> Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. (2022)

Throughout our lives, most of us will experience some kind of mental health struggle. It's important to remember, however, that mental health struggles happen on a continuum and may look very different from person to person and from situation to situation. For some, that mental health struggle will lead to a mental illness diagnosis. Mental illness diagnoses can be complex and fluid. They are given by medical professionals who must work within strict criteria when making a clinical diagnosis. Remember that all mental health struggles are valid. Everyone experiences them a little differently, and it is so good and important to reach out for support when one feels like life is out of control.

As we mentioned you will never be in a position where you will be providing clinical support. However, it is important to know some basics so that you can refer someone to a professional if they need it.

The following are simple descriptions of some of the most common mental illness diagnoses. These descriptions are referenced from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders Version 5 (DSM 5). A reminder that only doctors can diagnose mental illnesses. There are no medical tests for mental illness diagnoses; all diagnoses are given based on assessments made by a doctor. Someone's diagnosis can change many times throughout their life; diagnosing is not an exact science, and new or different symptoms can emerge over time.

If you personally have a diagnosis or someone you are working with has one, it's important to know that recovery is very possible! We don't have to be defined by a diagnosis; people are so much more than that. Mental illnesses are conditions that can be worked with. Medication is one of many tools that exist today to support individuals who are living with a mental health diagnosis. **As peer supporters, we never offer our opinions about a potential diagnosis or clinical treatment (medications and therapy). We must avoid clinical diagnostic language in our work, as we are not trained to diagnose.**

Bipolar Disorder

 In the category of mood disorders. It's called bipolar because moods fluctuate between extremes on either end of the spectrum. People will experience both mania and depression (described below). There are different ranges of bipolar. Not everyone will experience it in the same way. Some people will have a long time between episodes of mania and depression, and for others the episodes are closer together. It's normal for everyone to experience some amount of highs and lows. It would only be considered bipolar if the moods have a significant impact on daily living.

A few signs of mania are:

- Decreased need for sleep
- Increased euphoria
- Racing thoughts
- Increased energy and, or agitation
- Thoughts of being invincible
- Talking faster than usual. Often the person can speak in a rambling way that is hard to understand and follow. Their speech might also be pressured (difficult to understand)
- Lower impulse control—for example spending excessively and thoughtlessly (money that the person doesn't have)
- Extreme restlessness

Some signs of a depressive episode are:

- Changes in sleep, often sleeping more than usual, or insomnia
- Decrease of pleasure
- Fatigue and exhaustion

- Noticeable change in eating habits: increase or decrease in weight
- Lack of interest in life, sometimes shows up in being numb
- Increased sadness, tears, or irritability
- Changes in cognition, and ability to concentrate
- Thoughts of suicide

Major Depressive Disorder

Sadness is a normal part of life. Most people feel sad, and even depressed at some point in their lives. A person is diagnosed with major depression when their low mood has a huge impact on their daily life. Depression can have a negative impact on school, work, and relationships. Clinical depression is persistent and long-term. People may require long-term treatment.

The Mayo Clinic website says this about depression:

> Although depression may occur only once during your life, people typically have multiple episodes. During these episodes, symptoms occur most of the day, nearly every day and may include:

> - Feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness or hopelessness
> - Angry outbursts, irritability or frustration, even over small matters
> - Loss of interest or pleasure in most or all normal activities, such as sex, hobbies or sports
> - Sleep disturbances, including insomnia or sleeping too much
> - Tiredness and lack of energy, so even small tasks take extra effort
> - Reduced appetite and weight loss or increased cravings for food and weight gain
> - Anxiety, agitation or restlessness
> - Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements
> - Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fixating on past failures or self-blame
> - Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things
> - Frequent or recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts or suicide
> - Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches

Schizophrenia

The Canadian organization The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), defines schizophrenia this way on their website:

Schizophrenia is a complex mental illness that affects how a person thinks, feels, behaves and relates to others.

Schizophrenia involves psychosis and includes both "positive" and "negative" symptoms. When we say the word "positive" it just means that they are "added to" and distort the person's usual level of functioning. When we refer to negative symptoms, it means that usual functioning is lost or reduced.

Positive symptoms can include :

- **Hallucinations:** Seeing, hearing, smelling, and/or feeling things that aren't there (this can include hearing voices)
- **Delusions:** Beliefs that feel very real to the person and are easy for others to disprove (*some examples are: believing that the TV is controlling them, or perhaps sending a message just for them, believing that they are someone else–perhaps a famous person or religious deity, or a persecutory delusion like a government agent is stalking them.*)
- **Confused thoughts and disorganized thinking**: When speaking or writing words get jumbled up when speaking, and don't make sense to the listener/reader
- **Extreme difficulty concentrating**
- **Movement issues:** including jerky movements, or being catatonic (not moving) for long stretches of time

Negative symptoms can include:

- Withdrawal from people and relationships they care about
- Flat affect (showing little to no emotion on one's face)
- Lack of pleasure or interest in things the person previously enjoyed
- Not speaking much
- Lack of purpose and motivation

Schizoaffective Disorder

This mental health issue includes many of the symptoms of schizophrenia, combined with mania associated with bipolar disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Experiencing a certain level of anxiety is a normal part of the human experience. There are very often good reasons that we humans feel anxiety. Generalized anxiety disorder occurs when the worry grows out of proportion. People who struggle with this disorder find themselves anxious

most of the time. The anxiety gets in the way of schoolwork, relationships, and other activities of daily living

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

It's normal for anyone to feel a certain amount of stress and anxiety after a traumatic incident. People who still experience acute symptoms even after a significant time has passed, are likely to be diagnosed with PTSD. Some things that people with PTSD may experience are flashbacks, distressing and frightening thoughts, panic attacks, and retraumatization.

Eating disorders (e.g. anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa etc.)

Eating disorders fall into a complex category, as they are mental disorders, and they involve both the medical system and the mental health system. People with eating disorders can sometimes fall through the cracks, because of this overlap.

It's important to know that there are many supports and treatments available for all these issues. Recovery and wholeness is possible and accessible. Sharing and listening to people's recovery stories is one thing that shares hope and encouragement to people who are struggling. This is why peer support is so powerful!

It's also good to note that the mental illnesses mentioned above are serious mental health (medical) diagnoses from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Version 5 (DSM 5). A person is more likely to get a diagnosis when the struggles are chronic in nature (each mental illness has a timeframe connected with it in the DSM 5).

Situational Mental Health Struggles

As we mentioned earlier, many people struggle with mental health issues on a continuum. Some people might be struggling because of very stressful situations that cause overwhelmingly distressing moods (sadness, fear, anxiety). This might include situations like a break-up, failing a course, experiencing a loss or grief, bullying or harassment. Other people may be struggling with unprocessed trauma. Not everyone who struggles with a mental health issue has a diagnosable mental illness. Some levels of sadness and anxiety are simply normal human reactions to stressful events in our past or present. It's important that we don't pathologize those difficult feelings and try to label them a mental illness when they are situational, and temporary in nature.

For example, anxiety is a common issue that many people deal with. There are many interventions and modalities that can support us when we deal with anxiety that we don't have to receive from a medical practitioner. Your campus counseling department will be able to support

people with tools to cope. Always refer to a professional if you feel like something is out of your scope.

In other words some people will receive a formal diagnosis, and be prescribed medication by a medical professional, others won't. It's highly likely that most of the people you work with in your campus peer support role will not have a formal diagnosis, as early adulthood can be a key time when some of these illnesses start to get in the way of a person living their lives.

However, anyone struggling with a mental health issue anywhere on the continuum must be taken seriously. When people ask for support, it is important to follow through with that support. Research tells us that receiving support and learning good coping mechanisms during the early stages of a mental health struggle can change a person's trajectory so that they may not need psychiatric intervention in the future.

"Approaching Crisis as an Opportunity for growth: When people are willing to listen to each other stories without providing analysis, and at the same time compare and contrast experiences, possibilities for transfiguring meaning are endless. When we become part of each other's narratives, we not only offer possibility for alternate (mutually enriching) interpretations, our new shared story becomes a way to negotiate future challenges and crises while building real communities, '
~Shery Mead & David Hilton (From Crisis and Connection, 2002)

Crisis as an Opportunity for Growth and Change

It's likely that most people wish that life, and the process of getting back on one's feet after a mental health crisis, was straightforward and linear.

In so many ways, society often promotes an expectation that life should be good or happy all the time. That toxic expectation often seeps into our worldview; we assume that our goal is to always be happy, fulfilled, and "successful" and that when we're not, we must be doing something "wrong."

However, we know that is just not the way life works; experience tells us that toxic expectation just isn't realistic or helpful. Setbacks, ups and downs, uncertainty, loneliness, and crisis are all part of being human, even when we believe we are doing everything "right."

When we are able to change our mindset about the expectations of "a perfect life" and accept that life will never be totally free from setbacks or crisis, we invite the opportunity to grow our resilience. We can learn to become more adaptable and sturdy–we can develop a strength that

allows us to slowly get back up after a setback. We can let go of the debilitating shame that is so common when we experience crisis and setbacks, because we know that we are not alone, and that setbacks are par for the course. We can learn to offer ourselves compassion and kindness when we struggle.

Everyone experiences challenges. Crisis can happen to anybody—no one is immune. When we shift our mindset about crisis and setbacks, we can focus on creating stronger support systems and communities with others that we can lean on when we need to.

A crisis ALWAYS involves the worst kind of uncertainty, and as humans we really want to avoid uncertainty as much as we can. Hope comes in when we realize that uncertainty can also create an open door for a new possibility. We say this not to minimize the difficulty of the crisis or the sense of uncertainty, but to provide even just a crack where the light of hope can break through the despair.

As a peer support worker, you get to be a support for someone as they find their way through a crisis or a setback. Even if we just get the chance to talk to someone once, what we say can make a difference in their experience.

Peer support encourages a shift in perception about crisis to be accepting of the ups and downs of life. Sharing stories can be one of the most encouraging things we can do. Many peer support programs involve group work. With a skilled facilitator, this can be a perfect opportunity to share stories, and offer empathy and encouragement.

Things to remember when experiencing a crisis, or supporting someone through a crisis:

- When we embrace hope, we welcome the possibility for healing and growth
- When we understand that setbacks are part of the process of growth, and they come with being human, then we can get back on our feet quicker
- Reframing our thinking about crisis means that the progress we have made in our recovery journey does not have to be derailed
- Though a setback can be very serious, we can get back on our feet faster than we may have in the past when we have support, self-compassion, determination and a plan

Shery Mead's article *Crisis as an Opportunity for Growth and Change* shares a new perspective for us:

> Peer support is a culture of healing. As people practice new ways of "being" through even the most difficult times, possibilities for breaking old patterns and creating new opportunities are endless. Crisis then just becomes another word for redefining our

experience and ourselves so that instead of needing to be locked up, we can begin to break free. (2014)

Resilience & Recovery

Like we covered earlier, we can choose to see setbacks as learning opportunities, rather than something that will kick us back to square one. Taking the shame and blame out of a setback supports us to hold onto hope and see the experience as a teacher. Part of healing is allowing ourselves to feel all our feelings, including pain, and remembering that bumps in the road are a part of the process. When we believe this, we can get back up more easily.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back after adversity. Resilience building supports us to manage adversity. Being resilient doesn't mean that a person won't experience crisis or adversity. In fact, going through those things can strengthen our resilience. Resiliency is not extraordinary; anyone can strengthen their resilience. It's like strengthening a muscle.

As we cultivate resilience while offering compassion to ourselves, our capacity for taking personal responsibility expands. We begin to understand that imperfection is a non-negotiable piece of the human condition, and that guarantees that we will make mistakes in life. We will have moments when we either intentionally or unintentionally hurt people around us. However, when we can learn to let go of our shame, offer kindness to ourselves then we can own our mistakes. We can feel equipped to actively repair our damaged relationships.

Human beings are resilient. Believing that fact makes us even more resilient.

This is important to remember for ourselves, and we also might be in a position of sharing these ideas and practices with the people we support.

The word recovery is used frequently in mental health and addiction spheres. We see recovery as a transformative, self-directed exploration. It's the equivalent to a mysterious healing process where someone grows new strengths and abilities through their struggle and subsequent healing process. Recovery is an opportunity for discovery – to see that which may not have been visible before. Recovery includes the discovery, resurfacing and development of hope, self-determination, resilience, purpose, presence and belonging, even in the midst of struggle. It's the revelation of a new sense of being in the world.

recovery is the process of building...

SELF-DETERMINATION & PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY
I am taking every opportunity to steer my own life.

CONNECTION
I understand that relationships and belonging are important for my well-being. I am working on creating community

HOPE
I am working to believe that there is possibility even in uncertainty. I know that hope is a very courageous act, and it's okay if I don't always feel hopeful

MEANING & PURPOSE
I get to figure out what is meaningful to me, and pursue it.

ME

RESILIENCE
I know that I can do hard things. As I get through tough times, my strengths become more visible.

AN AWARENESS OF MY HUMANITY
I am not perfect and that's ok. I am learning to be more aware of my emotions & feelings, stressors, boundaries and limitations

A SENSE OF WHO I AM
I am working to see all of myself (the strengths and developing bits), and I choose to offer self-kindness

I KNOW THAT RECOVERY IS NOT:
the absence of pain, struggle, or setbacks. I am a complex human being, and it's okay if I mess up. We all do.

Recovery is not linear. It is not a destination. It's an explorative voyage

[Image description]

Image Description

Recovery process

Recovery is the process of building:

- Self-determination & personal responsibility: I am taking every opportunity to steer my own life.
- Connection: I understand that relationships and belonging are important for my well-being. I am working on creating community.
- Hope: I am working to believe that there is possibility even in uncertainty. I know that hope is a very courageous act, and it's okay if I don't always feel hopeful
- Meaning & purpose: I get get to figure out what is meaningful to me, and pursue it.
- Resilience: I know that I can do hard things. As I get through tough times, my strengths become more visible
- An awareness of my humanity: I am not perfect and that's ok. I am learning to be more aware of my emotions & feelings, stressors, boundaries and limitations.

- I know that recovery is **NOT**: the absence of pain, struggle or setbacks. I am a complex human being, and it's okay if I mess up. We all do.

Recovery is not linear. It is not a destination. It's an explorative voyage.

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When Someone you Support is in an Acute Psychiatric Crisis

As mentioned above, an acute psychiatric crisis is very serious and is different from a situational struggle. When we discuss an acute psychiatric crisis, we are talking about a situation when someone is behaving in a way that seems out of their control. If we know them, this behaviour might seem out of character for them. When someone is in a state like this, they most likely need professional support. Some types of behaviours you might see in an acute psychiatric crisis are:

- Acute psychosis; hearing voices, hallucinations, delusions. These symptoms can be normal for some people, for example someone with schizophrenia. It's a crisis if their behaviour is elevated, and they can't be calmed down with the usual things that support them
- Suicidal with a plan
- Exhibiting volatile behaviour
- Extreme out of control panic

The way we support someone depends on their unique situation and experience. Sometimes, a crisis can be experienced as persistent, lower intensity and spanning several months or even years in length. At other times, a crisis can be experienced as immediate, intense, and sometimes episodic (occasional and irregular) in nature. This is what we mean by an acute crisis. An acute crisis may present itself as a very intense, one-time, or a possibly aggressive, or violent situation.

In this section, we look at how you can support someone you're working with when they experience an acute crisis. This can include many different types of situations.

The following are some potential acute crisis situations:

- Psychosis
- Panic attack
- Potential overdose
- Delusional state because of alcohol withdrawal
- Physical health crisis
- Re-traumatization
- Suicidal ideation, a plan, or is in process (*we will cover this further on in the module*)
- Severe depressive episode
- Episode of mania

If there is a way to avoid intervention from law enforcement, that is ideal, as not all officers are trained in mental health best practices. An altercation with law enforcement can cause trauma for someone in an acute psychiatric crisis. However, there might be times when calling 911 is the only option. If that is the case, the immediate safety of the person and everyone around them must be considered.

Each of the situations listed will require a different approach. Being prepared for anything is important. Have a phone close-by. Naloxone training is essential. Be ready to call 911 if you come across anything you feel you can't handle.

A Note About a Non-Acute Crisis

We mentioned that the word crisis means different things to different people. It is also a term that can be used often in casual conversation. This can add to potential misunderstandings of what the word crisis means within a mental health context.

For example, though the following situation is certainly stressful, and definitely a crisis of sorts, it is not an acute psychiatric crisis: "*I had a huge crisis the other day when I spilled water on my laptop and lost the whole paper I was working on. I had to start from scratch. It caused me so much anxiety and stress!*"

A situation like this can still be a crisis for someone; we don't ever want to negate or minimize that. However, the way we would support someone through that crisis will be very different than how we support someone experiencing an acute psychiatric crisis. Anytime a situation comes up for someone where they feel overwhelming negative stimulus, and a lack of control, can be defined as a crisis for them. (This can be when something terrible happens to someone, such as a death in the family, failing to get into an academic program one really wanted to get into, experiencing COVID-19 or a serious medical issue, an intense argument, loss of a valued relationship, a serious financial loss, or anything along those lines.) *Any of these situations could possibly be a trigger for an acute psychiatric crisis, but most often it wouldn't escalate to require professional medical interventions.*

A person may very well need support and a listening ear when experiencing a serious non-medical crisis, and this is exactly where peer support can come in! You can be a listening ear, and support someone to access different tools to get through their really tough situation. In fact there is much research that suggests that when people have a tangible crisis plan to support themselves through hard times, they can get back on their feet faster. This is the case for any type of crisis.

De-Escalation and Support

If we are working with someone who is experiencing a more acute intense crisis, it is important to know some ways to create a relaxed environment. *De-escalation is the more clinical term for this.*

During an acute crisis, the stress response is active and the sympathetic nervous system is engaged. Stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are pumping through the body. This can cause a fight, flight, or freeze response. This is the case both for the person experiencing the crisis, and for you the person in the supportive role.

The first thing you can do is try to regulate your own stress. As you calm your sympathetic nervous system, you will feel better able to support someone else. A simple way to do this is utilizing some breathing techniques.

There are some things you can do to support the person you are working to de-escalate. However, there is no recipe. There is no one size fits all approach to this. You might find yourself in a situation where nothing you are doing seems to help.

These tips are not about suppressing a person, but instead they are about tapping into empathy and compassion so you can connect with the person and support them to be seen and heard.

If at any point you are concerned about the safety of the person you are with, your own safety, or that of anyone around you, please treat it like an emergency situation and follow your campus emergency protocol.

Communication

Communication is the key to managing a crisis situation. Awareness of our own communication is essential. If no one is in immediate danger, you have time to slow down and be deliberate with your communication. Choosing to slow down and work on connection and communication can possibly stop the situation from getting worse.

Ask for support. You likely won't be alone on campus. If you are dealing with an acute crisis, ask someone close-by to find someone to help. Know who to call.

Tools for De-Escalation and Support

Here are some things to remember that can help de-escalate an acute psychiatric crisis situation, and support the person struggling:

- **Safety:** Notice any potential safety issues for all in the vicinity. Are you in a location where someone could potentially fall or be hurt in some way?
- **Be empathetic.** Accept the person's feelings exactly as they are. They are real and powerful to them in the moment. Responding to them with empathy is very validating, and it acknowledges their reality.
- **Be aware of your tone.** Manage your own responses in the moment. If you are very anxious, fearful, and aggressive, the other person will likely respond in kind, and continue to experience intense stress and fear.
- **Be aware of your own biases and judgements.** Work to withhold them. Being judgemental and harsh with someone is never supportive, and especially to someone who is in a crisis.
- **Be aware of your words.** The fewer words you use in the moment the better. When our brains are in crisis mode, our comprehension goes down. The stress response puts us into survival mode. Choose simple language and avoid too many words. This way the person is more likely to be able to take in the information.
- **Be aware of your non-verbal communication.** You can say all the right things, but if your non-verbal communication or tone is aggressive or defensive, it can make the person feel worse. Be as aware as you can be about facial expressions.
- **Do not ever try to restrain someone.** Restraints can be very traumatic for people. It's best to give someone space, and not crowd them. People can feel ganged up on, if everyone is up in their personal space. This can continue to escalate them.
- **Do not challenge the person.** This is not the time to challenge someone or ask a lot of questions. Don't try to convince someone that they are wrong. Don't argue. Just be with them exactly where they are in the moment.
- **Focus on feelings.** Instead of challenging, focus on the feelings they are experiencing. You don't have to validate exactly what they are saying, by validating their feelings is so important. Offer kindness, compassion, and empathy for where they are at. If you have been through something similar, you can share that in a way that creates connection and doesn't cause overwhelm. Saying something like, "you're not alone. I'm here with you. I have been in a similar place myself" can be comforting. If sharing appears to make the person more agitated, then hold back.
- **Always offer choices and options.** Rather than telling someone what to do, offer some potential options. But not too many–that can be overwhelming. Choice is always very important.
- **Be clear on any limitations you may have as far as your program expects and requires of you.** Follow the policies and procedures that your campus has outlined and be clear with the person on what those policies are. Don't leave room for ambiguity. It's very important to have clarity on the limits within the situation. Again, be aware of your tone and non-verbal communication. If you must repeat this several times, that's ok.
- **Allow time for reflection. Be ok with silence.** Create opportunities for reflection and silence.

These moments allow for the person to de-escalate, breathe, and begin to relax.

- **Deep breathing, and grounding exercises are scientifically proven to relax us.** Some people might be agitated if you push this on them though. Ask first. Grounding and mindfulness techniques support us to connect to the room, our bodies, our senses, our breath. Sometimes if you choose to intentionally focus on your own breathing, the person might follow suit.

Reach out and Debrief.

Once you feel like the situation is de-escalated, reach out to someone on campus for support.

After we have supported someone through an acute crisis, it is important to find someone to debrief with. We will find that our sympathetic nervous system is engaged after a crisis, so attending our own well-being is necessary.

We can close off the stress response through talking to someone, moving our bodies, journaling, or even a meditative practice.

Understanding Psychosis

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), the word psychosis "is used to describe conditions that affect the mind, in which people have trouble distinguishing between what is real and what is not." Psychosis is described by some as a "break from reality." An episode of psychosis can feel very scary for the person experiencing it and can be very disruptive to their life; it can affect a person's perception, thoughts, and behaviours. Some people experience psychosis on a regular basis. For others, psychosis can be a one-time event or can happen irregularly.

Psychosis is not a disorder itself. Rather, it is a syndrome or a grouping of symptoms that serve as an indicator that there is something else wrong. We mentioned earlier that psychosis is one of the symptoms of schizophrenia, however there are many mental health issues that can induce a psychotic episode. Psychosis can also be a symptom of a serious medical condition, so paying attention to the signs could potentially save a life.

The following are some illness/situations that can be accompanied by psychosis.

- Schizoaffective disorder
- Bipolar
- Depression
- Postpartum depression/psychosis
- Substance use
- Alcohol withdrawal
- Brain injury
- Dementia
- Starvation, people with eating disorders can experience psychosis
- Sleep deprivation

If you don't know someone's diagnosis and you see symptoms of psychosis, it's important not to assume you know exactly what is happening. Instead simply support them where they are at and seek support if you need it.

Since psychosis can be a symptom of a serious medical condition. Paying attention to these signs could perhaps save a life.

Breaking Down Stigma

There is a lot of stigma and discrimination for people who experience psychosis. One harmful stereotype – that is blown up and encouraged by the media – is that someone experiencing the symptoms of a psychotic episode will be violent. In reality, someone in this state is statistically more likely to be hurt or victimized by someone else, than they are to inflict violence on another person.

As peer support workers, it is very important to work at noticing and dispelling harmful stereotypes, and breaking down that destructive stigma.

Common Symptoms

Below are some of the main symptoms of psychosis. Usually, psychosis involves a grouping of these symptoms. While we covered some basics of these in the symptoms of schizophrenia, as mentioned psychosis is not relegated to schizophrenia:

- **Hallucinations:** When someone sees things that others around them aren't seeing. Hallucinations can include visions, tastes, smells, sounds, and sensations. Emotions and feelings can feel mixed up, people can be confused.
- **Delusions:** A delusion is an unsubstantiated, strong, firmly held belief. Other people's perceptions and experiences can't affirm the belief. Someone could think that they are a more powerful person than they are. Special powers or abilities can be part of a delusion. Or someone may have a delusion that they are being unfairly targeted by someone, a group of people, or perhaps a famous organization. Paranoia and elevated fear can come with delusions. This feels very real to a person experiencing this.
  Often, we find ourselves having different beliefs than other people. It is only considered a delusion when it begins to affect our ability to manage daily life.
- **Disorganized thinking and speech**: Thoughts can move rapidly. They can be disjointed and jump all over the place. It can be hard to understand someone's speech when they are experiencing psychosis. Receiving written words, such as texts, from someone experiencing psychosis can be very hard to understand and can seem very confusing.

Self-Harm

You may work with someone who uses self-harm as a coping skill. You may have also used, or currently use it, as a way of coping with things that feel out of control.

Self-harm is any behaviour that inflicts a physical injury on oneself. Self-harm is common, and is engaged in by people of all ages and genders. . People may feel numb or overwhelmed with pain;. self-harm can be a means to let the pain out or gain a sense of control. Self-harm is not a mental health condition but can be a way that someone copes with a mental health condition. When we support the underlying needs of a person, they will be less likely to self-harm.

With any tool we use to cope, there may come a time when we find that the tool no longer serves us. This is something we need to figure out for ourselves. Sometimes we find new wellness tools or coping skills, and then once we are using them, we realize some of our older tools don't serve us anymore.

If self-harm is new to you, it is essential that you pay attention to your own biases and judgments about it. There is an existing stigma around self-harm; it's important to be aware of how it informs your own thoughts about it. If it is something that is new to you, it can be easy to shame someone and reinforce the stigma. Because of your own discomfort, you may become very directive or try to be "helpful," giving advice and telling them to stop. Taking this kind of approach, or giving advice to someone who self-harms is not helpful. Telling someone that they shouldn't self-harm will never be effective. Contributing to shame and stigma is never helpful.

We need to understand that self-harm is a reaction or response to other overwhelming problems in a person's life–problems such as low self-worth, trauma, loss, overwhelming emotions, extreme stress, bullying or many other issues. Many people who self-harm have expressed feeling numb and a loss of control of their life and discuss self-harm as a coping tool to help release the pain.

It's important to know that people who self-harm most often keep it secret and can feel ashamed about it. A myth that can be out there around self-harming is that the person wants to die. That is not the case. People tend to self-harm to cope with their deep pain. Extending kindness, love and compassion is an important way we can support someone who self-harms.

Suicide

This is a basic overview of this important topic. Please consider a more in-depth training such as SAFER or ASSIST.

It's very important to start with a reminder that talking about suicide won't cause suicide. It can be very scary and uncomfortable to talk about suicide with someone we are worried about. However, talking about it is likely what they need, and it can provide tremendous relief for the person.

Confidentiality is always important. However, when someone is a danger to themselves or others, we **must reach out for help** from a supervisor or qualified clinician. <u>Don't ever promise to keep someone's thoughts or plans of suicide a secret.</u> Be clear with the person that you are required to seek help when someone tells you they have a plan for suicide. Know what your campus policy is for dealing with any situation around suicide, and follow them to the letter. If you have any confusion about this, please speak with your supervisor.

Since peer support staff are not trained clinicians, we must always take talk of suicide seriously. In some cases, someone might speak of suicide as a plea for help, and they might not be at risk. However, a peer is not trained to make that kind of assessment. It is essential that we reach out for clinical support anytime the topic of suicide comes up in peer support work.

Your campus should have a policy on what to do when someone share thoughts of suicide with you. Make sure you are familiar with it.

Language and Suicide

Words have great power; the way we speak about suicide matters greatly. It's so important that as peer support workers, we are hopeful and respectful. Consider the language you often hear or use regarding suicide as you read the following chart.[1]

Instead of saying this...	Say this...	Why?
Commit/committed suicide	Died by suicide, death by suicide, lost their life to suicide	The word "commit" comes from a time when suicide was considered a crime. It reinforces a stigma around suicide being an illegal and selfish act.
Completed suicide or successful suicide	Died by suicide, death by suicide, lost their life to suicide	Using either the words "successful" or "completed" is inappropriate, because suicide is tragic. Those two words are not congruent with suicide. It's better to take a direct approach; suicide is fatal or it isn't.
(person's name) is suicidal	(name) is thinking of suicide/is or has experienced suicidal thoughts/ is facing suicide	As with all person-first language we never want to define someone by an illness or struggle. They are more than their suicidal thoughts.

Suicidal Thoughts vs. Having a Plan

The clinical term for these thoughts is suicidal ideation. In this section, we'll look at the difference between passive and active suicidal ideation.

Passive Suicidal Ideation

Suicidal thoughts can be ongoing for some people who are struggling with mental health issues.

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1. The information below was sourced from CAMH Foundation's document "Words matter. Learning how to talk about suicide in a hopeful, respectful way has the power to save lives' and "Language Matters: Committed Suicide vs. Completed Suicide vs. Died by Suicide" from the Speaking of Suicide website.

These thoughts are considered passive when someone thinks about dying or wanting to escape life, but has no plans for suicide. Many people who contemplate suicide are so overwhelmed with their life, and they feel like their situation is impossible to deal with. More than wanting to die, they want an escape from the unbearable feelings.

Active Suicidal Ideation

There is a continuum for active suicidal ideation. As well as having thoughts of suicide, the person has intent to do it, and a plan for how they will do it. People are at a great risk for suicide when they have intent and a plan.

The only way to know the difference between active and passive suicidal ideation is to ask the person. **Like we mentioned earlier, it can feel scary to address this directly with someone, but that is exactly what we need to do when someone mentions wanting to die. Talking about suicide will not influence someone to take their own life.** Ask them if they are thinking of ending their life. If they say yes, ask them if they have a plan.

If they have a plan, it's important that you do not leave them alone. They are safe if someone is with them. Listen to them. Don't try to fix anything. Seek professional help–contact your supervisor or a school counsellor. Don't leave them until they are safely with someone else.

Warning Signs

The following are warning signs of suicide to keep in mind during your peer support work:

- Long-term unrelenting anxiety or depression
- Increased agitation
- Giving away belongings–especially possessions that are meaningful to the person
- Stockpiling medications
- Previous suicide attempts
- Talking about suicide
- Reckless behaviour
- Hopelessness
- Inappropriately saying goodbye
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Withdrawing more than usual from others
- Increased emotional display, such as rage or sadness
- Verbal behaviour that is ambiguous or indirect (e.g. "I'm going away on a real long trip," or "I don't want to be a burden on others").
- A sudden, unexpected state of calm

Be Present and Take Your Time

When someone tells us that they are contemplating suicide, it feels terrifying and overwhelming. As a peer supporter, it can be easy to slip into a panic mode, which makes it hard to be present with the person we're supporting.

Both you and the person you are supporting will benefit from a relaxed response, rather than panicked reactions. There are practical tools we can use to help us respond in a way that is more supportive, hopeful and more relaxed.

Take note of what is happening in your physical environment. Is there anything you can do in the moment to limit noise and stimulus?

Notice your own emotional state. How are you feeling? It is very likely that you are feeling panicked. Take a moment to do something to calm your nervous system. Breathe a bit deeper and slower to help regulate your body and emotions. *(Consider using some of the relaxation techniques we explore in this training)*.

If you are with the person, remember they are safe as long as you are with them. If you are on the phone with them, stay on the line, and contact your supervisor via text. Unless it is physically evident that their life is in danger, you don't have to rush. This gives you some time just to be present and have a conversation.

Take time to listen to them share their experience and how they are feeling. Human connection and empathy are powerful. If you do have time constraints, remember the limits of your role and know when to support them in either continuing their conversation with another peer supporter on the team or connecting with a professional.

Know that you can call 911 if things escalate. Until or unless you are at that point, take your time and do what you can to support the person you are with.

The Power of a Hopeful Response to Suicidal Ideation

When someone we're working with shares that they are contemplating suicide, it is important that we choose hope-based rather than fear-based responses. When we respond from fear, we react based on what we're afraid might happen or what we think might be wrong. When we respond from hope, we respond based on what we believe is possible and with hope for co-creating something new.

The following chart is shared from Shery Mead's Intentional Peer Support work and highlights the difference between a Hope Response (what we refer to above as a hopeful response) and a Fear Response (fear-based response) when supporting someone who expresses suicidal ideation:

Hope Response	Fear Response
Sitting with the discomfort of the situation	Trying to calm things down: stabilization
Staying connected to the person	Taking care of, helper/helpee
Unpredictability = Possibility	Predictability: things go back to the way they were.

Some Things to Remember

When supporting someone who is contemplating suicide, keep the following in mind:

- Remind them that they are not alone
- Express your care and concern for them–however, don't say anything you don't mean, as that could be triggering
- Ask them about people they care about
- Practice empathy, but don't say anything like "I know exactly how you feel." You don't know exactly how they feel, even though you may have experiences something similar
- If you have felt similar things you can say, "I've struggled with thoughts of wanting to escape or die too." This might help them to feel less alone. However, be cautious to not make the conversation all about you. Stay focused on them.
- If you haven't experienced thoughts of suicide, consider saying something like, "I can sense how desperate you are from your voice. I want you to know that I care, and I am here for you."
- Don't try to fix their problems–just listen

- Be aware of your judgements and your worldview, practice putting your judgements aside
- When the person is safe and you are able to leave, seek support for yourself. Speak to your supervisor or a counsellor at your school about your feelings. It is very important that you debrief with someone for your own well-being.

Supporting Yourself

Any time you are working with people, it's important to be aware of your own well-being. Self-awareness and self-nourishment are essential in this work. This is especially relevant if you are supporting someone who is in crisis. There is a real risk of you experiencing re-traumatization if you have been through something similar. Please support yourself and reach out for support when you need it. If you need to pass the baton, please do. If you need to take some time off for yourself, please advocate for that. Working when you are unwell can be potentially damaging to both you and the person you are supporting.

Hope

Let's look again at this quote that we referenced at the beginning of this module. It's from *Crisis and Connection* (Mead, Hilton 2002):

> When people are willing to listen to each other's stories without providing analysis, and at the same time compare and contrast experiences, possibilities for transfiguring meaning are endless. When we become part of each other's narratives, we not only offer possibility for alternate (mutually enriching) interpretations, our new shared story becomes a way to negotiate future challenges and crises while building real communities.

When we learn to reframe crisis and are able to support someone through crisis with a lens of hope, we are able to create new shared meaning. This way of being supports interconnection, hope building, and resilience. We can learn to reframe our approach and find hope and possibility in crisis.

Section 2: Mental Health Supporting Someone who is Grieving

Life Application Story

Greg (a peer support student) had been spending time with his peer, Michael, for several months. Michael was finally opening up about the death of a close friend who passed away two years ago, and how it was impacting him.

"It's just really unfair. He had just graduated and was so excited about the future. I feel like he was the only person I could really be myself with."

"That's awful. But I'm sure you have other people in your life who understand you, too," said Greg.

"Yeah, I guess," replied Michael.

Greg realized that his comment was unhelpful. He noticed disconnection swelling up between him and Michael. He recognized his own discomfort around grief and loss, and his need to fix things and make them better.

"I'm sorry Michael. I shouldn't have said that. You've lost someone very important in your life who you had a unique relationship with. I can't imagine how hard that is. Do you want to talk about your friend for a while?"

Michael thanked him for his apology and continued to talk about his friend, and about how hard it was to lose him. Greg recognized that he kept wanting to bring the conversation to a lighter place, to move Michael out of his pain before he was ready. He worried that he should be doing something, saying something, to help Michael feel better. He took a breath and resisted the urge to provide platitudes. He reminded himself to simply listen and be a witness to Michael's pain. "It's been two years since he died. I should be over it."

"You know, I still grieve the loss of my cousin, and he died over ten years ago. There's no appropriate timeline for when you're supposed to move on."

"Yeah. I just can't believe I've lost my best friend. I don't know... things are really messed up. His birthday is tomorrow and I've started drinking a lot more just to like, be okay."

Greg wanted to tell Michael that drinking wasn't going to solve his problems, but he remembered how he reacted when family members told him to stop smoking. He felt defensive and it certainly didn't inspire him to quit. Greg thought back to his training about the reasons why people use substances, and how they can be a helpful coping strategy when other things aren't working.

"Yeah that makes sense. Anniversaries and special dates are really hard when it comes to loss."

"Yeah. I haven't been sleeping at night, and it helps me pass out."

"That sounds hard. Is there something you've done in the past that helps when your drinking gets out of control?"

"Well when he died I went on a massive bender, and got some grief counselling which helped. But that's run out, and I can't afford a new counsellor. I mean I guess telling my friends has helped before, because then they know to suggest doing other things besides always going to bars."

"That sounds like a great plan. I'm sorry to hear the grief counselling has run out. Finding affordable counselling is such a headache!" Greg had a lot of resources in his head, but he didn't want to unload them on Michael all at once, especially not when he was feeling overwhelmed. "If you ever want, I can offer some suggestions for places that offer grief counselling."

"Yeah, maybe sometime."

Eventually, Michael shared how he felt guilty he hadn't been there for his friend more before his death, and how lonely and isolated he felt now. A few times, Greg jumped in and tried to offer kind words or suggestions. He noticed that he had a hard time just sitting there and listening to Michael describe his extreme distress. He tried to focus on his breathing instead of rushing to find a solution or "the right thing" to say. Eventually, they brainstormed some coping strategies and came up with a plan for the day of his friend's birthday, so he would feel okay to reach out for help if he felt like he was in a crisis. But they only discussed this when Michael was ready to go there. After their time together, Greg checked in with his supervisor, and debriefed.

When Greg went home, he noticed that he felt both exhausted and full of unsettled energy. He went for a run, cooked a nice meal with his roommate, and watched a funny movie.

"The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares." ~ Henri Nouwen

Sometimes something happens and life explodes into a million tiny pieces.

Nothing feels the same after a big loss. It's as though colours, smells, and tastes are different, and life will never be "normal" again. Eventually, though very slowly, we find ourselves healing. We put one foot in front of the other, and somehow, we find the strength to get up and live another day. Often, we are forever changed by a loss, but we can celebrate our resilience and our ability to create a new normal.

Most of us at some point in our life have experienced a loss that has felt like a kick in the gut, and we have found ourselves struggling to catch our breath for a little while after. Your amazing

resiliency is one of the things that has brought you to this very training. Please celebrate it and appreciate your strength.

Understanding Loss

Loss is part of the human experience, though most of us wish it wasn't.

Over a lifetime we face many losses. The losses can range from minor inconveniences to significant traumas that can impact the rest of one's life. Loss and trauma can certainly intersect. Something is traumatic when we feel a loss of control, a sense of isolation and our ability to cope is significantly diminished; we feel an impact on our physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual health.

Some examples of losses people face are:

- Diagnosis of an illness
- Injury
- Failing something
- Death of a loved one
- Miscarriage
- Dealing with a chronic disease
- Loss of a scholarship or funding for school
- Losing a good friendship
- Natural disaster
- Loss of job or career
- Death or loss of a pet
- Loss of child custody
- A break-up
- Loss of financial security

This list is far from exhaustive and is just a sampling of potential losses. For the purpose of this section of the module, we want to make sure we are clear that **loss is more than death.**

Loss is complex. We are not just dealing with what we have lost, but also how that loss continually impacts us in the future.

Abstract and Future Loss

Another example is the loss of a dream or a future abstract loss. The person may not have lost something concrete in the present moment, however their future is forever impacted by a potential loss.

Let's look at the movie *Little Miss Sunshine* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006) for an example of this kind of abstract loss. It's a quirky film about a dysfunctional family on a road trip. They are traveling from New Mexico to California in a Volkswagen (VW) bus. In a pivotal scene, 7-year-old Olive is playing eye doctor with her older brother. She has some photocopied papers and she's checking his vision. Her brother, 15-year-old Dwayne, has taken a vow of silence until he is able to leave his dysfunctional home to pursue his dream of becoming an Air Force pilot. In this scene we see that through Olive's primitive test, Dwayne is most likely colour blind. His uncle looks at him and says, "Dwayne, I think you might be colour blind. You can't fly jets if you're colour blind." In this simple moment while driving in a dilapidated VW bus, we see this teenager's dream crumble before our eyes.

His dad pulls over and Dwayne gets out of the bus. We see him running down a hill wailing. His mother attempts to comfort him, but seems to have little empathy, because she is more worried about getting to their destination on time. Little Olive shuffles down the hill in her bright red cowboy boots. She says nothing. She just puts her arm around Dwayne and hugs him. It seems that even though she is a small child she understands what he has just lost. After a tender moment together they both get up and walk back to the bus.

For Reflection

Consider other pop culture (movies, books, stories). In a small group talk about some other stories that reflect this kind of abstract loss. How did other characters support the character, or did they cause more harm? What can we take away from these stories that we can apply to our own work?

Many of us have experienced abstract losses like Dwayne's. Perhaps we have needed to change our career plans due to an illness or diagnosis. Maybe we have lost a career all together because of a loss. Maybe the loss of a relationship has altered the direction of our whole life.

Loss can also be multilayered. One loss can be the catalyst for more loss. It's important when we support people that we realize that loss can be complex and can go very deep.

Acknowledgement

"True comfort in grief is in acknowledging the pain, not in trying to make it go away.

Companionship, not correction, is the way forward."
~Megan Devine
(It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand)

Being heard and seen is the most supportive thing we can give to someone experiencing loss.

Acknowledgement means that we choose to see and hear someone's pain. We know that nothing we say or do can fix their pain. As much as we would love to wave a magic wand and take their pain away, we can't.

The best thing we can give to someone is connection and acknowledgement.

For Reflection

What are some ways you can be present and support someone who is experiencing grief and loss?

Comparing One Loss to Another

It is so easy to compare one loss to another. Competition and judgement comes with being human, and it impacts our perception of loss and grief. We all have different perceptions and judgements based on our own experiences. There's no one right way to see something because everything is filtered through our experience. As supporters, it is important that we never compare losses. Rather, we remember to support each person exactly where they are at.

With a mindful approach we can begin to unpack our judgements and biases, and learn to question them, and suspend them.

Judgements around loss and trauma can be very common. We must remember that trauma isn't the event itself. Trauma is the physiological and emotional response after a traumatic situation.

This means that people can have very similar experiences and have different trauma responses. One person might feel very traumatized by a situation, and for someone else it might not make them feel powerless at all. They might simply get back up and walk away with very little emotional impact.

Because of this, it is very important that we never judge someone's loss or trauma response against another's. The sentiment, "why are they still struggling...? They should be better by now" is never helpful. It invalidates and isolates people.

Unpacking Old Paradigms of Cycles of Grief

Many of us grew up hearing about Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' model of the Five Stages of Grief. The stages are:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

It is still a common strongly held belief that it is essential people cycle through these 5 stages of grief when they have experienced a loss. We see the five stages written in pamphlets, referred to at hospice centers, by many professionals. You may have even had someone share these stages with you. However it this hasn't actually been scientifically researched.

However, what is not commonly known is that Kübler-Ross originally wrote the five stages of grief for people who were given a terminal diagnosis. The five stages came from her book *On Death and Dying* originally published in 1969. She theorized that people who found out that they were dying needed to go through these stages as a journey toward acceptance of the diagnosis. These five stages were never written for people who were experiencing grief or loss of a loved one, and they have never been scientifically researched or proven. The book was based on case studies of her dying patients, as Kübler-Ross was in medical school. Case studies are anecdotal; meaning they are based on personal accounts, not research or facts.

In the Psychology Today article *Why the Five Stages of Grief Are Wrong,* author David B. Feldman, Ph.D says this:

> Studies now show that grievers don't progress through these stages in a lock-step fashion. Consequently, when any of us loses someone we love, we may find that we fit the stages precisely as Kubler-Ross outlined, or we may skip all but one. We may race through them or drag our feet all the way to acceptance. We may even repeat or add stages that Kubler-Ross never dreamed of. In fact, the actual grief process looks a lot less like a neat set of stages and a lot more like a roller coaster of emotions. Even Kubler-Ross said that grief doesn't proceed in a linear and predictable fashion, writing toward the end of her career that she regretted her stages had been misunderstood. (2017)

The process is not linear. Instead, grief and healing from loss tend to be processed in waves. There is no standard formula or timeframe for healing, and some losses will always be felt. Some losses change us and we adapt, but we will never be the same.

There is no right way to experience loss. There is no wrong way to grieve. Everyone's journey will be individual and unique. If someone you are working with is grieving and begins to display behaviours that seem to be out of character or out of control, seek support from your supervisor to know how best to support them.

For Reflection

Is this idea new to you? How do you feel knowing that there are no concrete stages to grief?

Collective Grief

Some grief and loss is individual, and some losses are felt collectively as a community or even a nation. Connection is sometimes easier to achieve when we experience a collective loss, although only if people are willing to talk openly about it.

Community Loss

Loss can affect people on an individual level and/or at a community level. Loss can deeply impact a community when we experience a collective loss.

In community losses, there is a need for the community to come together to process pain collectively.

For Reflection

Have you been a part of a community that has experienced a loss? How did people support each other?

Traumatic National and Global Events

In addition to the collective losses listed above, we also experience national or global events that are traumatizing. Natural disasters can also bring collective loss.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission existed with the purpose of acknowledging the truth of Canada's terrible history through the sharing of people's stories and experiences. The goal of the Commission was to support the ongoing need to tell and hear the truth about the horrible acts of colonization to support the creation of opportunities for reconciliation. Acknowledging the pain that was caused is always the first step in any reconciliation process.

The peer support movement also began as an opportunity for people to come together to grieve and support others who had experienced the same systemic oppression. Those early gatherings were the birth of a movement that has essentially made this training and work possible.

In her book *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (2020), Valarie Kaur talks about collective grief regarding the events of September 11th, and the aftermath of racist attacks that followed:

> We come to know people when we grieve with them through stories and rituals. It is how we can build real solidarity, the kind that points us to the world we want to live in—and our role in fighting for it….America's greatest social movements—for civil rights, immigrants' rights, women's rights, union organizing, queer and trans rights, farmworkers' rights, Indigenous sovereignty, and Black lives—were rooted in the solidarity that came from shared grieving. First people grieved together. Then they organized together…When people who have no obvious reason to love each other come together to grieve, they can give birth to new relationships, even revolutions. (Kaur 2020)

We Can't Fix it: Supporting Someone Who is Grieving

"Sadness is treated with human connection." ~Pauline Boss

Many of us never learn how to support someone in their grief. It can be very uncomfortable to be unable to take away someone's pain. The truth is that we cannot fix someone who is grieving. As much as we wish we could, we are unable to change the situation.

The only thing we can do when someone is experiencing grief is to come alongside and hold space for them.

In her book *It's Ok That You're Not Ok: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand* (2018), Megan Devine says:

> The reality of grief is far different from what others see from the outside. There is pain in this world that you can't be cheered out of. You don't need solutions. You don't need to move on from your grief. You need someone to see your grief, to acknowledge it. You need someone to hold your hands while you stand there in blinking horror, staring at the hole that was your life. Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.

We can feel helpless and lost when we are supporting someone who is grieving.

That sense of helplessness can sometimes fuel a felt need within us to do something to alleviate the person's suffering. This desperation within us can cause us to say things that come from a good place but can be hurtful and dismissive to the person experiencing grief.

Most people tend to be quite uncomfortable with pain. We can especially have a very hard time sitting with someone else's pain. We want to fix it, provide some relief for them. As a result of our discomfort, we find ourselves trying to push people along in their grief before they are ready. We can feel a desire to be a "cheerleader." Being a cheerleader means that we aren't necessarily engaged with the person, but instead are focused on cheering them up, or cheering them on from the sidelines, like an observer. We can find ourselves offering platitudes, thinking that we are supporting someone to move forward. However, when we are honest with ourselves, the desire to fix comes from a need to ease our own discomfort. Sharing a platitude like "everything happens for a reason" does more to dismiss someone's pain, than to alleviate it or support them through it. The truth is that pain from grief and loss is not fixable by someone else, especially from someone simply cheering another person on. Some pain is just not fixable, and we need to do our own work to deal with that discomfort.

All we can do is be a support to someone. Don't try to fix that which can't be fixed. Don't try to cheer someone out of a grief that must be felt and processed.

It is essential that we deal with our own discomfort around pain and let go of our desire to fix someone's pain.

We must also realize that different cultures, and religions might have a different approach to grief and loss that what you are familiar with. Some of the customs surrounding grief and mourning might feel uncomfortable for you. However, we must take a culturally humble approach to supporting someone who is grieving.

A cultural humility mindset is also very important when supporting someone in grief. Many cultures and religions have specific traditions and practices around grief and loss.

We must humbly respect those practices.

If you want to learn about another person's cultural traditions around mourning and grief, simply ask them in a humble way whether they want to share. Let them know that they don't have to respond if they'd prefer not to.

For Reflection:

- Can you remember a time when someone tried to support you with a "cheerleader" approach? How did that make you feel?
- What are some ways you can support someone without trying to fix them? (Refer to our Life Application Story)
- Do you have any cultural traditions around grief and loss?
- Do a little online research around how some cultures grieve. Write one or two things you learned about three different cultures below:

Avoiding Platitudes

Cambridge dictionary defines platitudes this way:

> a remark or statement that may be true but is boring and has no meaning because it has been said so many times before.

It's easy to let a platitude roll off our tongue. We have all heard them a million times before. The thing is that platitudes are quite dismissive and leave someone feeling unheard. Let's unpack this a little:

Things to avoid saying	Why we should avoid these statements
"Everything happens for a reason."	This is trite. The truth is that sometimes bad things just happen. We believe in hope and that we can all get through hard things but saying "everything happens for a reason" negates the person's pain. Instead, we can say something like, "I see how much is hurting. I want you to know that I am here."
"Your person is in a better place."	"But they are not here...with me, right now." This can be felt as dismissive. It can make the person feel ashamed for feeling sad. Comments like this can keep people from doing the important work of processing their pain. Instead we can say something like, "I'm so sorry you have to go through this."
"Your person would want you to move on."	As we covered in this module, grief has no time limits. When this is said to someone, they can hear it as this: "your grief is taking a long time...you need to get over this."
"I know that things will get better for you."	You don't actually know that. You can be holding hope for someone, but you don't have a crystal ball. Consider some other ways you can share hope with them, rather than a platitude. What can you do to share hope?
"God doesn't give you more than you can handle."	We don't know what someone's religious beliefs are. Also, this makes no logical or theological sense. Horrific things happen to good people.
"At least you had some good times with that person. Treasure those moments."	Again, this negates their pain. Instead say, "tell me about your person? Tell me a story." Many people, but not everyone, love talking about their loved ones who they have lost. For some people it can keep the memory alive. Follow the person's lead with this. Don't push them to talk if they don't want to.
"I know how you feel."	Everyone's experience of loss is different. Instead, "I don't know what you are feeling, but know that I am here."

| "Cheer up!" | This again, negates someone's feelings.

However, continue to be invitational. Invite someone to go for a walk, out for coffee or out to see a movie. Be ok if they say no, but never stop asking. |

Holding Space When Someone is Grieving

Holding space means that we stand with someone and intentionally make room for them to process their pain in a way that works for them. The following are some ways we can practice holding space:

- Come alongside someone and bring our full presence
- Let go of any agendas we might have
- Don't fill the sacred space with advice, too much talking, or anything that is not welcomed by the person–especially if our motivation for filling the space is about masking our own discomfort
- Notice – and then suspend – any judgements, biases, or assumptions we might have. It's not for us to judge the way the person is processing their situation. Remember that we are seeing the situation from our own perspectives
- Listen and engage with empathy
- Don't try to fix the person – trust their inner wisdom
- Don't take someone's power away by doing too much for them, or by making decisions for them that are not for us to make
- Let go of our ego and the need to see a particular outcome. The growth or lack of growth the person is experiencing is not reflective of the support we are offering
- Be humble
- Always work towards the creation of a safe space
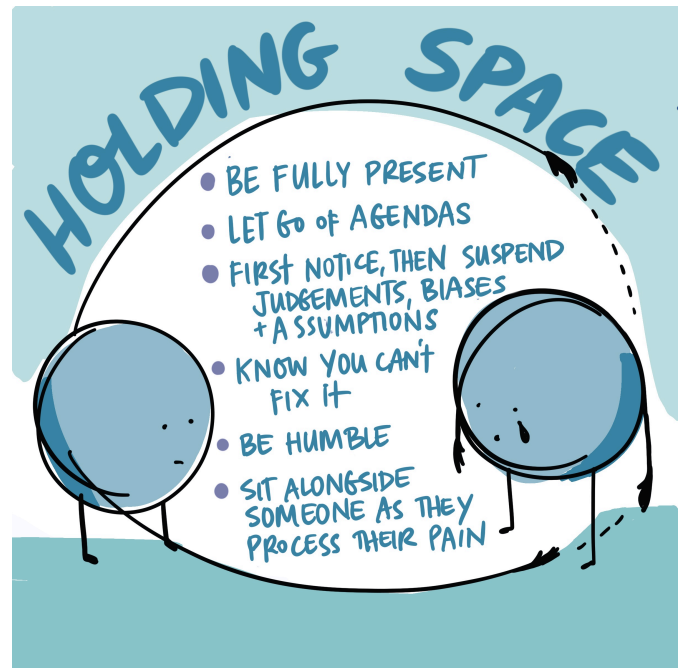
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Section 3: Harm Reduction and Supporting Someone Who Uses Substances

Using Substances

It's not uncommon for students to use substances while attending post-secondary.

The use of substances can range from casual recreation use to serious addiction. As a peer you might interact or work with someone who is struggling with an addiction, but it is unlikely that supporting anyone with substance use issues will be within your scope of work.

You may be in a position where you can refer people to campus services, or even services within your community. It's important to be aware of what is available locally for students.

Overdose is a big risk today. On February 9th, 2022, the Vancouver Sun reported that "2,224 people died from suspected illicit drug overdose deaths in 2021, a 26 per cent spike from 2020."

Because of the risk of overdose, it's recommended that everyone who works in peer support is trained in how to use Naloxone. Your campus likely already has a training program on Naloxone that you can access. If they don't, you can get a kit at your local pharmacy, and the training is available online.

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist. This means that in the event of an opioid overdose, it will temporarily block the body's opioid receptors, reversing the overdose and saving a life. It is encouraged that peer support workers receive training in how to administer Naloxone and carry the treatment with them in the event their peer experiences an overdose.

Harm Reduction

The province of British Columbia takes a harm reduction approach to substance use. However, there are many layers of complexity within our conversations around substance use. It's essential that people who use substances are treated with the deep respect that they deserve. This section will cover some of the principles and methodologies around the evidence-based harm reduction approach we use today.

Harm reduction within peer support work looks like meeting people where they're at, promoting safety and providing support that's free from judgment. We are not here to support or condemn an individual's use of substances.

A very simple way to look at harm reduction is to think of it in terms of reducing the potential harm of injury or death from things that are preventable.

Most of us practice this basic principle every day. For example, when we choose to use seatbelts in a car, we're reducing the harm that can come from a car accident. When we wear sunscreen, we're reducing our potential harm from the effects of the sun. When we wear a helmet on a bike ride, we're reducing the potential for brain injury or death in the case of an accident. We accept that some degree of risk exists in our day-to-day activities and attempt to reduce the potential for harm.

The International Harm Reduction Association (2002) describes harm reduction as:

> Policies and programs which attempt primarily to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of mood-altering substances to individual drug users, their families and communities, without requiring decrease in drug use.

Harm reduction is, in essence, the act of reducing the risks of any behaviour to create better outcomes for individuals and communities alike. In a substance use context, harm reduction can be practices like drug testing kits, supervised injection sites or carrying a naloxone kit.

Healthlink BC's Understanding Harm Reduction: Substance Use (2020) expands on this idea:

> Harm reduction is a public health approach that aims to reduce harms related to substance use. Harm reduction includes many options and approaches. It may include abstinence, or not using substances at all. Stopping all substance use isn't required before receiving care. It meets people wherever they are in their substance use journey. Evidence shows that harm reduction does not increase or encourage substance use.

Harm reduction strategies and services can lessen the consequences associated with substance use. The consequences include social, physical, emotional and/or spiritual concerns. It may include access to safer sex and safer substance use supplies and/or take home naloxone. It also involves outreach and support programs and referrals to health and support services. Harm reduction helps ensure services are non-judgmental and available to all.

Harm reduction treats people with respect. It helps people connect with others and develop healthy relationships. It involves working directly with people and their communities. The service helps individuals; families and friends learn harm reduction skills. People can learn about the resources and supports in their communities.

Harm Reduction Approaches

Between January 1 and June 30, 2020, 728 people died in B.C. from drug overdoses. B.C. has been in a state of public health emergency for nearly five years now, and overdose numbers continue to rise.

Dying from overdose is preventable. Harm reduction aims to meet people where they're at, promoting safety and support that's free from judgement.

The foundation of harm reduction is that there's never been a drug-free society. Strategies that reduce the potential harm that can come from drug use ask that we suspend any judgement around drug use and work instead to reduce its impacts.

Harm reduction can involve many different approaches and supports. These supports can include needle distribution, safe disposal, supervised consumption services (SCS) and overdose prevention sites (OPS), medication-assisted treatment, safer supply and overdose treatments like naloxone.

There's no one approach. What works for some may not work for others. The list above includes just some of the ways harm reduction is manifested in services. In fact, it's important to note that harm reduction is not a set of services but rather an underlying philosophy of care that belongs in every care setting.

Talking about this important topic, and sharing stories can reduce stigma and save lives; we know the stigma of substance use can kill. Check with your campus supervisor to learn your campus's approach to harm reduction. Ask for clarification regarding what your involvement in harm reduction is as a peer support worker.

The Principles of Harm Reduction

(Adapted from Harm Reduction: A British Columbia Community Guide)

Realistic Approach

Harm reduction takes a realistic view of substance use. As we've mentioned, harm reduction accepts the fact that the non-medical use of mood altering or psychoactive substances happens almost worldwide. Harm reduction therefore acknowledges that, although there are risks, substance use also gives the person who uses benefits that have to be taken into account. Harm reduction also recognizes that drug use is complex and includes a range of behaviours from chronic dependence to abstinence. There are also different degrees of harm to individuals and communities.

Human Rights

Personal choice, self-management and taking responsibility are key components of harm reduction. It respects the rights and basic dignity of people who use substances and accepts their decision, without judgement. **There's no move to either support or condemn substance use** – 'it is what it is'. Harm reduction supports informed decision making when it comes to active drug use and recognizes an individual's right to freedom of choice and self-determination – a core value we continue to explore in this work.

Focus on Harms

As the name suggests, harm reduction places emphasis on the harms of substance use over how much the person uses or the fact of their substance use. Priority is given to decreasing any negative consequences of substance use – both to the person who uses and others – rather than attempting to decrease the substance use itself. While harm reduction encourages safer practices and patterns of substance use, it also doesn't exclude a longer term goal of abstinence. In this way, harm reduction complements the abstinence model of addiction treatment.

Maximize Intervening Options

Harm reduction acknowledges that people who use substances can benefit from a variety of approaches and treatments; there's no "right way" to do it, no single treatment or one type of prevention option that works across the board. People are kept safe and alive when there is easy, early access to a range of interventions and the ability to choose. Another key in the co-creation

of effective harm reduction strategies is involvement of both individuals and communities impacted by substance use.

Priority of Immediate Goals

Harm reduction starts with where a person is at in their substance use, with a focus on their most immediate concerns or needs as the starting point. Harm reduction then establishes achievable goals or steps that, taken one at a time and gradually built on, can lead to a fuller, healthier life for people who use substances.

Involvement of People who use Drugs

Harm reduction places people who use substances at the centre of treatment and all related approaches. It recognizes both their freedom and their ability to make their own choices. They're acknowledged as the best source of information about their own drug use, and the focus is on empowering them to work with service providers to determine what may work best in terms of interventions to reduce harm.

A Peer Support Approach to Supporting Students Who Use Substances

As a campus peer support staff or volunteer, it's important to know the basic principles of harm reduction, as covered in this section. It is also important to be aware of what resources are available on campus for students who use substances.

Check out what your program and campus approach is to supporting students who use substances. Talk to your supervisor about what you need to know specifically, and if your program has any specific policies that you need to follow.

The risk of someone dying from a drug overdose has increased because of BC's fentanyl crisis, and unsafe supply issue. Using alone can be very dangerous.

Be clear on specific things you can do to support someone to use in a safe way.

- Get a Naloxone kit for yourself, and learn how to use it
- Know where people can access Naloxone kits, and support the distribution of kits (pharmacies offer them free)
- Share resources about never using alone, as using alone increases someone's chance for an overdose
- Be aware of the Lifeguard app, and encourage students who use drugs to use the app
  - As reported by Global News (2020), Lifeguard is an app that is activated by the user before they take their dose of drugs. After 50 seconds the app will sound an alarm. If the user doesn't hit a button to stop the alarm, indicating they are fine, the alarm grows louder. After 75 seconds a text-to-voice call will go straight to 911, alerting emergency medical dispatchers of a potential overdose.
- Be aware of the support your campus provides for people who drink excessive amounts of alcohol

For further reference, check out the student website Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP). The BC Chapter is located at UBC.

> CSSDP is "a grassroots network of youth and students who are concerned about the negative impact our drug policies have on individuals and communities. We consider drug use a health and human rights issue rather than a criminal-legal issue. We advocate for evidence-based responses to reduce and prevent harms associated with drug use and drug criminalization."

The Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous Option

Although harm reduction is evidence-based, and is the principle recommended by most governmental and campus organizations, some people find personal success using an abstinence approach to substance use. Many people appreciate the peer connection and support that the Alcoholics Anonymous or similar 12-step models provide.

Whatever your thoughts are about abstinence, if someone you are working with prefers that approach, it's important to support them with it. Be aware of any local meetings that they can attend, or if there are any meetings happening right on campus that students can attend.

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Purpose of Module

As a society we can often have a simplistic view of health. However, we know that many complex social factors have a significant impact on a person's overall wellness. We are all impacted by social determinants of health in one way or another.

The Government of Canada has listed the following twelve factors as key Social Determinants of Health:

1. Income and social status
2. Employment and working conditions
3. Education and Literacy
4. Childhood experiences
5. Physical environments
6. Social supports and coping skills
7. Healthy behaviours
8. Access to health services
9. Biology and genetic endowment
10. Gender
11. Culture
12. Race/Racism

Understanding the social determinants of health will equip you to better understand and have empathy for others both in your work on campus and in your future endeavours. Knowing this will also serve as a guide in advocacy efforts.

In this module, we will dig into the many layers that can affect someone's access to healthcare and well-being. In our society we have many inequities that affect individuals and people groups in various ways. When people have privilege and don't encounter barriers in a certain area, they often aren't even able to see inequity.

1. You will be able to recognize and recall the Government of Canada's identified 12 Social Determinants of Health.
2. You will be able to explain how the complex social factors, including but not limited to economic status, social status, culture and gender affect health outcomes and health disparity.
3. You will be able to demonstrate awareness of how these determinants of health create inequalities in our communities.
4. You will explore and compile effective local strategies that are working towards improving systems and creating equity for people.

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. *If you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.*

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

Life Application Story

Heather, a peer support worker, has just started supporting her new peer, Melissa. Melissa is studying part-time because she has to work twenty hours a week to make ends meet. Most of her income goes towards groceries, and she doesn't always have enough left over for all the textbooks she needs for her program.

Heather and Melissa are both studying film, and for one of their classes they had to take photographs to experiment with shadow and light. During one of their meetups, they decide to take photographs together of interesting architecture around campus. Heather showed up with her new expensive DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) camera, while Melissa took photos on her five year old phone. As they walked through campus taking photographs in the changing light, Melissa described her frustration about feeling like she wasn't doing well in her classes, and how her mental health was also suffering.

"I understand completely what that's like," Heather said. "I really struggled with my courses in the first semester and was constantly feeling down on myself. I ended up hiring a tutor which really helped."

"Yeah. That's cool you were able to improve. I feel like I should have gotten my life together by now."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get there too. What do you feel you want to change?"

Melissa talked about wanting to live a healthier lifestyle.

"That's a good place to start," said Heather. "I've really been enjoying learning how to cook healthy meals lately. And if you want, I can give you the name of my yoga studio."

"That's okay," said Melissa. "One of the big problems is that I can't focus enough on school because my serving job is really stressful, and I just feel so tired after a shift. I don't even have the energy to cook or do anything else."

"Yeah that sounds tough. Can you ask for fewer shifts?"

"Not really," said Melissa.

Later, they looked at one another's photos. Melissa was impressed by how professional Heather's photos looked, compared to the ones she had taken on her old phone. "I wish I was as good as you are."

"Well, the nice camera sure helps," laughed Heather.

As they continued to meet up, Melissa shared a bit more about her circumstances. She wanted to focus on school full time but didn't have the money, and her parents were in no position to help her out financially. While she wanted to do more to support her mental and physical health, she didn't have the money to buy a lot of fresh produce or to pay for yoga classes or tutoring. She had also experienced a great deal of racism within the mental health system and didn't always feel safe reaching out for help.

Heather realized that despite having similar struggles, she didn't really have any understanding of what Melissa's unique struggles were like because of her own privilege. Her parents had always been able to help her out financially through school. Since she was white and part of the dominant culture, she hadn't experienced racism in the mental health system and felt relatively comfortable advocating for what she needed. She also had the resources to make healthy lifestyle choices and do things to support her wellbeing that Melissa wasn't able to afford. The next time they met, Heather didn't try to over-relate. She had a new respect for Melissa's resilience and ability to cope in difficult circumstances. She offered to look up resources and organizations that delivered fresh produce to people with low-income. Once they had developed greater trust, Melissa asked Heather if she would help her sign up for the free counselling offered at the University, as she felt overwhelmed by the process. Heather agreed, realizing she was there to support Melissa as her own advocate rather than advocating for her.

Heather realized that by trying to make her and Melissa's experiences the same, she was ignoring the intersectional systemic barriers that Melissa faces on a regular basis. Heather had no personal experience with those barriers. She was finally able to see her own privilege more clearly and choose to be humbler and more sensitive.

Once Heather began to realize this, her relationship with Melissa was able to grow and deepen.

Overview of all 12 Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)

These determinants come directly from the Government of Canada.

1. Income and Social Status

The higher a person's income and social status, the better their health will be.

The article *Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts*, (Mikkonen and Raphael, 2010. Pg. 12) states the following about income:

> Income is perhaps the most important social determinant of health. Level of income shapes overall living conditions, affects psychological functioning, and influences health-related behaviours such as quality of diet, extent of physical activity, tobacco use, and excessive alcohol use. In Canada, income determines the quality of other social determinants of health such as food security, housing, and other basic prerequisites of health. (2010)

Have you noticed this connection to income, social status and health in your life, or the lives of people close to you? How did it make you feel?

2. Employment and Working Conditions

People who are unemployed or underemployed are less likely to experience consistently good health. Also, those who work in environments that are unsafe have additional barriers to health. These situations affect us both mentally and physically.

Also from the article *Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts*, (Mikkonen and Raphael, 2010. Pg. 17):

> Employment provides income, a sense of identity and helps to structure day-to-day life. Unemployment frequently leads to material and social deprivation, psychological stress, and the adoption of health-threatening coping behaviours. Lack of employment is associated with physical and mental health problems that include depression, anxiety and increased suicide rates. (2010)

3. Education and Literacy

People who have a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to have post-secondary educational opportunities, and be able to earn degrees and certifications, which increases their determinants of health.

The Government of Canada website article *Social and Economic Factors that Influence Our Health and Contribute to Health Inequalities* states the following about education:

> Generally, being well-educated equates to a better job, higher income, greater health literacy, a wider understanding of the implications of unhealthy behaviour and an increased ability to navigate the healthcare system – all of which lead to better health. The data in Chapter 3 indicate that Canadians with lower levels of education often experience poorer health outcomes, including reduced life expectancy and higher rates of infant mortality. (n.d.)

4. Childhood Experiences

Childhood development sets people on a path towards good health or poor health, enhanced or decreased well-being. Consider the Adverse Childhood Experiences study conducted by the US Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente. The study surveyed 17,000 people and found that those who have adverse childhood experiences are at a greater risk for health issues in adulthood. (*It's important to note that of the 17,000 people studied, 100% had jobs and health insurance, 74.8% were white, 75.2% had attended some college, or had a degree. The study focused on families of origin and didn't track adverse experiences caused by systems.*)

Within this context, we must understand and acknowledge that experiences of intergenerational trauma, discrimination and other factors are important social determinants of health.

What are some ways our childhood experience affect us as adults?

5. Physical Environments

Exposure to unsafe levels of contaminants through water, food, air and soil can negatively affect health. Housing, transportation and access to resources also have a huge impact on health.

Many studies show that unsafe or poor quality housing, homelessness and food insecurity all have direct impacts on our health. We know that some Canadian homes, especially on Indigenous reserves, lack clean water and basic sanitation – and many are overcrowded.

Overcrowding and a lack of clean water or sanitation can lead to the spread of illness and disease. Living in inadequate housing can also increase stress and impact people's ways of coping, including substance use. We also know that those who are experiencing homelessness have a much higher rate of a wide range of physical health problems and mental health diagnoses than the general population.

The report *Key Health Inequalities in Canada: A National Portrait* (Pan-Canadian Public Health Network, 2018, Pg. 341 & 342) states:

> Poor housing conditions, including issues such as mold, overcrowding, and lack of affordability, have been associated with a wide range of health conditions such as respiratory and other infectious diseases, chronic diseases (e.g. asthma), injuries, inadequate nutrition, adverse childhood development, and poor mental health outcomes… The prevalence of housing below standards among Indigenous peoples in Canada was higher than among non-Indigenous people. First Nations people living off reserve had prevalence of housing below standards 1.5 (95% CI: 1.5–1.6) times that of non-Indigenous people.

What do you think are the drivers that lead someone to live in poor conditions?

What circumstances could be beyond their control that end up affecting their living conditions?

Do you think there are enough services to support people who live in inadequate housing conditions?

6. Social Supports and Coping Skills

High levels of support from family, friends, and communities are associated with better health outcomes. Community and belonging are recognized as being important determinants of health. When people have communities that are stable, diverse, safe, and cohesive, one's overall health is enhanced.

Practices that support disease prevention and promote self-care, including coping with adversity and developing self-reliance, all support people's overall health. However, it is important to recognize that personal life "choices" are hugely influenced by the socioeconomic environment; some people do not have options for engaging in these practices.

Do you feel like you have a strong support system? If so, how do they support you?

If not, is there anyone in your life right now who you'd like to work on building a stronger relationship with? What will you do to build that connection?

7. Healthy Behaviours

Our behaviours greatly affect our health. The resources available to us impact our access to options and will be drastically different for everyone. Some people who are negatively affected by many of the social determinants of health will have less resources available to them. This affects everything from food choices to leisure and activity options.

From the article *Social Determinants and Health Behaviors: Conceptual Frames and Empirical Advances* (Short & Mollborn, 2016):

> Health behaviors, sometimes called health-related behaviors, are actions taken by individuals that affect health or mortality. These actions may be intentional or unintentional, and can promote or detract from the health of the actor or others. Actions that can be classified as health behaviors are many; examples include smoking, substance use, diet, physical activity, sleep, risky sexual activities, health care seeking behaviors, and adherence to prescribed medical treatments. Health behaviors are frequently discussed as individual-level behaviors, but they can be measured and summarized for individuals, groups, or populations. Health behaviors are dynamic, varying over the lifespan, across cohorts, across settings, and over time. (2016)

8. Access to Health Services

Those who have access to health care services and have the funds to pay for services that are not free, will be healthier than those who can't access services.

Though we have universal healthcare in Canada, there are still disparities as many services, such as eyecare, dental care, some pharmaceuticals, and access to alternative health practitioners, are not covered.

For example, diabetes is a disease that comes with a high price tag for ongoing care. Medications, pumps, and test strips are very expensive. People who can't afford these medications and supplies will tend not to keep tight control of their blood sugars, which can have a serious impact on their physical and mental health.

Have you ever been in a position where you haven't been able to access healthcare services? If so, how did that feel?

9. Biology and Genetic Endowment

Genetic endowment can predispose people to particular diseases or health problems.

The HealthyPeople.gov website article Determinants of Health (n.d.) states,

> Some biological and genetic factors affect specific populations more than others. For example, older adults are biologically prone to being in poorer health than adolescents due to the physical and cognitive effects of aging.

> Sickle cell disease is a common example of a genetic determinant of health. Sickle cell is a condition that people inherit when both parents carry the gene for sickle cell. The gene is most common in people with ancestors from West African countries, Mediterranean countries, South or Central American countries, Caribbean islands, India, and Saudi Arabia.

10. Gender

Society tends to link different personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, and levels of power and influence to gender. These societal norms have a big impact on one's health in the way the health care system offers treatment.

From Chapter 2 of *The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2012 – Sex, gender and public health*:

> Socio-economic factors can contribute to inequalities in health outcomes not only between women and men, but among and between different groups of women and men. These factors can influence opportunities for good health and well-being

Consider gender outside of the binary confines of male and female. Life can be increasingly complex for those who are outside of traditional Western gender norms. Discrimination and prejudice are major issues that affect one's overall health for those who are Two-Spirit, transgender, and non-binary.

Have you ever noticed your own gender affecting your health outcomes? Why or why not?

11. Culture

People who identify with cultures outside of the dominant culture of Canada can feel marginalized. They often face stigmatization and are not able to receive culturally appropriate services. This important topic is covered extensively in the Cultural Humility module.

In the Canadian Public Health Association article, *Racism and Public Health* (2018):

> Canada remains a nation where a person's colour, religion, culture or ethnic origin* are

determinants of health that result in inequities in social inclusion, economic outcomes, personal health, and access to and quality of health and social services. These effects are especially evident for racialized and Indigenous peoples as well as those at the lower end of the social gradient and those who are incarcerated (populations that are also disproportionately composed of racialized and Indigenous people). Complicating this scenario are government and non-governmental systems that impose barriers on those in need which limits their ability to obtain the services and benefits that are easily available to most Canadians. Steps must be taken to eliminate these systemic barriers. (2018)

What do you think is missing from the list above?

Now take some time to consider the following:

- Indigenous culture, and Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- Disability and the UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Food Insecurity
- Homelessness
- Substance use issues

Decolonization: Since Canada's dominant society reflects a Eurocentric attitude, it is essential that we dig deeper into these SDOH to understand and decrease discrimination. As you consider these social determinants, notice how colonization continues to inform every area of society and how we might work to make change.

Equity vs. Equality

"Equality focuses on creating the same starting line for everyone. Equity has the goal of providing everyone with the full range of opportunities and benefits – the same finish line." ~YWCA Calgary

It's important to distinguish between equity and equality because these two concepts are different. For the purpose of this section, we are looking at equality and equity from a systemic approach.

Equality is about sharing things equally between all people no matter what their circumstances. **Equity** realizes that people differ in their resources, abilities, barriers, and experiences, and adjusts for those differences.

Consider that you are serving a lasagna out to a group of people.

- **Equality** means that every person gets the same size piece of lasagna, no matter their situation
- **Equity** means that the size of the lasagna piece will vary depending on the person: a child might get a smaller piece, someone who has just eaten might get a little morsel, someone who hasn't eaten in a day might get an extra-large piece.

With **equality** it's about equal distribution of the lasagna amongst all people–everyone gets the same sized piece. With **equity,** the goal is that everyone gets nourished and alleviates hunger. This means that some people might get more or less lasagna depending on their situation. Equity also avoids the issue of some people eating so much that they need an antacid.

Equity within systems that provide support services means taking into account that many people have suffered oppression and injustice and have experienced multiple barriers. It also recognizes other people have privilege. Equity means that those who have less will get more to make up for past inequalities, as those inequalities eventually create significant barriers. The goal of equity is that we all eventually succeed at the same level.

Equality – treating everyone the same – sounds wonderful in theory. But in practice, when we treat people equally rather than based on their unique situation and need, we ignore the complex barriers that many people face. This includes the impact their experiences, social status and background can have on their access to resources. If we ignore these barriers, then we're inadvertently reinforcing privilege and feeding into the inequities they experience.

Equity recognizes that not everyone is coming from the same "starting line," that many face

numerous obstacles in their path while others face few, and tries to provide each person access to the same "finish line."

The research paper entitled, *Social Determinants of Mental Health: Where We Are and Where We Need to Go* (Alegria, NeMoyer, Falgus, Wang, Alvarez, 2019), states the following:

> Social determinants frameworks build upon the concept of the "social gradient"—that individuals with lower social status have greater health risks and lower life expectancy than those with higher status, and that the impact of social position can accumulate over time. Observed differences in social determinants are thought to develop from unequal distribution of resources; thus, they can be reduced through targeted social and economic policies and programs.

For Reflection

- What are some barriers that impact equal access to resources, or support?
- In what ways do you see inequity show up in your community or campus?

Poverty, Homelessness & Food Insecurity

At its simplest, poverty is a lack of sufficient financial resources to meet basic needs. Many factors shape how we understand poverty and what poverty looks like within a society. We know that a socioeconomic issue like poverty can affect many things in our lives, including:

a. Housing and housing stability
b. Access to food, and food insecurity
c. Education
d. Access to non-essential health care (dental & medication)
e. Childcare
f. Work opportunities

While their impact is huge and pervasive, wealth and poverty aren't the only social determinants of health. Many other factors can affect our overall health.

A Brief Scenario

Andy's Story

Andy's family is low income, living in a poor neighbourhood in an old, damp two-bedroom apartment. Andy and their parents often have extended family members stay with them. Their mom works multiple jobs and long hours, and their dad has several health issues that mean he's receiving social assistance.

Recently, Andy's been having difficulty breathing and experiencing coughing fits that last most of the night, disrupting their sleep and leaving them tired and distracted at school and unable to work at their part-time job. When their mom is able to go with Andy to the walk-in clinic, they have to wait hours to see a doctor and are then referred to a different clinic for tests. It takes another couple of months for them to get a proper diagnosis of moderate to severe asthma. One of the numerous doctors they see tells Andy they need to avoid mold as this can trigger asthma; the doctor also recommends they change their diet.

It's easy to see how several factors, including their housing situation – a damp apartment likely with mold throughout – have impacted Andy's health and will make it very challenging to manage or improve their health.

What feelings come up for you when you reflect on Andy and their family's experience with inadequate housing?

Housing

Many studies show that poor quality or unsafe housing, homelessness and food insecurity all have direct impacts on our health. We know that some Canadian homes, especially on Indigenous reserves, lack clean water and basic sanitation – and many are overcrowded.

We also know that those who are experiencing homelessness have a much higher rate of a wide range of physical health problems and mental health diagnoses than the general population.

"Poor housing conditions, including issues such as mould, overcrowding, and lack of affordability, have been associated with a wide range of health conditions, such as respiratory and other infectious diseases, chronic diseases (example, asthma), injuries, inadequate nutrition, adverse childhood development, and poor mental health outcomes"
~Key Health Inequalities Report

More and more, studies show that children who grow up in food insecure households are more likely to experience behavioural, emotional and academic problems than those who live in food secure homes. A poor diet (which is more common when people lack income and are food insecure) is linked to higher rates of chronic diseases and challenges in managing these diseases as well. Very often, mothers try to protect their children from the nutritional impact of food insecurity by cutting back their own food intake, which in turn impacts the mothers' health.

We are currently living with a housing crisis in B.C., driven by a lack of affordable accommodation, a high and increasing cost of living, low social assistance income, an increase in part-time and insecure employment and other factors that relate to government policy. Its ongoing impact on the health of individuals is real and ongoing.

Have you or anyone close to you, been affected by the housing crisis in BC?

Inequities in Mental Health

Major mental health inequities exist in Canada and globally. We know that mental health is a big part of our overall health that is directly impacted by social determinants. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has reported that low self-rated mental health (meaning how people view or rate their own mental health versus an official mental health diagnosis) is more common among those with the lowest income, those with lower levels of education and those with unskilled or semi-skilled occupations.

Low self-rated mental health is also reported by people who identify as bisexual or gay/lesbian compared with those who identify as heterosexual. Non-heterosexuality is also associated with higher rates of suicidal thoughts and acts, as well as self-harm. This is directly linked to stigma and discrimination.

"Factors associated with elevated rates of LGBT youth suicidality risk include homophobic and transphobic abuse, social isolation, early identification of sexual or gender diversity, conflict with family or peers about sexual or gender identity, inability to disclose sexual or gender identity, in addition to common mental health problems."
~McDermott, Hughes and Rawlings

Rates of hospitalization for those who are living with a mental health diagnosis are also directly linked to the social determinants of health. Mental health-related hospitalization rates go up with each 'step down' in a neighbourhood's income, education levels and other material and social deprivations.

Have you, or someone you know, experienced a mental health issue and had trouble accessing services? Why do you think that is?

If not, what supports were used? Are these resources available for everyone?

Disability

"Too often disability is seen in medical rather than societal terms. While disability is clearly related to physical and mental functioning, the primary issue is whether society is willing to provide persons with disabilities with the supports and opportunities necessary to participate in Canadian life." ~Raphael et al.

What we mean when we say disability:

> "Disability refers to the interaction between individuals with a health condition (e.g. cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression) and personal and environmental factors (e.g. negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social supports)." – World Health Organization (WHO)

People with disabilities – whether physical, mental, emotional or a combination thereof – face many challenges and barriers and are often left marginalized and vulnerable. Having a disability can lead to challenges in finding housing, receiving an education, gaining skills and long-term employment. It can also lead to many other factors that impact overall health outcomes. People with disabilities who do find employment tend to get paid much less than those without disabilities. Many also report that they have challenges in accessing any kind of workplace accommodation for their disability. This is discouraging, disheartening and discriminatory.

By the numbers:

- Over 22 percent of Canadians report having a disability
- Canadian women are found to have a higher rate of disability at 24 percent vs. 20 percent for men
- The rate of unemployment is 24 percent for individuals with mild disabilities and 69 percent for those with very severe disabilities

"Article 25 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) reinforces the right of persons with disability to attain the highest standard of healthcare, without discrimination. However, the reality is that few countries provide adequate quality services for people with disability." – WHO

It's important that you are aware of the services within your campus for students who have disabilities of any kind. Campuses today have many supports for students who are neurodivergent or have a disability. You may be in a position to point someone in the direction of a service that can make a huge difference in their lives.

In this work we must check our own judgments and biases. We might find ourselves advocating for people again purveying attitudes of ableism.

Ableism is discrimination of in favour of able-bodied people.

Off the top of your head, what resources and accommodations are available on your campus for people who need them?

LGBTQ2+

Many people who are LGBTQ2+ experience discrimination and stigma. Policies and governance are slowly changing, but many big policy changes have only begun in the last few decades. As a result, many people experience an intersectionality of discrimination that affects their health and wellness. Some still have to fight to have their basic rights met. Before we examine some of the challenges that LGBTQ2+ face in relation to health outcomes, it's helpful to define some terms.

Here Are Some Terms Defined:

Assigned sex refers to the biological characteristics used to classify people into the categories of male, female, or intersex. It refers to the physical elements of our bodies, including features like genetics, hormones and internal and external sexual anatomy, and is often assigned at birth. Being intersex means that someone has natural variations in their physical sex development, which is different from being trans (related to gender identity).

Gender expression is the way someone expresses their gender to the outside world. This shows up in behaviour, clothing style, hairstyle and sometimes through pronouns and name, etc.

Gender identity is a person's internal and individual sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or something entirely different (as described below). A person's gender identity may also be affected by social, emotional, cultural, spiritual elements of their life. Examples of gender identities include:

- **transgender** or **trans**: when someone's gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth
- **non-binary**: when someone's gender identity exists beyond, between, or outside of "man or woman." Some people may use terms like gender non-conforming, genderfluid, genderqueer, agender, bigender, pangender, and many other terms
  Remember, there is no one way to "look trans" or "look non-binary" – trans and non-binary people can express their gender in a wide variety of ways, and may or may not seek gender-affirming medical or surgical care.
- **cisgender** or **cis** is when someone's gender identity aligns with their assigned sex; not trans. Cis people also express their gender in a wide variety of ways.

Sexual orientation refers to who someone is attracted to sexually, romantically, and/or emotionally. Examples of sexual orientations are: queer, asexual, bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, gay, and heterosexual/straight, among others.

Two-Spirit: Pre-contact, many Indigenous communities acknowledged more than two genders. Through the residential school system and other colonial practices and institutions (e.g. medicine, language, law, economics, religion, government, etc.) there was an attempted erasure of these genders and of the language that described them, and an enforcement of a Western European patriarchal gender binary. Today, Two-Spirit is a term used by some Indigenous people and communities that can encompass cultural, spiritual, sexual, and gender identities. Often, being Two-Spirit is connected to specific roles and responsibilities within a community. While some Indigenous people who hold diverse sexual and gender identities consider themselves Two-Spirit, others may have terms in their own traditional languages, or identify themselves as LGBTQ+ and Indigenous, Indigiqueer, or use multiple terms.

Remember too that some people choose not to label themselves at all, and it is important that we respect that

Pronouns

We want to be respectful of each individual's identity, and part of that means asking them for their pronouns (example, she/her, they/them, he/him, etc.). Using pronouns we aren't used to using will require much intentionality and practice, but just like learning a new language, when you put in the time and energy, it will become second nature and will begin to flow more naturally for you.

When you mess up someone's pronoun, simply correct yourself and move on. If you make a big deal of the mix-up by over-apologizing, it centers you. When you center yourself in situations like these, you could be unintentionally asking for emotional support from the person to whom you are speaking.

LGBTQ2+, Social Determinants & Health Outcomes

Many healthcare processes and policies can be inherently discriminatory to LGBTQ2+ folks – even if unintentionally. For example, many medical forms don't include space for a full range of gender identity questions or sexual orientation questions, which impacts not just the level of care a person may receive but also the types of services made available to them.

Healthcare providers are also commonly not trained in gender affirming care or the specific health issues faced by LGBTQ2+ people, and this can be more of an issue in remote or rural communities. The majority of providers are also often unaware of issues faced by LGBTQ2+ populations beyond health issues; for example, someone who is trans may be unable to obtain identity documents that list their correct gender and name (and instead only list sex assigned at birth and legal name). Over and over, this places the burden on the service user rather than the

care provider as they have to explain their gender identity, sexual orientation, name differences, pronouns and more.

"41% of LGBQ people and 75% of transgender people report needing to educate their health care providers on LGBTQ-specific health needs." ~McAfee, 2019

What Does This Mean for Us as Peer Support Workers?

We can offer our emotional support, encouragement and empathy, and we can challenge discrimination against LGBTQ2+ folks whenever we encounter it. Our peer support work offers a vital way to reduce the common feelings of isolation and rejection amongst LGBTQ2+ service users and support them on their journey.

We can also share our lived experiences and what has helped or hasn't helped us in similar circumstances. We can use their pronouns and apologize when we get it wrong. And we can acknowledge the many barriers in place that may be affecting them.

Intersectionality
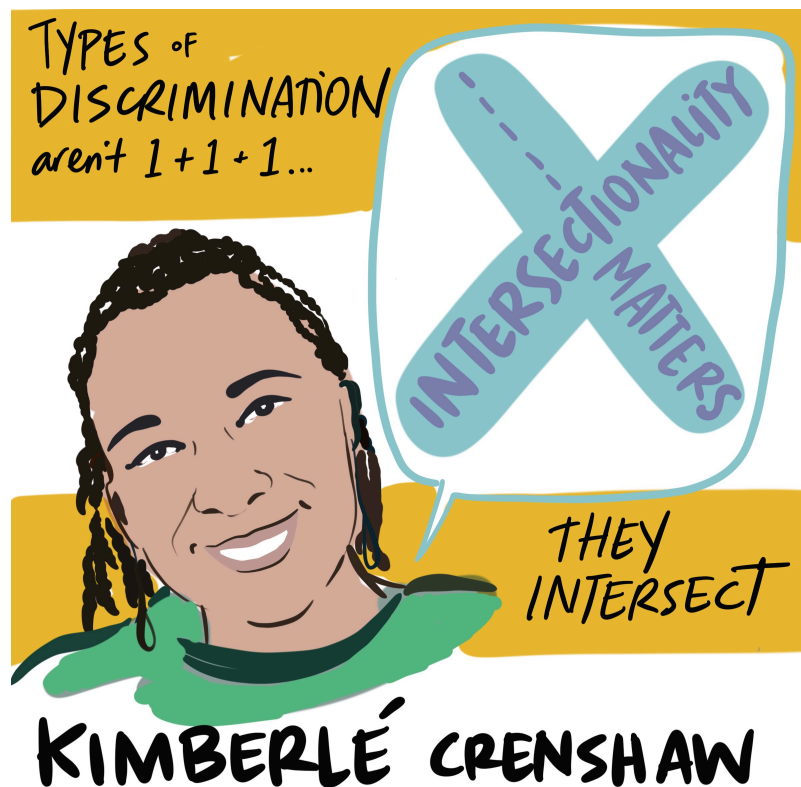
KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW

In 1989, lawyer and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote a legal paper entitled, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics.*

The term intersectionality came from that paper; the word's meaning can be difficult to define and has evolved over the years. Crenshaw wanted to explore how people's social identities overlap; in 1989, she coined the term to describe when a black woman faced overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination – to describe the intersection of gender, race, and class.

Today the term is used to illustrate overlapping and interconneting types of oppression and discrimination such as gender, race, age, class, socioeconomic status, physical or mental ability, gender or sexual identity, religion and ethnicity.

"An African American man is going to experience the world differently than an African American woman… Somebody who is LGBT is going to experience the world differently than somebody who's straight. Somebody who's LGBT and African American is going to experience the world differently

than somebody who's LGBT and Latina. It's sort of this commonsense notion that different categories of people have different kinds of experience." ~David French

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Systemic Racism

We must remember that laws and policies in colonized countries like Canada and the United States were established to benefit the colonizers.

Laws that were set up in the early years of Canada's formation were designed to give advantages to white colonizers and, consequently, disadvantages to BIPOC people. This shows up in our justice, healthcare, education, employment, social welfare systems. Though some issues are beginning to be addressed now, these unfair systems continue to harm people.

The conditions present when a system begins (an organization, a business, a relationship, a class/training, or anything that involves multiple people) deeply impact its future trajectory. Patterns, beliefs, and practices that are present at the conception of that system build on each other and, in turn, continually shape its future path. Most people involved in creating and perpetuating the system are likely unaware of this dynamic because it is all they have ever known –"*It just is what it is.*"

Making changes requires thoughtful, intentional, focussed deconstruction. So when we are busy – and busyness is a high value in our dominant culture – and especially when we aren't experiencing direct harm within a system, we don't often stop to question what is and isn't working within that system. As we've talked about in other parts of this training, we humans like predictability and certainty so we tend to avoid challenging the status quo unless we really need to. Often we don't even notice the status quo needs changing until we are personally negatively affected by a system. One way colonization affects us today is that we get stuck in our little individualized silos, which makes it very easy to barely notice what life is like for someone who has different challenges than we do.

Shifting broken systems is really difficult because there is no one person or entity that can change all of them. Systems are complex and multilayered. All participants in a system (including us) play a small role in sustaining them. Systems continually impact one another. For example, consider the various ways the foster care system, the education system, the judicial system and the healthcare system intersect and impact one another.

The scope of the problem doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to make changes. Though it can feel discouraging and hopeless when we start digging into these systemic issues, the only way to change them is for a strong majority of people to notice these harmful systems and begin to question and deconstruct them.

We must begin with ourselves. We must educate ourselves on systemic issues, address our own implicit biases and the ways in which we reinforce the harm within these systems. We can't know

everything about every harmful system, but what is so beautiful about working together as a collective is that you don't *have* to know everything. You can focus on what you are passionate about while listening and supporting the work of others who know more than you know about other systemic issues.

During the spring and summer of 2020, mass Black Lives Matter protests and marches began in the United States and spread around the world. One of the beautiful results of that movement is the awareness it raised and the growing intention to amplify the voices of those who have been historically overlooked. We can continue to be intentional about amplifying those powerful voices.

Small changes add up, even if we think they don't. We must be patient and steadfast, and remember that there is a cumulative effect to these small shifts.

The University of British Columbia article *Systemic Racism: What it Looks Like In Canada and How To Fight It?* (2021) says:

> In a settler colonial state like Canada, systemic racism is deeply rooted in every system of this country. This means the systems put in place were designed to benefit white colonists while disadvantaging the Indigenous populations who had lived here prior to colonialism. This power dynamic continues to be upheld and reinforced in our society, extending its impact on new racialized citizens.
>
> According to a 2016 report from Statistics Canada, both Black women and men were less likely to obtain post-secondary education compared to women and men in the rest of the population in Vancouver, with a difference of about 10%. And the unemployment rate for the Black population was approximately one and a half times higher than that for [the] rest of the population. In terms of socioeconomic impact of COVID-19, around one-quarter of Indigenous people living in Canadian urban areas were in poverty, compared to 13% of non-Indigenous population in these areas. (2021)

About the Indian Act

The Indian Act was first established in Canada in 1876 and is still law today. There were amendments made to the law in 1951 and 1985.

The Indian Act:

- Created reserves.
- Mandated residential schools: John A McDonald, Canada's first Prime Minister said that the objective of residential schools was to "take the Indian out of the child." "Indianness" was not

to be tolerated, rather it was to be eliminated.

- Forcibly stripped Indigenous people of their names, replacing them with new western names.
- Restricted First Nations from leaving their reserve without permission from a government official. There was an officer at the entrance to each reserve, and people had to have the proper paperwork to be able to leave and come back to the reserve.
- Authorized unused portions of the reserve to be taken and leased out by the government to colonizers.
- Forbade First Nations peoples from forming government, or even voting.
- Forbade First Nations peoples from speaking their language, practicing their religion, or any form of culture–from potlatches to wearing traditional regalia.

As we all know, land in Canada was stolen from our Indigenous people. As mentioned above , early laws were set up explicitly to benefit the colonizers. Indigenous lives were dehumanized and the laws were set up not to support their well-being but to undermine it. The DNA for how Canada treats its First Nations, Métis and Inuit people was set when the Indian Act became law.

Though the Act has been revised, it set the tone for how Indigenous people are still treated today.

Is any of this new information for you?

The last residential school closed in 1996. How does that make you feel?

The Sixties Scoop

We see the ongoing mistreatment and dehumanization of Canada's Indigenous people throughout our history. The Canadian Encyclopedia article entitled *Sixties Scoop* (Sinclair, Dainard, Gallant, 2020), explains this particular era in Canada history:

> From the 1960s to the 1980s, provincial governments considered the removal of Indigenous children the fastest and easiest way of addressing Indigenous child welfare issues. In many cases, the child welfare system did not expect or require its social workers to have specific knowledge about, or training in, Indigenous child welfare. They also did not have to seek the consent of communities to "scoop" newborn and young children from their parents and place them into non-Indigenous homes. It was only until the Child, Family and Community Services Act in 1980 that social workers were required to notify band councils of a child's removal from the community. (2020)

Incarceration and BIPOC people

In December 2021, the CBC reported that "Indigenous people make up about 32 per cent of the

federal prison population, despite accounting for less than five per cent of the total population. Indigenous women, meanwhile, account for 48 per cent of the population in women's prisons."

In May 2021 The Toronto Star reported that, "nearly one out of every 15 young Black men in Ontario experienced jail time, compared to one out of about every 70 young white men, and incarcerated Black people were more likely to live in low-income neighbourhoods, a new study of hard to come by race-based inmate data shows."

Segregation of Black people in Canada

The Canadian Encyclopedia article *Racial Segregation of Black People in Canada* (Henry, 2021) shares many facts about segregation in Canada that aren't often spoken of today.

> The racial segregation of Black people in Canada was historically enforced through laws, court decisions and social norms....The segregation of Black people in Canada was justified for many years [after Abolition] by perpetuating ideas about racial inferiority that had been used to justify Black enslavement. Historically, practices of racial segregation differed across the country, often according to province or local community. (2021)

In Ontario and Nova Scotia, racial segregation of Black children in the education system was legislated. Though not legal in other provinces, racial segregation was encouraged.

The article entitled *Racial Segregation of Black People in Canada – Education* (2020) on The Aeolian website explores the issue of segregation in both elementary and post-secondary education.

> Queen's University (Kingston) banned Black students from admission into the medical program in 1918. Their "justification" was that racially intolerant local white residents would not want to have any physical contact with Black doctors. There was another influence pressuring the University as well: the American Medical Association (founded in 1846) that did not welcome Black Physicians until the late 1960s and wanted them expelled from American and Canadian schools. This anti-Black restriction was practiced at Queen's until 1965 and stayed as on book policy until 2018, while not being enforced. (2020)

As recently as the 1960's, Vancouver real estate land titles contained restrictive covenant clauses that prevented the sale or rental of property to people of African descent and other racialized groups. According to The Canadian Encyclopedia, there was a clause in Vancouver real estate deeds used between 1928 & 1965 that stated, "the Grantee or his heirs, administrators, executor, successors or assigns will not sell to, agree to sell to, rent to, lease to, or permit or allow to

occupy, the said lands and premises, or any part thereof, any person of the Chinese, Japanese or other Asiatic race or to any Indian or Negro."

Black Lives Matter

In 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement began as a nonviolent grassroots protest against police brutality and racially motivated violence.

In the summer of 2020, we saw the movement gain more traction through social media, and it has brought greater awareness to the dominant culture of the layers of racism that black people continually have to deal with.

Many people who aren't personally affected by systemic racism believed that we were living in a post-racial society. Many white people felt that the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s along with desegregation had changed western culture for the better and essentially "fixed what was broken."

There was a popular belief that racism wasn't as much of a problem today as it was prior to desegregation. However, we are seeing now that those who are a part of the dominant culture are simply unaware of, or ignorant to, the effects of systemic racism not because the effects don't exist, but because they simply don't affect them directly.

Racism feels "quieter" to those who don't experience it on a daily basis. The Black Lives Matter movement has exposed the reality that systemic racism is far from over.

Unfortunately, these problems are not just in our past. These mistreatments continue to this day.

History does not just stay in the past. History impacts the present and the future; only when we actively unpack it and learn from it can we change course.

Additional Resources

To continue your work on being anti-racist and to learn more about systemic racism and related issues, we recommend checking out the following resources as a great starting point:

- 21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act: Helping Canadians Make Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples a Reality by Bob Joseph (based on an article he first wrote for the CBC)
- How to be Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi
- My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies by Resmaa Menekem

- Building a Foundation for Change: Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy 2019–2022

White Privilege

Peggy McIntosh's essay *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* was first published in 1988 and was one of the first pieces to break down white privilege into examples of recognizable, personal and tangible impacts. This is often a starting point for understanding what we mean by white privilege.

It's helpful to understand how white privilege leads to what can be called 'unearned advantages.' It's also important to acknowledge that white privilege goes beyond avoiding inconveniences. The reality is that white privilege exists because of systemic racism, colonialism and historic bias and has ongoing impacts on non-white people.

In that essay, McIntosh writes:

> As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage... I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (1989, Pg. 1)

The concept of white privilege doesn't mean that being white makes you immune to struggle, or that you haven't struggled or experienced barriers; it means that these struggles or barriers you experience have not been as a result of your race as is the case for BIPOC people.

Just like awareness of our worldview and biases is vital to our work in peer support, so is awareness of the ways race, systemic racism and white privilege inform our experience.

> *"White privilege is an absence of the consequences of racism. An absence of structural discrimination, an absence of your race being viewed as a problem first and foremost."*
> *~Reni Eddo-Lodge (author of Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race)*

> *"White privilege is about the word white, not rich. It's having advantage built into your life. It's not saying your life hasn't been hard; it's saying your skin color hasn't contributed to the difficulty in your life."~ Emmanuel Acho (author of Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Man)*

- What thoughts and feelings come up for you when you consider white privilege?
- What responsibilities do you need to take in your own life to address these inequities?

Stigma, Discrimination and Prejudice

Let's look at the differences between prejudice, discrimination and stigma:

Prejudice is a preconceived opinion of a people group that is not based on reason or actual experience. There is very little reflection or thought given to these sweeping judgements.

Discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people because of their race, religion, sex, sexuality, age, health status or other characteristic.

Example: "*I won't hire that person, because _____. I think they would be a difficult employee.*"

Stigma is when a large majority of people have strong feelings of disapproval toward a specific people group. Stigma is a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

(Stigma can show up in situations like when a woman passes a Black man on the street and unintentionally clutches her purse.)

Example: "*Apparently, she spent some time in a mental hospital. Her life must be really out of control.*"

On the Cambridge University Press website, the article *Prejudice, Stigma, Bias, Discrimination, and Health* (Paradies, Bastos, Priest, 2016) says,

> Prejudice, stigma, bias, and discrimination are all expressions of oppression, "a concept that describes a relationship between groups or categories of people in which a dominant group benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation, and injustice directed toward a subordinate group". While a myriad of typologies exist concerning definitions and manifestations of prejudice, stigma, bias, and discrimination...oppression is frequently conceptualized across three distinct, but interrelated, levels:
>
> 1. Internalized (or intrapersonal) prejudiced attitudes or beliefs, frequently based on notions of supposedly innate superiority/inferiority, which may be subscribed to either by members of dominant social groups or by subordinate ones;
> 2. Interpersonal discriminatory interactions between people, with varying degrees of frequency and intensity, including manifestations from racially motivated assault to verbal abuse, ostracism, and exclusion; and
> 3. Systemic or structural, which includes bias in societal institutions, laws, policies, and social practices. Of note, this level may be thought of as the one that sets the context

and increases or decreases the likelihood of the first two types of oppression outlined here.

So, **prejudice** is about unfair beliefs, **discrimination** is about unfair treatment, and **stigma** is like carrying a mark of shame created from sweeping unfair judgments, criticisms or even hatred.

All these phenomena are related to circumstances or qualities that are out of the affected person's control. They all involve thoughts, treatment and behaviours that are fundamentally unfair as they are based in lies and misconceptions.

Here are some areas where we tend to see discriminatory thoughts or behaviours arise:

- Race
- Culture
- Class
- Gender
- Age
- Disability
- Sexual Orientation
- Sexual identity
- Citizenship
- Appearance
- Weight
- Religion
- Employment
- Language
- Employment Activity
- Care and Parental Status
- Marital Status
- Pregnancy or Breastfeeding
- Political Belief or Activity

Have you ever experienced discrimination due to one of the factors listed above? What was that like?

Three Types of Stigma: Public, Internalized, and Stigma-by-Association

For the purpose of the following section we will focus specifically on stigma around mental health issues. However, as we identified above, stigma is experienced by many different people groups.

There are three ways stigma can show up: in the public, internally, and as a stigma-by-association. Let's explore all three.

Public Stigma

When looking at how stigma shows up in public, we ask "how does the public (the majority, or a large part, of society) perceive this people group?" Potentially because of media coverage, there may be a tendency to see people with mental illnesses as dangerous, violent, weak, and unpredictable. Consider movies you've seen that portray villains as having a mental illness...(*Joker*, *Psycho*)

With this stigmatized worldview of mental illness, people who struggle can be considered scary, dependent, burdensome and unable to make competent decisions. Sometimes they are even blamed for their illnesses.

This stigma can make people with mental illness feel excluded from social groups. Because of this stigma, people may isolate and miss out on needed social opportunities. These factors lead to poor self-worth and even worsening mental health. People may begin to fear seeking treatment because they don't want the label of being mentally ill

Public stigma can also cause discrimination and prejudice in housing, workplaces, and educational settings.

> *Can you think of ways the media has influenced this unhealthy worldview? Explain.*

Internalized or Self-Stigma

Self-stigma occurs when individuals internalize the beliefs and opinions of their dominant culture. As you can imagine, these beliefs can profoundly affect a person's self-image and feeling of worthiness. Self-stigma significantly impacts personal relationships, family, work and social life. Self-stigma can escalate depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and feelings of shame.

People who are stuck in a self-stigma loop often internalize self-blame, believing they are responsible for their illness. They may doubt they are deserving of care or that they have any power to change their situation. They can get stuck in a state of learned helplessness, because the stigma they experience keeps them from moving forward in their life. They may believe they are incompetent and a burden to society rather than productive, contributing members. As a result, people who are struggling with self-stigma may feel immobilized and unable to pursue basic goals like housing, education and employment.

Stigma-By-Association (SBA)

Friends and family members of those with mental illness may also experience the detrimental effects of public stigma on their wellbeing. SBA can have psychological effects similar to those experienced by people who have a diagnosis, including a tendency to isolate and avoid social interaction. A coping mechanism for people dealing with SBA may be to distance themselves from the loved one dealing with mental illness as a way of distancing from the stigma. Or it could involve withdrawing from social situations so that they don't have to answer difficult questions about their loved one. This distancing can lead to a breakdown in the family unit.

Family members are also often the caregivers. They may lack support themselves because they withhold information about their family member's diagnosis out of the fear of stigma. SBA can overpower a person's coping skills, especially when their concerns have not been taken seriously in the past.

How All of This Impacts Recovery

Stigma, prejudice and discrimination have a big impact on an individual's ability to recover.

Stigma often leads to exclusion and isolation. Prejudice and discrimination can often lead to poorer economic and interpersonal outcomes relative to the rest of the population. All the above negatively impacts an individual's sense of self-worth.

Is it any wonder people often fear disclosing their illness or seeking treatment?

Unfortunately, this secrecy also significantly affects health outcomes.

Social Justice, Advocacy & Moving Forward with Hope

"If you find it in your heart to care for somebody else, you will have succeeded."
~Maya Angelou

As you do this work, you will have the opportunity to examine and challenge biases you may have about any of the social determinants of health, as well as the inequities we've discussed in this module. You also have the opportunity to partner with your campus in advocating for systems change within the overall education system.

Depending on what your peer role looks like on campus, your work may include creating community connections and building spaces centered on belonging and inclusion.

There's a lot we can do to change the systems that we live within when we learn how to use our voices and speak up with those who are marginalized. It's also important to acknowledge our resilience and the capacity we all have to heal from the impacts of unjust systems, prejudice and stigma, as we work towards wholeness.

There is hope and a way forward. You and your campus can make a difference!

It is really hard to bear witness to so much pain and strife in the world. Our greatest challenge is to witness all these injustices, and yet not lose ourselves in the pain. We must remember to prioritize hope and make space for connection, laughter, and joy. We must not let anger for injustice consume our own humanity.

"We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."
~Martin Luther King Jr.

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms:
   Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

BUILDING PERSONAL RESILIENCE

Purpose of Module

An important aspect of this work is prioritizing our own self-nourishment. As a post-secondary student, you likely have many responsibilities on your plate. Between studying, volunteering, and working it can be easy to put one's own well-being on the back burner. However, if we don't give our own mental health the attention it deserves, we can find ourselves slipping into burnout. In this module we will talk about building resilience, creating wellness plans, and practicing self-compassion.

Learning Objectives

1. You will be able to recognize the importance of creating a self-nourishment plan to help manage stress.
2. You will be able to apply wellness principles as you create personal boundaries around work issues.
3. You will be able to assess your situation and create wellness plans to support yourself when struggling.
4. You will learn the concept of self-compassion and have tools to apply the practice in your life.

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. *If*

you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

Life Application Story

This personal account comes from Robyn Thomas, a peer support worker from Victoria, B.C.

"To me, building personal resilience is directly related to fostering self-compassion. When I struggled in the past, I would beat myself up for struggling. I would tell myself I should be stronger, I should get through this alone, I shouldn't feel this way. I was swimming in a lot of "shoulds and should-nots."

Self-care is a part of developing self-compassion, but it is also deeper than that. It's more than tools and strategies. It's redefining the narrative of what it means to struggle. To understand that going through a hard time is not failure, it is a chance to grow and evolve and find meaning. When I used to look at my story of illness and hospitalization, I saw failure, I felt shame. Now I look at my story and I feel compassion for the person who was in pain. I see her resilience and her strength, as well as her vulnerability. I understand that point in time as a struggle that led to deep personal transformation.

What helped me most was not people telling me what I should do. It was people who shared their own stories of struggle and hope, who admitted to not being perfect. It was the people who saw my wholeness rather than my perceived brokenness, and who trusted that I was going to make it through."

For Reflection

- In what ways can you relate to Robyn's feelings?
- What does self-compassion mean to you?
- Do you try to practice self-compassion? How does that look or feel for you?

Redefining Self-Care

With a Lens of Connection and Interconnection

For some people, the thought of self-care might feel self-indulgent. When we have assignments due and other responsibilities like clubs, athletics, work or volunteering, taking a break might seem optional.

If we constantly tax our bodies and minds without giving them the rest and rejuvenation they need, our bodies will be living in a perpetual stress-responsive state far too often. Over time, having these stress hormones pumping through our bodies will take a toll, showing up in emotional overwhelm, physical illness, or a mental health issue..

Choosing to work under the umbrella of peer support is a very fulfilling experience for most. However, like any role we take on, it is another demand on our time and energy. The relational nature of this work also means that it draws on not just our time or our physical energy, but our emotional energy as well.

When we get burned out, we just don't have much left to give to anyone else. That is why it is non-negotiable that when committing to peer support work – or any kind of interpersonal, relationship-based work – that we also make a commitment to take care of our own personal well-being.

Interconnection and Societal Change

When we look around at the state of the world, many of us may feel a sense of dread – or even despair. We may also feel a strong pull and motivation to try to do something about it. It's totally normal to fluctuate anywhere between those two poles many times throughout our lives, as it is very hard to not get discouraged.

Pacing ourselves is essential. Many people say that they get into this kind of work, because they want to impact the world in some way. That is a very honourable desire. As we embark on that journey, it's essential to remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint. The work you begin here in your post-secondary peer program will transfer with you as you move into new areas of your life.

Many people devote their entire lives to a cause, and it can take years to see it make an impact.

Impacting the world means that we need

A Global Lens

This is where big picture advocacy comes in, and the societal change we all long for. In the article Breaking the Chain: Healing Racial Trauma in the Body, activist, therapist and author Resmaa Menakem says that he predicts that it will take 9 generations to see a big change in systemic racism issues! Change happens slowly over time, but we need to be persistent and committed. Systems are big and complicated and changing them means we need to be dedicated, tenacious, and persistent. Clearly this is a long-term commitment.
We share this not to discourage you, but to encourage you to pace yourself when engaging in efforts for huge cultural shifts. Do your part, and take care of your own needs. It is OK to enjoy your life, even if others are suffering. You cannot alleviate all suffering. It's impossible. Please take pleasure in the little moments of joy in your life, while you do the important work of creating a better society.

A Community Lens

Wholeness, wellness, and societal change also involve a focus on smaller communities – your school, your workplace, your city or town, your family, your friend groups, and any subcultures you are involved in. At the community level, the focus is more about mutual support; support must go both ways. You can't give support away to others without receiving it back in some way. This is about give and take, the sharing of energy and resources. To experience wellness, it is

essential that we give to others, and it is equally essential that we learn to receive from others. Not only is Mutuality a core value of peer support, but it is also necessary for our own personal wellness, and the wellness of our communities. When we deny others the opportunity to support us, we are denying the human need for mutuality in those who want to support us.

A Lens that Supports Individual Well-Being

Building your own resilience is what this whole module is about. Well-being for yourselves includes attending to your needs, practicing self-compassion, and creating boundaries. It is essential that we find a way to support ourselves with kindness and compassion, and then create some concrete ways to put these things into practice. This module is the tip of the iceberg, but we hope it will encourage you to create your own wellness plan.

Global Change

What are the issues you are passionate about changing on a global level?

Have you established a sense of purpose or direction about one of those issues? If so, what are you committed to do to support change?

What will you do to create the endurance needed when tackling an issue this large?

Community Change

What things are you committed to being involved in at a community level?

What steps will you take to support this?

*Who are **your** supporters? Who will you lean on when you are struggling?*

What are some qualities you look for in a supporter?

Wellness for Yourself as an Individual

Complete the following:

- *These are the things that cause me stress:*
- *These are the tools I currently have to support myself:*
- *We all have areas we want to work on, and grow in. What are some opportunities for growth that you want to focus on in your own life? Some examples might be: clearer boundaries, more sleep, eating better, building a stronger support system, practicing mindfulness or self-compassion.*
- *I am committing to do the following, as a practice to support my well-being:*

From the First Nations Pedagogy website:

> Interconnection is a central core of First Nations, Inuit and Metis worldviews and ways of knowing. Some First Nations sum this up with the phrase "All my relations". This mindset reflects people who are aware that everything in the universe is connected. It also reinforces that everyone and everything has a purpose, is worthy of respect and caring, and has a place in the grand scheme of life.

Let's Look at Self-Care

What if we redefine the word self-care? The term "self-care" in pop culture has come to mean spa days, yoga, hiking, or drinking green smoothies. When we look at our self-care that way, we are really trivializing something that is essential to our well-being.

Instead of the current popular understanding of "self-care," let's redefine it this way: **Self-care means supporting our well-being with compassionate intention**. After all, caring for our well-being is much more than what we eat, and how we move our bodies (though those are important). Supporting our well-being includes doing some hard work around healing, feeling our feelings, sitting with discomfort, setting boundaries, taking personal responsibility, owning our mistakes, and offering ourselves grace and self-compassion in our own struggles and sufferings.

As mentioned throughout this curriculum, we believe in interconnection; through that lens, when each of us supports our own well-being, we understand that we are ultimately supporting the whole. So when we identify our own needs and create intention to meet them, we are supporting others in the process.

What is your preferred way to define or understand self-care?

What do you think your major needs are right now?

As we move through this module, it is our intention to give you a framework so you can continue to take care of your own needs and also give to others in your peer support role. If we are constantly giving and not filling up our own cup, we will get depleted. Not unlike a spending account–if we continually withdraw money without depositing any, eventually we will end up in overdraft.

Let's work together to prevent overdraft.

Defining the Term "Resilience"

Resiliency is a word that is used a lot in our work. A common definition of "resiliency" is the ability to spring back to shape after adversity.

The goal of this training is to support the growth of your personal resiliency AND give you the tools to be able to support others to be more resilient.

In the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry article *Rethinking Resilience from Indigenous Perspectives* (2011) the authors talk about the resiliency of nature.

> In psychology, resilience is commonly framed as an individual trait or process rather than emphasizing its systemic or ecological roots. Resilience has been associated with individual psychological characteristics including hardiness, flexibility, problem- solving ability, intelligence, sense of humour, and social skills. Although resilience tends to be framed as an individual characteristic, it may also have systemic, collective, or communal dimensions. At the level of family and community, resilience may reside in the durability of interpersonal relationships in the extended family and wider social networks of support. What is needed then are alternative frameworks that take into account the dynamic processes on many levels that may confer on the individual, communities, and whole peoples better prospects for survival and positive development. (Rethinking Resilience From Indigenous Perspectives, The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, Vol 56, No 2, February 2011)

Let's look to nature to support a deeper understanding of resiliency. When we think of adversity in nature, it tends to show up as a disturbance to the ecology, such as a fire, storm, flood or other extreme weather event. These events impact the whole ecology, not just one plant or tree.

Living things have a deep-seated need to flourish and thrive.

When impacted by adversity, our resiliency might not be about springing back to "normal" but about adapting and creating something new.

When we consider adversity in the forest, we look at the interconnection of all living things. Nothing in nature exists in isolation. Nature is dynamic, always changing and growing. Even after a devastating wildfire, nature adapts, heals, and regrows over time.

Resiliency looks more like this ability to adapt and change in the midst of adversity. For example, when a tree is damaged and loses a large branch, that branch doesn't grow back as it was. The bark seals, and sometimes a new branch is formed.

Consider the similarity of a tree's resiliency to our own emotional resiliency. When we experience extreme adversity, trauma, or loss in our own lives, we won't ever be exactly the same as we were before. Our resilience then is not attached to becoming what we were before, but it's about adapting and creating new ways to thrive and grow.

As with the diversity within a forest, it is important for us to consider the value and impact of our loved ones and communities on our adaptability. If we don't have a strong community, how can we begin to develop one?

Following adversity, we will heal and grow in new ways, but we will be forever changed. Different. Possibly wiser, and perhaps stronger and more able to face adversity in the future.

For Reflection

- How do you define resiliency?
- What are some examples of your own resiliency?
- How does community and connection show up in your resiliency? Write down some specific examples.
- Draw a picture of what resiliency in nature means to you

Self-Compassion - An Overview

In order to fully understand self-compassion, we must first look at compassion. Compassion is about seeing the suffering of others, feeling a deep concern, and harnessing the motivation to do something to alleviate that suffering.

Compassion always involves action of some kind.

Empathy is feeling with someone, or perspective taking.

Empathy and compassion are intertwined, but they are different. **Empathy is often the gateway to compassion**, and compassion is what motivates and moves us to take action to make a difference in other people's lives.

For Reflection

- What are your thoughts about compassion?
- How does compassion show up in your life?
- What suffering are you most motivated to work towards alleviating?

Many of us find it much easier to offer compassion to others than to extend it to ourselves. Yet there is much research that indicates those who practice self-compassion have a greater sense of well-being and resiliency, and stronger mental health.

What is Self-Compassion?

"A moment of self-compassion can change your entire day.

A string of such moments can change the course of your life."

~ Chris Germer, PhD (Author of The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion)

Self-compassion is about extending compassion to oneself in instances of suffering, perceived inadequacy, or failure. As humans we have the tendency to stuff or ignore our pain and

discomfort. We consciously or unconsciously think that stuffing our pain seems like a better option than dealing with it. However, we also know that unprocessed pain festers and grows. It can begin to impact our perceptions and the way we interact with the world. In essence ignoring the pain has the opposite effect of what we want. Alternatively when we treat ourselves with self-compassion, we create space to normalize and process the pain. We are better able to learn from the pain and move past it.

Let's look at this in terms of compassion for someone else. If I see the suffering of another, and in my busyness and haste I walk by without offering any kind of compassionate response. I have allowed the suffering to continue.

Likewise, if we do not pay attention to our own suffering, then we will not be able to offer ourselves self-compassion and we will continue to be in pain. Over time, a lack of self-compassion will increase our chances of experiencing depression, stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress.

Self-compassion means that we extend to ourselves as much kindness as we would offer our best friend, our children when they are suffering. It's about noticing when you are having a difficult time. Instead of being harsh and critical with yourself, telling yourself to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," acknowledge the pain of the situation and offer yourself kindness.

When we practice self-compassion we say,

"This hurts. I'm hurting right now." And then ask, "What can I do to support myself right now?"

If your best friend came to you upset and emotional about a problem they were facing, how would you respond to them?

Likely you would offer them a hug and some kind words. Now consider how you treat yourself when you are struggling. Are you apt to offer kind words, and some self-comfort? Or would you be quick to let your inner critic say nasty, mean things?

When we build a practice of self-compassion, we become aware when we are beating ourselves up, judging and criticizing ourselves. We learn to pay attention to it, and then very consciously shift from judgement to kindness. It's important to note that when we criticize and berate ourselves it activates the stress response in our bodies. We feel a similar effect emotionally as we would if someone else berates us.

Imagine that your favourite little person, under the age of 10, comes to you crying. They tell you that they failed a test today, and other children in the class teased them.

- How would you respond to your favourite little person?
- What if you failed something at school or work, and then got raked over the coals by a professor or supervisor? How would you treat yourself?
- Would you treat yourself differently than you would treat the little person in your life? Why?
- If it is hard to offer kindness to yourself, do you think it's possible to shift that response?

The practice of self-compassion encourages us to process difficult feelings. We all benefit when we receive tenderness and a gentle approach. We know that we need this from others, but the person we need tenderness from the most is ourselves.

Kristin Neff PhD is a leading researcher on the topic of self-compassion and author of the book *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself.* In her research, Dr. Neff describes self-compassion as having three components – Self-Kindness, Common Humanity & Mindfulness. Let's dig into them.

Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgement

If being hard on yourself was going to work, it would have worked by now.

Many of us have developed a habit of speaking unkindly to ourselves when we struggle or make mistakes. Sometimes we even have a sneaky – often unspoken – belief that being hard on ourselves will motivate us to change or improve. The opposite is actually true.

As we mentioned above, when we speak to ourselves unkindly, with judgmental and criticizing self-talk, we trigger our sympathetic nervous system. That means we are causing our own bodies to react by releasing stress hormones into our bodies. Rather than motivate us to change, this response actually causes us to stay stuck in our pain.

The truth about that habit of speaking unkindly – sometimes brutally so – to ourselves has to do with our "Inner Critic." We have all been on the receiving end of negative, critical comments. These critical comments are remembered and held by our subconscious, even if our conscious

mind forgets. These negative comments can show up in the form of our "Inner Critic," which is that tape that plays critical comments in your head when you mess up.

Anytime we mess up or something bad happens creates an opportunity for our Inner Critic to rage out on us. It's like an awful recording that we can't seem to delete.

For Reflection

- Do you have an Inner Critic?
- What kinds of messages does your Inner Critic give you?
- Where do you think some of these messages have come from?
- Have you discovered any effective ways to quiet your Inner Critic?

In order to shift power away from our Inner Critic or judge, we need to understand that the Inner Critic is all about self-protection.

We also need to understand that neuroplasticity is a real thing and that we have the power to change our brains! This is such good news.

Now, about self-protection: Have you ever noticed that on any given day, several positive things can happen for you, but if you experience one negative situation, or you hear a negative comment directed at you, that's the thing that sticks? The negative comment or experience sticks like Velcro. Neuroscientist Rick Hanson says, *"The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones."* Our brains tend to remember or store criticisms and negative comments as an act of self-protection.

In his book *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence,* Dr. Hanson talks about "the negativity bias."

He further defines negativity bias in the article *Take in the Good,* this way:

> Scientists believe that your brain has a built-in "negativity bias." In other words, as we evolved over millions of years, dodging sticks and chasing carrots, it was a lot more important to notice, react to, and remember sticks than it was for carrots. That's because – in the tough environments in which our ancestors lived – if they missed out on a carrot, they usually had a shot at another one later on. But if they failed to avoid a stick – a

predator, a natural hazard, or aggression from others of their species – WHAM, no more chances to pass on their genes.

Many scientists agree with this theory of negativity bias. Essentially, it was important for people to remember when something bad happened, because that memory protected them in the future! Though we now don't have the same type of predators, our brains still work in similar ways.

Though our risk for getting attacked by a wild animal is much less today than it was in our hunter/gatherer days, we can be bombarded by things that trigger our stress response on a daily basis (*these can be things like a negative comment on social media, a negative interaction with a professor, feeling inadequate, etc.*).

When we approach this with self-compassion, we learn to approach these feelings with self-kindness instead of judgement.

Practicing self-kindness means we:

- Notice the self-judgement
- Choose to stop it
- Instead offer self-kindness and understanding

Dr. Kristin Neff talks about self-kindness this way:

> Self-compassion entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism. Self-compassionate people recognize that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties is inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals. People cannot always be or get exactly what they want. When this reality is denied or fought against suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration and self-criticism. When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced.

When we practice self-kindness, we choose to self-soothe. Instead of just listening to the negative tapes that play in our head, we can choose to change the tone of our self-talk. Instead of speaking like your Inner critic, as cheesy as it might sound, you can choose to speak in the tone of your Inner Coach.

- How would your Inner Coach speak to you?
- Can you think of some positive, encouraging things others have said to you in the past?
- How can you remind yourself to speak with the tone of an Inner Coach, instead of the Critic?

You can also choose to self-soothe through something as simple as putting a hand on your arm, or having a cup of tea or choosing something that feels soothing to you.

What are some things you can do that calm you down when you feel like you are judging yourself?

Consider some self-soothing practices that stimulate your senses. Make a list below:

- Sight (ex. Spending time in nature, noticing things):
- Sound (ex. Listening to music that calms you):
- Smell (ex. Using an essential oil such as orange, or lavender): Touch (ex. Wrapping yourself in a cozy blanket):
- Taste (ex. Enjoying some tea or chocolate):
- Kinesthetic: (Ex. Go for a bike ride, or do some stretching):

Common Humanity vs. Isolation

When we struggle, we can feel very much alone, and we can tend to isolate and pull away from others because we feel like we are the only one who struggles in this way. This feeling of isolation can be suffocating and disconnecting.

When you are in the thick of things, have you ever found yourself thinking things like, "why me?" or "I am the only person who has ever experienced this."?

It's easy to feel like everyone else has it all together…everyone but me.

The truth is that we are not alone.

Everyone struggles. When we are struggling in isolation, it can be a HUGE comfort to remind ourselves that we aren't alone and that others have struggled in the same way we have.

Creating connection while normalizing these big feelings is what peer support is all about. The connection. "Same. I get it. Me too." are powerful words. There is relief in knowing that we aren't alone when we are in our deepest struggle.

Part of being human is that every one of us wears a badge that says, "Hello, I am wonderfully imperfect, and I will make mistakes and that's OK." Being human means that struggle and suffering come with the territory. When we are mindfully aware that we are not alone, the pain stings just a little less.

When we are more accepting and loving towards ourselves when we fail or suffer, we create an opportunity for connection.

We will all mess up. Even as you start this job as a peer supporter, you will make mistakes. It comes with the territory of starting something new.

You aren't perfect. No one else is perfect either.

You *will* make mistakes. And so will everyone else in the world. You can learn from your mistakes; and treating yourself with self-compassion means you are actually more likely to take personal responsibility for your life.

You are valuable no matter what!

When we can accept that messing up is part of being human, we are more likely to learn from the experience, integrate the learning into our lives, and move past it. When we hold onto our pain, struggle, and shame when we make a mistake, we get stuck. We are more likely to ruminate, become defensive, and get lost in a shame cycle. When we know that everyone makes mistakes, and that we are the same as everyone else, we don't need to defend ourselves when we mess up. Then we are more likely to take a humble approach.

There is so much freedom in owning our fallibility, learning from our mistakes and moving on, rather than ruminating or getting defensive. The research says that people who practice self-compassion are better equipped to take personal responsibility. We can speculate that this is because we are able to let go of the drive for perfection that can cause us to be defensive and to avoid things that are uncomfortable.

So next time you are in a struggle or are feeling badly about making a mistake, pay attention to how you feel. Know that you aren't alone. Offer yourself some kindness.

- Have you felt alone when you have struggled?
- How does it feel when someone says, "me too"? If you were holding onto shame, can you see that it would help you let go of it?
- Do you beat yourself up when you make a mistake?
- What can you do to be kinder to yourself?
- What do you think would be or feel different if you were to practice greater self-compassion?

Mindfulness vs. Over-Identification

Mindfulness can have many meanings, and some people might feel resistance to the word. When we are talking about mindfulness in the context of self-compassion, we are talking about courageous presence. We are talking about choosing to pay attention to what is happening around us, in our thoughts and in our bodies. When we pay attention to our emotions, when we are more aware and mindful of them, then we are able to work with them.

The two unhelpful extremes to note when dealing with our emotions are (1) to suppress our feelings and (2) to allow them to become very amplified. Neither is helpful for our well-being.

A big part of self-compassion is allowing ourselves to feel our pain or emotion, sitting with it and learning from it before we move on from it.

Sitting with a strong emotion can be challenging since we are hardwired to be reactive towards things that trigger us. When we learn to sit with the discomfort that comes from big feelings, and we choose to feel the pain, we create a space of mindfulness that helps us avoid both stuffing our feelings and lashing out in reactivity at others.

With this approach we look at emotions as weather patterns. They come and go. We don't have to judge them or hold onto them. We aren't defined by them. We HAVE them, but we know we are always MORE than our present emotions. Ruminating on or stuffing our feelings doesn't serve us either – it just keeps us stuck.

When we move quickly into problem solving mode without allowing time to process what is

happening, we are essentially stuffing our pain. When we stuff our pain, we are not creating space to process and learn from our experiences. That space to process before we jump in and try to fix things is very important to our mental health.

Next time you feel struggle, pain, disappointment or sadness try sitting with it. Pay attention to where you are feeling it in your body before you react in a problem-solving way.

For Reflection

- Do you tend to let yourself feel big feelings? If not, why?
- Do you see yourself as a stuffer of emotions, or an avoider?
- What can you do to support yourself to sit with and process your big feelings?

Stress and Overwhelm

Emotions and feelings can be so all-encompassing. We can feel weighed down and immobilized by our feelings. And when we attach narratives to our feelings, we can get even more stuck.

Let's look at what we mean by attaching narratives to our feelings...

We have talked about how our life experiences form our worldview – the lens through which we see the world. Our lens helps us make sense of the world. Unless we work at it, we are often not conscious of our worldview or how it forms the stories we tell ourselves. From an evolutionary perspective, the goal of our worldview is always survival. We are not wired to be objective; we rarely have all the context when something happens to us, but our brains still make up a story to fill in the gaps and make sense of a situation.

For example:

- **Triggering event:** My peer support supervisor was just curt and abrasive with me when I said hi.
- **My mind wants to make sense of the event:** *I don't know anything about what's going on with Tim, but I'm pretty sure his rudeness has something to do with me.*
- **The story I'm telling myself is**: *The rude comment is because I did something wrong. I'm in trouble, and I'm sure I'm going to be fired.*
- **Rumination can happen:** *For the next two days I am on edge and worried, replaying events of the week. I am frightened about losing my job.*
- **What I find out days later**: *Tim had just received news of a major funding cut right before I saw him. That's why he was stressed out and rude to me.*

Our minds fill in the blanks, and more likely than not the story we create is inaccurate.

For Reflection

- Can you think of some situations when your mind filled in the blank, and the story was wrong?
- What are some tools you have that have helped you stop ruminating on difficult

feelings?

- What are some of your triggers and stressors? Feeling prepared ahead of time can really support you to manage these stressors.
- What can you do to support and soothe yourself when you are stressed out? Consider things that ground you to your senses (getting outside, smelling a calming scent, deep breathing)

Working Through Big Feelings

Sometimes we find ourselves swimming in big feelings, ruminating on a challenging situation, or even just feeling a little dark and gloomy.. Being stuck in this feels awful and overwhelming, but we can move through it if we are intentional. Let's look at moving through big feelings.

1. [Notice the Feeling](#)
2. [Label the Feeling](#)
3. [Choose to Feel It (Without Rumination)](#)
4. [Offer kindness to yourself](#)
5. [If You Are Stuck–Disrupt](#)
6. [Deconstruct the Feeling – Get Curious](#)

Now let's look at each of these a little closer. Feel free to use this as a tool when you are working through some big feelings.

1. Notice the Feeling

Often we go through our days without paying attention to our feelings. We might just feel gross, or bad, but we don't stop to really notice what it is.

We can sometimes feel detached from our bodies. Noticing the feeling means noticing what is happening in your body. Pay attention to each part of your body from your head to your toes. What do you notice? Where does the feeling or discomfort show up for you?

How does your emotion feel in your body? Observe the feeling, without judging it. Just be ok with whatever is there.

2. Label the Feeling

A big piece of moving through a feeling is to figure out what exactly we are feeling. Give it a name. Be specific. If you are feeling sad, what is underneath the sadness? Is it disappointment, discouragement, grief?

This can be challenging if we have felt detached from our emotions for a long time. There are many good, free online resources that can support us to articulate what we are feeling; to find

some good lists of feeling words, for example, you can do a search for "feelings wheel." For more on this, check out the work of emotions researcher Dr. Susan David. She has some great resources on her website (www.susandavid.com), as well as a book called "Emotional Agility."

You can use this when you are feeling good too. Acknowledging and labelling the good feelings is helpful too!

What feeling(s) are you noticing now?

3. Choose to Feel It, Without Ruminating

Sit with the feeling. Don't run from it, distract yourself, or stuff it away. Just notice that it's there. It's also important to not ruminate on the feeling or slip into self-pity. Just allow the feeling to be there, without letting it define you.

As discussed earlier, it can be helpful to think of our feelings like the weather. Here in BC, we know the rain. Though we can be visited by the rain for many days in a row, we always know that it's not forever. The sun will return eventually. No weather is permanent. Weather, like the seasons, is always shifting. Sometimes when we are in the middle of winter, it can feel all-encompassing. But the rule of nature is that winter *always* gives way to spring. This is the same with our feelings and emotions.

Also be aware of assigning value to your emotions. Emotions and feelings aren't intrinsically good or bad. They are just feelings. We can work with them, and they can guide us.

Our feelings can offer great wisdom if we take the time to be with them.

In her book *Love Warrior*, Glennon Doyle, an author who writes about her experiences with mental health and substance use struggles, says:

> Perhaps pain was not a hot potato after all, but a traveling professor. Maybe instead of slamming the door on pain, I need to throw open the door wide and say, Come in. Sit down with me. And don't leave until you've taught me what I need to know. (2017)

4. Offer kindness to yourself

What can you do to support yourself right now? What can you do to self-soothe?

Self-soothing for babies and children shows up with pacifiers, blankets and stuffies. These things are a normal part of childhood, yet as we get older self-soothing practices seem to become much

less important to us. Even though self-soothing is still a very important part of emotional regulation, and emotional intelligence.

Consider your senses. What can you do to self-soothe in the moment?
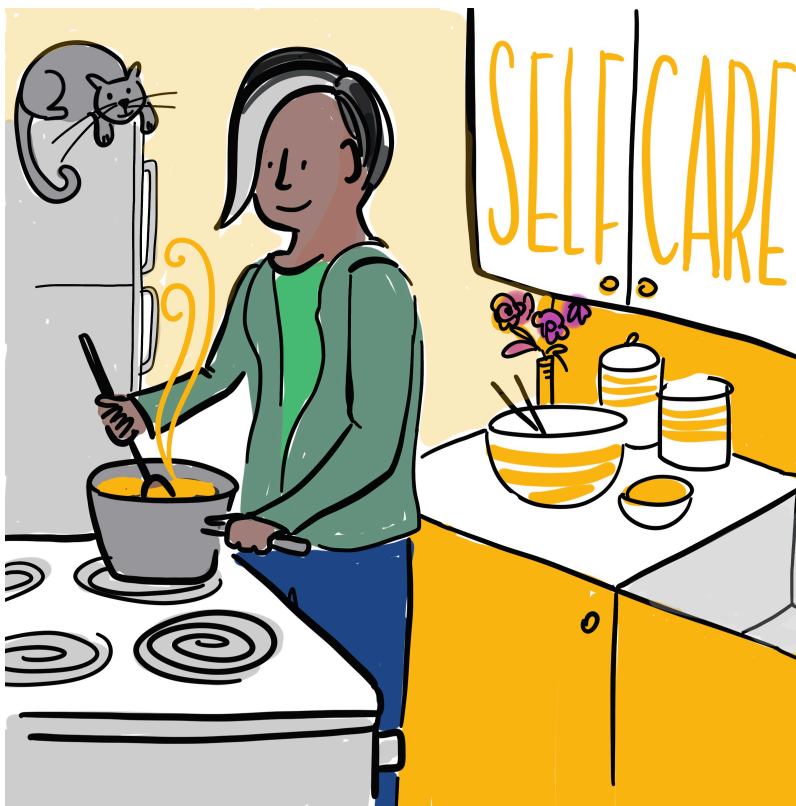
5. If You Are Stuck-Disrupt

After identifying the feeling, feeling it and sitting with it, it may be a good idea to disrupt the feeling. Especially if it's an extra sticky feeling, and we are ready to move past it. Anything we can do to disrupt our tendency to ruminate is helpful. Inertia means that we continue to move in the direction we are currently moving in. So when we are moving in a direction we don't want to continue in, we need to disrupt it!

The process of disrupting a feeling can be very simple. Just choose something different. You can choose anything from exercise, getting outside, or changing your location. Whatever you choose, do it with an intention to disrupt. Choosing to be mindful of our thoughts and actions is helpful.

What are some things you can do to disrupt your feelings of rumination?

6. Deconstruct the Feeling – Get Curious

This phase is about getting curious. We know that curiosity can calm the nervous system, and that it supports the calming of the sympathetic nervous system. When we deconstruct our feelings, it means we ask ourselves questions about our feelings. Questions like:

- *What events led to this feeling?*
- *Was there a single cause, or a combination of events?*
- *How is my worldview impacting or contributing to my feeling?*
- *Am I reading more into this than I need to be?*
- *What is the story I am telling myself?*
- *Can I change the story?*
- *What am I missing? Is there something I am not seeing?*
- *Has this happened before? If so, what helped last time?*
- *What can I learn from this?*

These are just some sample questions. There are many more that can be explored.

In his groundbreaking book The Body Keeps the Score, trauma expert Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk says:

> Mindfulness not only makes it possible to survey our internal landscape with compassion and curiosity but can also actively steer us in the right direction for self-care.

Feel free to use this mindfulness tool anytime you feel overwhelmed or stuck. Notice what happens for you as you use it.

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Protecting Ourselves from Burnout

There are so many tools, resources, and ideas included in this training that, if you choose to integrate them into your work, will protect you from burnout.

Let's highlight some key points from a few of the modules:

- We can increase our **tolerance for uncertainty**.
- We can **integrate the Core Values** into our work and life.
- We can work on **shifting our biases and judgements**. This means stepping back from our strongly held beliefs and choosing to look from a different perspective
- We can remember that we aren't serving people in order to fix or save them, but instead supporting them to find their own self-determination. This means **we don't take on too much, because that is stealing someone's self-determination from them**.
- We can be aware of our needs and **create clear boundaries** that support our well- being. Know what is OK, and what is not OK for you – in all your relationships.
- **Create trauma-informed environments that encourage healing-centered relationships**. If everyone works on this, it will support the whole team to stay well! If you have your own trauma, know what you need to do to feel safe.
- Consider your own personal vision and goals. **Have clarity about how you want to feel, and what you are moving towards.**

Below, write some of your own thoughts about what you have learned in the other modules that will support you to stay well and avoid burnout.

A Self-Compassionate Approach to Burnout or Compassion Fatigue

In his book *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*, Dr. Christopher Germer talks about how compassion fatigue happens when we are too attached to an outcome:

> The result of extending ourselves too much to others is called "compassion fatigue." The term is actually a misnomer because compassion itself isn't fatiguing. Compassion fatigue is really "attachment fatigue." We wear ourselves out when we're attached to the outcome of our hard work, such as success or recognition. Sure signs of compassion fatigue are (1) believing that you're indispensable and (2) feeling resentment toward those you're trying to help. Compassion fatigue feels bad, and it's not good for anyone. The antidote to compassion fatigue is self-compassion. When your emotional supplies are depleted, take

a break and care for yourself in whatever way you can: physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally, or spiritually. (2009)

My Emotional Well-Being Inventory

It can be helpful to check in on ourselves and our well-being regularly. Knowing who we are, and how we feel when we are at our best can help to become more aware of difficult feelings, and patterns that are not serving us.

- **This describes me when I'm at my best:**
  - *(Example: I like to laugh. I like to spend time with my friends. I like to explore nature.)*
- **These are my strengths (we are not talking about skills here, but rather character strengths):**
  - *(Example: I am a hard worker. I am energetic. I am calm. I have a good sense of humour. I am kind.)*
- **When I am doing well, this is how my body feels:**
  - *(Example: I have energy. I have a health issue, so I am often tired. I feel strong.)*

Routines and Daily Practices

As a post-secondary student, you are in a season of life that is exceptionally demanding. You have many demands and responsibilities. Being a student most often comes with financial demands, so even eating healthy can be challenging sometimes. Plenty of students live on ramen noodles and coffee.

This season in which you're attending post-secondary is likely not all that short. While it may be doable to get through a couple months letting your self-care practices go, doing that for months or years on end will take a real toll on your well-being.

Plenty of research has been done here in Canada about the declining mental health of post-secondary students. However, you can equip yourself to deal with the stressors of this season of life if you put some work into protecting your mental and physical health.

Because this is a demanding time of life for you, think about what non-negotiable things you need to do to stay well. Consider creating some simple practices. Can you think of some practices that would have the biggest positive impact on your overall mental health and well-being?

Try not to write something down because you think it's the "right" thing to do. The truth is, you will only integrate a practice into your life if you think it's important to you. You must be intrinsically motivated.

My Body: What do I need to do on a regular basis to take care of my physical health?

Sleep Practices:

(Example: I prefer 8 hours of sleep per night. I can get by on 6 hours, but only twice a week. I will take a bath or a shower before bed to relax. I will turn off screens a ½ hour before bed and read a book.)

Morning Routines:

(Example: I will get up at 7:00 am on weekdays, and 9:00 am on weekends. I will meditate for 15 minutes. I will have coffee and read a book for 15 minutes before I get ready. I will pack a healthy lunch before I start school.)

Meals:

(Example: I will eat an egg and toast, a smoothie, or oatmeal for breakfast every day. I will create a meal plan for the week and shop for groceries on Sunday. I will find cost effective ways to get protein and vegetables. I will bring water with me wherever I go.

Movement:

(Example: I will stretch every morning before I get ready. I will go for a walk with a friend every other afternoon. I will go to the campus gym twice a week for an hour.)

Alcohol consumption:

(Example: I will go out with friends Friday evenings, and otherwise I will limit what I drink.)

Comfort:

(Example: I will always have an assortment of teas. I will curl up in my blanket once a day and read or watch a show for a ½ hour. I will reward myself with a bubble bath when I finish an assignment. I will listen to my favourite album while I'm studying.)

Boundaries with Time

We all only have 24 hours in a day, and most of us could fill twice that many hours! This is especially the case for busy students. Knowing what your priorities are will help you know what you need and want to say "*yes*" to, and what you must say "*no*" to. It's easy to slip into a "waste time" mode. Perhaps we are trying to do homework, and instead we find ourselves scrolling social media. Sometimes this can feel restful, but sometimes it can be draining.

First consider establishing a hierarchy of priorities. Things at the top of the list are things you value the most, and therefore might need more time given to them.

Here are some activities to consider as you figure out your priorities:

- Exercise
- Studying/homework
- Spending time with friends and family
- Being outdoors
- Spiritual practice
- Hobbies
- Work/volunteering
- Learning for fun
- Watching movies or shows
- Reading for fun
- Cooking/baking
- Going out for dinner
- Helping people out

What are some other priorities we missed above?

In the chart below, do the best you can to prioritize the activities in your life. In the second column write down the amount of time you plan to give to that activity in a given week.

Activity you wish to prioritize	How much time will you give to this in a given week?

When you finish this chart, pay attention to the amount of time you gave everything. If you add up all the hours, do you feel like you have enough time? If you don't think you have enough time, what can you change to make it work?

Stressors or Triggers

At times, we all find ourselves feeling triggered, overwhelmed, or frustrated. It's important for our well-being that we pay attention to those big feelings. When we ignore them, the stress can continue to build until it spirals out of control.

We don't always know immediately what caused those feelings, but if we step back and reflect, we can often figure it out. This is an important piece of information to learn because as we get to know what our external stressors or triggers are, we can feel more equipped to deal with them or, if possible, to avoid them, in the future.

Knowing our stressors also gives us the opportunity to respond thoughtfully to things rather than reacting with a strong emotion. Reactions often show up in anger or frustration, sometimes directed at others. When we take the time to respond, we are better able to take personal responsibility for our situation.

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

~ Viktor Frankl (Psychologist and Holocaust survivor)

Take a few minutes to answer the questions below.

The following describes my stressors or triggers:

(Example: Unexpected bill. Failing an exam. Someone raising their voice. Negative feedback from a professor or supervisor. Conflict.)

This is how stress shows up in my body:

(Example: headaches, pain, intense cravings, rapid thoughts, tight chest, etc.)

Noticing these feelings early on is really helpful.

Is there anything I can do to prevent these stressors?

What can I do to support myself when I am feeling stress, anxiety, or overwhelm?

(Example: Go for a walk. Practice deep-breathing. Call a friend or family member to vent)

How will I know that I'm not doing well? This can perhaps be some unresolved stressors that are compounding.

(Example: I'm repeatedly late for class. I skip meals. I have insomnia for at least 2 days in a row. I keep forgetting important things.)

What do I need to do for myself when I notice this?

(Example: See a counsellor. Spend a few days at home with my family. Cancel all my non-essential plans. See my doctor.)

At any given time, no matter where you are, a great self-care tool is simply asking yourself this:

What can I do to support myself right now, in this moment?

It seems almost too simple to be effective. However, if you ask it earnestly, it really works!

My Window of Tolerance

When our sympathetic nervous system is engaged, which happens when we are triggered or stressed out, our stress hormones are activated. When this system is engaged for longer periods of time, it can have a lasting effect on our health.

Trauma expert Dr. Dan Seigel coined the term "window of tolerance." It refers to the state of arousal or stimulation – the zone – in which we are able to function and cope effectively. When we move outside the zone, we become essentially dysregulated until we are able to calm our nervous system.

Stress and stimulation within the window of tolerance can be motivating and healthy. Getting used to a little bit of activation can support us to take risks and sit with discomfort that is necessary for growth. As noted, stress that repeatedly or continually takes us outside our window of tolerance can have lasting negative effects on our health and wellbeing.

With time and practice, we can widen our window of tolerance.

For Reflection

- What does it feel like when you are outside your window of tolerance?
- What can you do when you are feeling stressed out, but you are still within your window of tolerance?
- What are some calming practices you can do for yourself when you find your nervous system activated in what feels like an uncontrollable way?
- What can you do when you are feeling overwhelmed, and your responsibilities feel like they are too much for you to manage?
- Who can you go to for support when you need it?

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Hope and Wholeness for All

This Is the Overarching Value of Peer Support

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

PEER LEADERSHIP AND FACILITATION

Preface

If you are interested in taking a leadership role on your campus team, this module will support you to understand leadership theory. It will support you to take the material we have covered throughout the rest of the training, and specifically the Core Values of peer support, and apply them to your leadership style. If you are a facilitator, you will also be able to apply these leadership theories to build on your existing facilitation skills.

It's recommended that you read all the other modules that come with this training before beginning this one, as we will be building on concepts covered in those modules.

This module does not need to be covered in its entirety. Read and work with whatever topics are meaningful to you and will support you in your leadership and facilitation goals.

We have broken this module into three major sections:

1. Leadership theory
2. Personal leadership exercises
3. Facilitation skills

Purpose of the Module

As part of your peer support work, it's highly likely that you will take initiative and leadership on other campus projects from time to time. You may lead workshops, plan events, and support other team members. The time you invest doing these things now will support you to develop some foundational skills that you can apply in any future leadership opportunities.

Many people find themselves in management and leadership positions without any real understanding of basic leadership principles. In this module we'll give you some foundational principles that you can use in your work now, and that you can continue to build on into the future.

In this module we will break down some tired and unhealthy definitions of leadership, and we'll explore what it means to deconstruct and decolonize leadership as we know it. We will explore

what it means to lead others from a place of humility, with a strength-based approach that builds others up. In essence, this module will encourage you to take all the information and knowledge you've learned throughout the peer support training and integrate it with principles of healthy leadership; you will be invited and equipped to begin developing a clear leadership lens that has application in many aspects of life, beyond just managing a team.

The study of leadership is complex and layered. In this module we will take a high level, principle-focused approach to leadership. The goal is that you can take these ideas, blend them with the core values and principles of peer support, and feel equipped to lead others in your work. We won't be able to tackle specific details or management situations that could come up. However, it is our goal that the information and tools in this module will support you to be able to make those decisions when situations arise.

Group facilitation tends to be a common aspect of campus peer support work. One definition of the word "facilitate" is "to make easier." Facilitation is a leadership skill and is about guiding a group process. It is different from teaching; while teachers are expected to be subject matter experts, facilitators are not. They are guides that support a group process. In this module we will share some principles that will support you to grow and develop your facilitation skills.

Prerequisite: Prior to working with this module, please make sure to read all of the other modules in this training, as this module will build on the concepts we have already shared throughout the training.

Learning Objectives

- You will be able to describe the five expressions of Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership.
- You will be able to demonstrate how the core values and principles of peer support compare with other paradigms of leadership, including servant leadership and decolonized leadership.
- You will be able to take the peer support core values and apply them to different aspects of leadership.
- You will determine your vision, as well as some personal goals for your work within peer support.
- You will be able to identify some key facilitation skills, and incorporate them into

your facilitation work.

Core Values

Throughout this module, please consider and reflect on the Core Values. When you are finished going through this module, please come back to this page and jot down some thoughts about how you will apply the Core Values in your work related to this topic. If you need a refresh of the definition of the Core Values see the graphic at the end of this module.

- Hope and Wholeness for All
- Acknowledgement
- Mutuality
- Strength-Based
- Self-Determination
- Respect, Dignity, and Equity
- Belonging and Community
- Curiosity

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Section 1: Leadership Theory

What is Leadership?

Here is a definition of leadership from a Forbes magazine online article entitled, _What Is Leadership?_ (Kruse, 2013):

> DEFINITION: Leadership is a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal.

Notice key elements of this definition:

- Leadership stems from _social_ influence, not authority or power
- Leadership requires others, and that implies they don't need to be "direct reports"
- No mention of personality traits, attributes, or even a title; there are many styles, many paths, to effective leadership
- It includes _a goal_, not influence with no intended outcome

Does that definition resonate with you? Do you have another definition that you like better?

Let's face it, there are many leadership paradigms in use all around us that have been built on hierarchical systems that are quite oppressive. Most of us have either worked within or interacted with a hierarchical system like this. Because of our exposure to these kinds of systems, we may have even unconsciously internalized that kind of paradigm as the only option for a leadership structure. The good news is that simply isn't the case.

Throughout this training we have talked in-depth about harmful systems. These harmful systems all have a common thread–an imbalance of power; a few people at the top hold power over everyone else in a way that causes harm when that power is wielded. This kind of "power over" approach can show up in a small team or business as much as it can in a large organization like a healthcare system, educational setting, or a governmental body.

Now let's look at a couple of alternative leadership paradigms.

Decolonizing Leadership

As we have explored elsewhere in this training, colonization and the persisting mindset of colonization has been devastating for our First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada. Unless intentionally built otherwise, our systems and structures here in Canada were formed with a colonial infrastructure. Colonized systems put the "self" at the center, seeking to gain and keep power for the self, whereas an Indigenous-centric mindset or organization focuses on

interconnection. Colonialism is harmful for *everyone,* and a change in our approach to leadership is necessary in order for meaningful change to be possible.

The article *Toward an Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership: A Literature Review* (Khalifa, Khalil, Marsh & Halloran, 2019) provides five examples of decolonizing leadership principles:

> ...underlying values of leadership praxis enacted by Indigenous and minoritized school leaders from around the world. This theme highlights five expressions, or strands, of IDSL [*Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership*]: (1) the prioritization of self-knowledge and self-reflection, (2) the empowerment of community through self-determination, (3) the centering of community voices and values, (4) service based in altruism and spirituality, and (5) approaching collectivism through inclusive communication practices.

The five expressions of Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership mentioned in the above quote align with the principles we have already outlined in this training.

For Reflection

Consider all of the principles and values of peer support that we have already covered in this training. How do you see these philosophies interconnecting with the five expressions mentioned above? Write a few thoughts about this intersection below and how it has shown up in other sections of this training.

1. The prioritization of self-knowledge and self-reflection
2. The empowerment of community through self-determination
3. The centering of community voices and values
4. Service based in altruism and spirituality
5. Approaching collectivism through inclusive communication practices

Throughout the rest of this module we will continue exploring the five expressions of Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership, and how they relate to this work.

Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf explored the concept of leading by serving others in 1970 with his essay *The*

Servant as Leader. He went on to write a book in 1977 called *Servant Leader.* With this style of leadership, the leader moves from taking center stage to prioritizing serving others on the team.

Author Angelo Letizia defines servant leadership in his 2017 book *Using Servant Leadership: How to Reframe the Core Functions of Higher Education.*

> What does it mean to serve another human being? How does one human being help another human being grow and develop? What exactly is growth, and how do we measure it? These questions all point to the phenomenon of servant leadership, which has emerged over the last forty years due chiefly to the writings of Robert Greenleaf. Greenleaf argued leadership could be con-ceived of as service to followers. For Greenleaf (2002), the most important test of servant leadership is "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" Greenleaf (2002) did not just view servant leadership as an individual phenomenon, however; he also called for the ideas of servant leadership to transform institutions.

> The terms "servant" and "leader" are opposed in some sense; thus the idea of servant leadership is paradoxical (SanFacon and Spears 2011; Spears 2004). Yet as SanFacon and Spears (2011) note, when opposites join, paradoxes ensue and can open our eyes to new, previously unknown ideas. The new possibility is a leader who serves (Spears 2004). As Greenleaf noted, servant leaders want to serve before they want to lead. In contrast, leaders who lead first may simply have a desire for power (Greenleaf 2002). Greenleaf called these leaders "leader- first," and for them, leading comes before serving. Of course, as Green-leaf (2002) notes, in real life leaders usually fall into a number of complex gradations between these two concepts of leadership. Greenleaf's voluminous work set in motion the ideas and research for servant leadership that spans until the present day.

This concept of leaders as servants is a big shift for most leadership paradigms. It also lines up with some of the philosophies and approaches of peer support.

In a few words, how would you articulate the similarities between servant leadership and the values of peer support?

Power and Leadership

When you reflect on the concept of power, notice what comes up for you. Are you someone who desires power? Do you feel repulsed by it? Do you have other feelings that arise altogether that fall somewhere outside those two binary poles?

"Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change."
~Martin Luther King, Jr. (Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?)

In line with the understanding referenced in Dr. King's quote above, let's try to look at power from a neutral perspective, without value judgements.

Power just is.

Power is everywhere, like energy or electricity. It is the key to any kind of change–positive or negative. If you are a Star Wars fan, think of power like the Force–a continuum of power that moves between the dark and light side. In *A New Hope*, Obi-Wan Kenobi explains the Force to Luke this way, "It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together." In other words, power in all its forms shapes our experience of the world around us.

Because of the predominance of unjust systems, power is often held by the few, while many others hold none. At times, those holding power aren't aware of or even curious about their own privilege and the ways it impacts their use of power. At other times, those holding power may be keenly aware of their privilege and its impact on their experience and that of those around them. What they choose to do with that awareness determines so much for those who are impacted by their leadership.

We might find ourselves feeling angry and frustrated at the thought of anyone holding any kind of power. It can feel constricting, manipulative or coercive, especially if people hoard and oppress by holding power over others. However, if we take a moment to notice what it feels like to have our autonomy taken away–to feel powerless–then we can begin to recognize the significance of power, and the great need not to do away with power (which is simply not an option – remember the Force) but rather to channel it in a just and equitable way.

In the *Creating an Ecology of Self-Determination* module, we talked about categories and containers. As humans, we need categories and containers to organize and make sense of all the stimulus that comes our way. Similarly, we also *need* human systems to organize ourselves and bring order to the chaos. Again, we may feel resistance to this idea if we've experienced

oppression and injustice within such systems; the reality is that most systems today were built on a foundation of colonialism that continues to harm people. But there are other ways to wield power. There are other ways to lead.

The questions we must ask as individuals and as a collective society are: How do we want to wield and share this power? Do we want to live in societies and systems where a small group of people in charge hoard power, oppress people with fear and a "power over" approach? Or do we choose to all work together and create equitable opportunities for power to be shared and exchanged? Power can be expansive and generative if we work with it in ways that lift others up, and support people to find their own power within.

If you read this and think this kind of leadership seems idealistic or unrealistic, remember that massive change always starts with many smaller shifts. It starts with individuals and small groups of people doing things differently and working together. Each of us has the capacity to affect change simply by the way we lead and live. When we shift our own use of power within the systems we're part of – schools, offices, teams, etc. – we show others what is possible. When we lead and engage with hope, equity and mutuality, we can shift how others experience power and support them to do the same.

In the following sections, we'll look at four different ways of wielding power, drawing on four "expressions of power" outlined in the book A *New Weave of Power, People, and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (VeneKlasen, Miller, 2002). The four expressions we'll look at are: power over, power with, power to and power within.

Power Over

Power over is the more traditional, strong-armed approach to power. This approach does not foster self-determination and is not used within a peer support context

VeneKlases and Miller describe "Power Over" this way:

> The most commonly recognised form of power, power over, has many negative associations for people, such as repression, wealth, force, coercion, discrimination, corruption, and abuse. Power is seen as a win-lose kind of relationship. Having power involves taking it from someone else, and then, using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it. In the absence of alternative models and relationships, people repeat the power over pattern in their personal relationships, communities, and institutions. (2002)

Where have you noticed this kind of approach to power?

Power With

This approach to power is in line with the mutuality we talk about in peer support. "Power with" is about working together as a collective, and harnessing mutual support. A "power with" approach builds bridges and connects individuals and communities. It is a transformational approach to power and advocacy.

Have you witnessed this kind of approach to power (either in your life, or perhaps you've read about it or learned about it in school)?

Power To

This approach is about how the individual uses their power for their own self-development and then shares that power with the world.

VeneKlases and Miller refer to "Power To" "as the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibilities of joint action, or power with."

How do you think this approach to power fits with the five expressions of decolonized leadership described above?

Describe the connection of "Power To" with self-determination.

In her podcast Unlocking Us, Brene Brown interviews Joe Biden. Before the interview Brown discusses the four expressions of power. This excerpt comes from that podcast.

> With power with and power to, one of the core principles of power with, power to is servant leadership. Leadership is seen as a responsibility to be in service of others rather than served by others. So rather than having to constantly demonstrate more and more cruelty and a greater capacity for bullying and shaming and those things, it's the opposite. I see my job as your leader, to serve you and be in service of you rather than served by you. My job is to empower you, not keep the power. (2020)

Power Within

This expression of power is very similar to the concept of self-empowerment. When someone is empowered, they feel like they are in the driver's seat of their life. They feel equipped to make positive choices. They understand their strengths, and they know and understand what they need to work on. They are self-determined and feel intrinsically motivated to learn.

VeneKlases and Miller describe "Power Within " as having "to do with a person's sense of self worth and self-knowledge. It includes an ability to recognise individual differences while respecting others. Power within is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfillment."

Most of us feel "power within" on a continuum. Can you think of a time when you felt this kind of power? Describe what it was like. What was intrinsically motivating to you?

Applying These Leadership Principles

After reading these ideas and principles about leadership, let's consider creating some scenarios and figure out how you would lead an initiative.

What is one thing you would like to see changed or developed on your campus, or in your peer program?

How do you see yourself becoming involved in the change?

What would leadership for this project look like? Describe how you would create a team to bring this dream about using the ideas we have covered so far in this module.

Knowing what you know now, how would you want to lead people in this project?

What would you do if conflict arises in the team? How would you deal with it in a way that utilizes a power with approach?

How would you divide up roles and responsibilities in a way that utilizes a decolonized leadership approach? (Hint...you can't do everything.)

The Core Values

"Daring leaders who live into their values are never silent about hard things.. A value is a way of being or believing that we hold most important. Living into our values means that we do more than profess our values, we practice them. We walk our talk–we are clear about what we believe and hold important, and we take care that our intentions, words, thoughts, and behaviours align with those beliefs."
~Brené Brown (Dare to Lead, 2018, pp 184 & 186)

The Core Values we have shared throughout this curriculum are meant to be guideposts throughout peer support work. They are sacrosanct to the work. Collins Dictionary defines "sacrosanct" this way: "If you describe something as sacrosanct, you consider it to be special and are unwilling to see it criticized or changed."

Effective leaders know the importance of core values. Organizations – including post-secondary institutions – that have a well-defined set of core values have clarity of purpose, provide a strong service, and have unity within their teams. Core values that are simply lip service or written on a plaque hanging on the lobby will do nothing to guide a program or agency.

On the other hand, a clearly defined set of values can equip leaders and organizations to be able to make decisions.

Dr. Susan David, a researcher on the topic of emotional agility, talks about how a well-established set of values can support us against social contagion. Social contagion is when we "catch" emotions or behaviours from others. For example, if you are in an elevator and another person riding it pulls out their phone, you are highly likely to pull out yours too. In groups and organizations, social contagion has a strong pull. However, a strong set of values that are known and lived out, protects us from catching behaviours that are not in line with our beliefs.

Values are Foundational

Consider a healthy tree. A tree is only as healthy as its root system. If there is a problem with the root system, the tree will eventually die. Though no one really sees the roots directly, a strong root system is the key to the life of the tree.

Core values are to the success of a program, like the root system is to a tree. As a leader within peer support or in future work, it is important that you know the core values well and use them in your work–to both give direction and to support you to deal with the challenges that will inevitably come.

Make the Core Values Actionable!

As stated above, values that are simply words on a website or plaque are meaningless. We can all likely think of organizations that fail (and some that don't even try) to live out their core values. If an employee or manager can't articulate how the core values show up in their everyday work, then the organization's core values are essentially meaningless.

Values can only impact organizational and program culture if they are integrated into all aspects of an organization or service delivery. This means they need to be actionable! In other words, we *need* to ask ourselves how our attitudes, choices, and behaviours will be *shaped by the core values*.

Author and business educator Simon Sinek coaches businesses and organizations to discover their WHY. In his book *Start With Why*, Sinek talks about the need to ask ourselves "WHY *do we do what we do*?" Defining our "WHY" is similar to defining our purpose (we will explore that a bit later). Once we are clear on our WHY–that defined purpose shows up in our HOW. The HOW refers to the accountable daily actions that shape our work–actions that are influenced by our core values. In other words, the core values are meant to be a guiding system (like a GPS) for our work.

In *Start with Why*, Sinek states the following:

> It's the discipline to never veer from your cause, to hold yourself accountable to HOW you do things; that's the hardest part. Making it even more difficult for ourselves, we remind ourselves of our values by writing them on the wall...as nouns. Integrity. Honesty. Innovation. Communication, for example. But nouns are not actionable. They are things. You can't develop systems or develop incentives around those things. It's nearly impossible to hold people accountable to nouns. "A little more innovation today if you would please, Bob."...For values or guiding principles to be truly effective they have to be verbs...Articulating our values as verbs gives us a clear idea of how to act in any situation. We can hold each other accountable to measure them... (2009)

In this peer support training curriculum, we have given you a well-defined set of core values. It's up to you and your campus to take those values and make them actionable. If you are – or are working to become -a facilitator of this training program, we can't stress the importance of this enough.

Here are some examples of what it may look like to make core values actionable in your work:

- We make Hope actionable by stating something like, "I will speak to the people I support in a way that validates and honours their experience, while encouraging hope and an openness to new possibilities."

- We make Acknowledgement actionable by stating something like, "I choose to really see people for who they are, and I commit to listening deeply without trying to fix or save."
- To make a Strength-Based approach actionable, we can say, "In my role as a peer support worker, I will choose to intentionally seek out strengths in those I serve because I believe everyone has intrinsic value."

When we make something actionable, it becomes measurable. That means that at the end of the day, we are able to assess our actions. We can ask ourselves, "How did hope, acknowledgement, and the strength-based approach show up in my work today?" This allows us to adjust as needed and empowers us to grow.

Peer Support Core Values and Leadership

Hope and Wholeness for All

This is the overarching value of peer support.

Core Value	Moving towards hope and wholeness for all:
Acknowledgement	All human beings long to know and be known – to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save for us.
Mutuality	The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.
Strength-Based	It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.
Self-Determination	Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an environment where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.
Respect, Dignity and Equity	All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by: • practicing cultural humility and sensitivity • serving with a trauma-informed approach • offering generosity of assumption[1] in communication and conflict • mindfully addressing personal biases Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

1. Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms: Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often, we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

Belonging and Community	Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.
Curiosity	We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement. This curiosity isn't fueled by personal pain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support. We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

Building relationships and connection through harnessing our common lived experience is the core of peer support. Everything we do – the very heart of this work – is about building that connection with the people we serve.

Cultivating connection and building relationships is also a significant component of leadership and facilitation.. The core values have application within your peer support leadership and facilitation work, and you will also be able to take many of these concepts and apply them to future experiences.

Now, let's examine each of the peer support core values with the lens of leadership.

Acknowledgement

Definition from the Core Values: All human beings long to know and be known–to be seen for who we are, and deeply heard, without someone trying to fix or save us.

Feeling seen is such an important aspect of well-being. When someone takes the time to listen and acknowledge us, we tend to feel a sense of connection.

When we are a part of a team and we feel that sense of acknowledgement from our leaders and fellow team members, it fosters connection. When we feel a sense of belonging, we are more likely to feel inspired and connected to the vision and purpose of the team.

It's so important when we are in a leadership position that we pay attention and notice the

people we work with, and that we practice offering encouragement to them. In the Creating an Ecology of Self-Determination module, under the section *Encouragement and Self-Determination* there are 5 points discussed regarding offering encouragement. We've listed the points below but do go back to that section and read it again. Consider how you will offer encouragement when you are in a leadership position and list some ideas below.

- Notice.
- The small steps matter a lot.
- Be specific.
- Be genuine.
- Celebrate.

The Harvard Business Review article *Good Leaders Acknowledge Their Employees Often* (Mook, 2021) looks at how leaders supported their employees to deal with the atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty that came with COVID-19. Within that context, the article says this about acknowledgement:

> Good leaders quickly learned that acknowledgement is one of the greatest positive motivators, and an important tool to help team members overcome uncertainty. We also learned that recognition need not be elaborate or expensive, but merely authentic and deserved. It serves as a great learning tool for others and a way to move beyond mental exhaustion to a sense of inspiration.

Mutuality

"A leader, first and foremost, is human. Only when we have the strength to show our vulnerability can we truly lead." ~Simon Sinek (Start With Why)

Definition from the Core Values: The peer relationship is mutual and reciprocal. Peer support breaks down hierarchies. The peer support worker and the peer equally co-create the relationship, and both participate in boundary creation.

Of all the peer support core values, mutuality might feel the most challenging to apply within a leadership context. This is especially true because most leadership paradigms are so hierarchical by nature.

When we think of mutuality in peer support, it's helpful to go back to why this is a core value, and from there we can figure out how to apply it in a leadership setting.

- In your words, why do you think mutuality is such an important aspect of peer support?

- Why is a reciprocal relationship needed in peer support?

Mutuality in peer support means that support is a co-learning process. Each participant in the relationship is contributing, learning and growing. When you work under the umbrella of peer support, you do not have to be "the expert." There is room for your own growth and learning as you support others, which creates space for humility, transparency, and vulnerability. You do not have to pretend you are something you are not. You get to bring your full self to the work. This of course doesn't mean that we let go of policies and guidelines; we are still called to be professional and to uphold all of our campus directed policies and procedures.

From what we have touched on about mutuality so far, what can we take from that and apply to a leadership role?

Mutuality and Safety

Let's reflect back on some of the key principles of trauma-informed care–safety, transparency, and choice. When a leader takes a humble approach to leading, while intentionally breaking down hierarchies, it supports a trauma-informed culture.

- Have you ever worked or volunteered with a business or organization where you didn't feel safe? Why didn't you feel safe?
- If you did feel safe, what made you feel safe? What about the leadership/management style made you feel safe?
- What does transparency mean for a leader? When should a leader be transparent about something, and when should they hold back?
- What does choice look like when embedded in a management style? What kinds of choices should be offered to team members and staff?

Dr. Brené Brown is a leadership expert known worldwide for her work exploring shame and vulnerability. Consider reading her book *Dare to Lead* if you plan to move into any kind of leadership role.

In the Forbes article, *Could A Little Vulnerability Be The Key To Better Leadership?* (Sime, 2019), the author refers to Brown's teachings on courage, vulnerability, and leadership:

> Brené defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. If you replaced vulnerability at the beginning of that sentence with the word leadership it would define that quite well too. That is one of Brené's points, vulnerability and leadership go hand in hand. Both require us to take the risk of stepping forward and showing up in a forum that exposes us. When we're vulnerable and when we lead there aren't any guarantees that we will succeed. Risk and uncertainty are things leaders weather every day. Being vulnerable

and leading while owning this vulnerable is brave work and you can't be courageous without being vulnerable. Perhaps it's fair to say that courage, vulnerability and leadership all go hand in hand in hand. If that's the case then vulnerable leaders are by far the most courageous.

Spend a few minutes reflecting on the importance of mutuality and vulnerability in leadership. How do you want to approach this in your work? How will you choose to show up and be real with your colleagues?

Strength-Based

Definition from the Core Values: It is more motivating to move towards something rather than away from a problem. We intentionally build on already existing strengths. We thoughtfully and purposefully move in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.

Language has power. The words we choose are forming the reality in which we live. The first step in creating the life we want is to become intentional about the language we choose. Words create worlds.

Social Constructionism is a term used in sociology. Thought Co defines it this way,

> Social constructionism is the theory that people develop knowledge of the world in a social context, and that much of what we perceive as reality depends on shared assumptions. From a social constructionist perspective, many things we take for granted and believe are objective reality are actually socially constructed, and thus, can change as society changes. (Vinney, 2019)

Basically social constructionism means that humans collectively – whether in a family, a community, a campus or a workplace – create knowledge together based on the meaning we give to our experiences. So when we ponder the question, *"How do we know what we know?"* the simplest answer using social constructionism is that together we create our knowledge and the "worlds" we live in by the language we use.

Language itself is a key example of social constructionism. Words are made up; on their own, they are just a bunch of sounds. But they mean something because collectively we have decided that certain combinations of sounds have particular meanings. This is the same for the value of money, etc. Art and culture are socially constructed as well; we explored this in depth in the cultural humility module.

What this means for groups and organizational cultures is that we have the opportunity to create

our own meanings and realities. The Core Values of peer support, for example, only have meaning if collectively we give them meaning, otherwise they are just a bunch of words. Now, what does all of this have to do with leadership and being strength-based? As leaders, what we choose to focus on shapes the culture of the group or organization. If we are nit picky, negative, and we micromanage, then that will shape the culture of the whole organization.

If we are intentional with our words, if we choose to honour the core values, and if we focus on the strengths of the people that make up the organization, then *that* will shape the culture. In this way, leaders have tremendous power and responsibility in shaping organizational culture.

As you can see, a strength-based approach is essential both when we work with individuals and when we work with groups, businesses, and organizations.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a systems change management tool. It is used in organizations, focusing on strengths and leveraging the best of what already exists, rather than focussing on problems. It essentially applies a lot of what we have already talked about within this training, but focuses on groups. David Cooperrider developed Appreciative Inquiry in the 1980s. In his book he calls leaders "*positive change catalysts*" with leaders "*participating equally as one of the many essential voices at the table.*"

Cooperrider was tired of the focus on deficits and problem-solving that was so dominant in organizations. He decided to change the questions that were being asked. He took a more positive approach, digging into what was working within the organization and building on those strengths. That's not to say that with this approach we overlook issues that need addressing. Addressing weak spots is important for us as individuals and for organizations. A strength-based approach like AI simply reframes the question to focus on what we **can do** rather than on what we can't do.

The book, A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005), defines Appreciative Inquiry this way,

> Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative, coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives life to an organization or a community when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. In AI intervention gives way to inquiry, imagination, and innovation. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design. AI involves the art and practice of asking unconditionally positive questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten potential. (2005)

Let's look back at the questions you answered in the "Applying These Leadership Principles" section of this module.

We're going to consider this AI approach in terms of goal setting. If we create goals centered on problems, we're trying to solve rather than on moving towards a bigger hope and dream, we can often stay tied to the problem. This is because when we are focused on something, that's where we put most of our attention; in this case, it would mean giving more attention to the problem and less attention to where we want to go. When we are very focused on the problem, we might even feel the body tighten up and constrict. (*Next time you are thinking about a problem, pay attention to how your body feels.*)

When we focus on strengths and on moving towards where we want to go, we feel more inspired and less limited. We are no longer only thinking of the problem, but engaging creative, divergent thinking, harnessing creativity, and fueling intrinsic motivation.

A Strength-Based, Moving-Towards Approach Opens up a World of Possibility.

Here's an example of this approach for a personal problem/goal:

Problem-focused goal: I currently spend too much time alone playing video games, and it makes me feel lonely. I will limit my video game time to 2 hours maximum a day.

Strength-based "Moving-towards" goal: I want to find a community and a place where I belong. I want to develop some good friendships and feel connected. I also want to exercise my creativity and love for music. I will join the music group that meets at the clubhouse on Wednesdays.

Let's do this again with a peer support campus goal:

Problem-focused goal: Identify the problems in a particular peer delivered workshop and address them to encourage greater attendance.

The issue is that people aren't attending a certain workshop that is being offered under the peer program. With a problem-focused lens, the goal is to figure out what people don't like about the program and the team works to fix those issues, and in the process hopefully more people will attend.

Strength-based "Moving-towards" goal: Discover what draws students to attend a workshop. Is there something we are doing in the workshop that students like and regularly attend? How can we expand those things and build more of it into the program?

Instead of just focusing on what isn't working with the workshop, ask about what *is* working? Ask

participants questions about what they value about the services and offerings of the program. Ask if there is anything they enjoyed in the workshop that they want to spend more time on? Is there a way the focus can be shifted to better meet the needs of the group?

For Reflection

- What is the goal you identified for your campus or peer program?
- How will you organize a team? What strengths will you be looking for in the people you gather?
- How will you identify strengths of your team members?
- What are some simple practices you can do with your team to build a positive culture?
- How will you address problems or issues with a strength-based approach?
- How will you make sure that in the process of moving towards where your team wants to go, you don't sweep problems under the proverbial rug, and instead deal with issues in a kind, respectful, and firm way?

Self-Determination

Definition from the Core Values: Self-determination is the right to make one's own decisions, and the freedom from coercion. We support the facilitation and creation of an ecology where people can feel free to tap into their inner motivation. Peer support workers don't fix or save. We acknowledge and hold space for resilience and inner wisdom.

Before continuing with this section, please make sure you have read the whole Self-Determination module. This section builds upon that knowledge; we will be taking the concepts covered there and you will apply them to the development of your leadership, and facilitation skills.

As a leader, motivation is a tricky thing. Many organizations offer their team members incentives or rewards for high performance, but these are short-term and they end the moment the rewards run out. The reality is that while we can incentivize behaviour, we can't actually motivate others. What we can do, however, is create conditions for people to become intrinsically motivated. We experience intrinsic motivation when we feel a sense of enjoyment or purpose in the work itself. This is another reason for an organization/community to build a strong connection to a set of core values.

It can be challenging to support individuals to tap into their intrinsic motivation. As leaders, the invitation and challenge of self-determination is to respect and trust the people we work with, believing that there is a natural desire within everyone that wants to be motivated and engaged. In order to tap into that, we can start by asking people to share their thoughts and perspectives openly, and support them to discover what motivates them.

When we are managing or leading a team, it is up to us to create conditions and opportunities that support the growth of intrinsic motivation. Otherwise people will struggle with incentive, commitment, and follow-through. When we're used to a top-down approach, it can feel a lot easier and much more comfortable for us to micromanage and try to control other people; it feels like there is less risk that things won't get done that way, but it leads to loss of connection, trust and true motivation for your team.

Creating the conditions of self-determination means that we must lead with intention to create opportunities for growth, skill-building, autonomy, community-building, and connection.

In the Very Well Mind article *What Is Motivation?* (Cherry, 2022) motivation is defined this way,

> Motivation is the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors. It is what causes you to act, whether it is getting a glass of water to reduce thirst or reading a book to gain knowledge. Motivation involves the biological, emotional, social, and cognitive forces that activate behavior. In everyday usage, the term "motivation" is

frequently used to describe why a person does something. It is the driving force behind human actions.

Self-Determination Theory

Developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, self-determination theory is a broad look at human motivation and wellness that has a lot of both basic and applied research. The theory says that motivation, life-satisfaction, and well-being are highly correlated.

Self-determination theory has application across all cultures, genders and ages. It is applicable in education, business, healthcare, coaching, counselling–basically anywhere human beings gather.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is motivation born out of purpose, meaning, and/or pure enjoyment. People can be intrinsically motivated by the simple pleasure of learning. It can be fueled by interests, or a desire to make an impact on the world. When we are intrinsically motivated we do things willingly.

Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation is motivation that is fueled by something outside of oneself. (Example: money, rewards, approval, punishment, embarrassment, public scorn.)

> *The desire to do something because you find it deeply satisfying and personally challenging inspires the highest levels of creativity, whether it's in the arts, sciences, or business."*
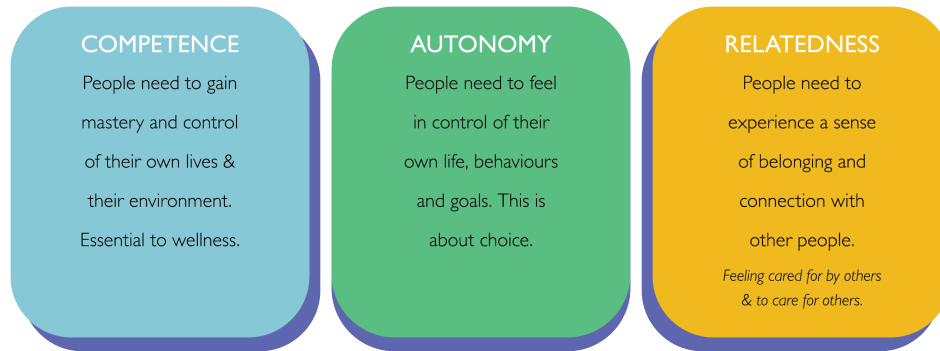> *~Teresa Amabile*

The success of an organization is dependent on the motivation of those involved. There are many things we can do to create a positive organizational culture filled with engaged, innovative, and motivated staff/volunteers.

When creating the conditions that support intrinsic motivation, we must consider competency, autonomy, and relatedness.

self-determination theory

COMPETENCE

People need to gain mastery and control of their own lives & their environment. Essential to wellness.

AUTONOMY

People need to feel in control of their own life, behaviours and goals. This is about choice.

RELATEDNESS

People need to experience a sense of belonging and connection with other people.

Feeling cared for by others & to care for others.

Based on the work of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci.

Competence

As human beings, we all need to feel effective, competent, and well-trained. We must have regular opportunities to continue our growth and learning.

- Growth–consistently learning new skills
- Mastery
- Increases our capacity for risk-taking, and dealing with uncertainty
- It is essential that we have a sense of control within our own lives
- Fuels our sense of purpose
- Encourages curiosity

Autonomy

Within teams, valuing autonomy means that employees/volunteers must have some agency and decision making power over how they fulfill their tasks and duties. Micromanaging erodes autonomy and breaks down trust. When we create conditions that allow for a measure of autonomy, we encourage intrinsic motivation. We must create clear boundaries so that all team members have clarity of expectations.

- Human beings NEED to have choice
- Personal-responsibility is essential to our well-being
- We can easily get stuck in auto-pilot when we don't have choice
- Mindfulness about what choices are life-giving, supportive, and what is detrimental to our

well-being

Relatedness

When people feel a sense of belonging they are more apt to feel engaged and motivated. As leaders, we are responsible for creating a culture that fosters the development of relationships and connections within our team. Celebrating wins and victories, and mourning losses together supports the cultivation of a strong, connected culture.

- Self-determination isn't an individualistic thing. Hyper-individualism doesn't actually support true self-determination. We need connection. We need belonging. We need community. We need support.
- We need to be cared for, and we need to care for others.
- Support systems are necessary.

What are some small practices you can do as a leader to support self-determination?

In the article, [*How to apply Self-determination theory to boost workplace motivation*](#) (Wedgwood, 2020) the author shares what his organization does to encourage motivation in their organization:

> To boost staff competence, we encourage peer-to-peer mentoring to ensure people of varying levels of seniority can coach each other. This reinforces skills, encourages knowledge-sharing, and creates empowered workers. We also have lunch-time learning sessions, where anyone can run sessions to help the rest of the team learn a new skill. This encourages competence and relatedness, as it promotes team cohesion and unity too. We also promote relatedness by having team night outs, lunches, quizzes and employee of the month awards. Finally, we demonstrate autonomy by letting our people work remotely and benefit from flexible working schedules. This ensures a healthy work-life balance and demonstrates trust.

- When have you felt the most motivated in a job or at school?
- What is it about that experience that increased your intrinsic motivation?
- Have you ever noticed a difference in your motivation level when you are truly interested in something, vs doing it for an extrinsic reward?

"The role of a leader is not to come up with all the great ideas. The role of a leader is to create an environment in which great ideas can happen."
~Simon Sinek, Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action

Respect, Dignity, and Equity

Definition from the Core Values: All human beings have intrinsic value. Peer support workers acknowledge that deep worth by:

- **practicing cultural humility and sensitivity**
- **serving with a trauma-informed approach**
- **offering generosity of assumption in communication and conflict**
- **mindfully addressing personal biases**

Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

Before continuing with this section, please make sure you have read all of the following modules:

- Cultural Humility
- Principles in Trauma-Informed Care
- Connection and Communication
- Creating an Ecology of Self-Determination

As we talked about at the beginning of this module, leadership requires us to think deeply about power, and the potential misuse of power. Many people have had difficult, even traumatic, experiences because of the misuse of power by someone in a leadership role.

The Core Value of "respect, dignity, and equity" is very complex and layered. We cover many topics important for student leaders to consider in the modules mentioned above. In this section we will simply highlight a few aspects of the core values as they relate to and impact on leadership.

Practicing Cultural Humility and Sensitivity

The research article, *Making a Case for Culturally Humble Leadership Practices through a Culturally Responsive Leadership Framework* (Campos-Moreira et al. 2020) addresses the issue of cultural humility and leadership in the quote below.

> Three concepts aid in equity and inclusion: (1) leadership humility, (2) cultural humility, and (3) cultural competence. Leadership humility encompasses: (a) a manifested willingness to view oneself accurately, (b) a displayed appreciation of others' strengths and contributions, and (c) "teachability" or a willingness to learn from all people (Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 1518). Cultural humility, along with cultural competence,

suggests a way of knowing and behaving to enact culturally responsive leadership practices. Both cultural competence and cultural humility are fluid processes. Cultural competence nestled within cultural humility serves as a lens to explore self-awareness and engage in critical self-reflection. Cultural humility involves an open and fluid process of self-reflection, consideration for diverse experiences, and shared power; it is a lifelong learning process that must be exercised daily with "kindness, civility, and respect" for all (Foronda, Baptiste, Ousman, & Reinholdt, 2016, p. 214). Scholars generally agree that cultural competence is a process of becoming more culturally aware, skillful, knowledgeable, and inclusive of others (Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Carrizales, Zahradnik, & Silverio, 2016). The practice of cultural competence is grounded in the values of equity, diversity, ethics, and effectiveness (Carrizales et al., 2016)...Thus, leaders who embrace cultural competency consider the cultural context in which they have to execute their leadership.

As leaders, we set the tone for our teams. In order to foster an environment that is equitable and inclusive, and one that invites full, safe participation by all members, we must do a few things: We must practice and model cultural humility and cultural competence, which includes maintaining a posture of humility and curiosity when we get it wrong. And we must keep open and clear communication with our team on these issues, fostering dialogue that is rooted in curiosity and responding quickly when something happens in the group that is harmful or that violates these principles.

- As a leader, what are the most important components of cultural humility that should impact your leadership style?
- It is important to create a culturally safe atmosphere on a team. How will you do that?
- What does equity mean within a team, made up of people from diverse backgrounds and cultures?
- How does a leader serve their team with a mindset of equity?

Serving with a Trauma-Informed Approach

Everything we covered in the Principles of Trauma-Informed Care module is deeply important in our approach to leadership. When we are trauma-informed, we recognize how pervasive trauma is. This means that many of the people on our teams will come to the table with trauma. It is important for every team member to be trauma-informed in their work; as leaders we must be especially aware of the impact our words and behaviours can have on those within our teams, and do everything we can to avoid retraumatizing people.

We must understand how the stress response works, and create a culture that fosters safety, transparency, and choice.
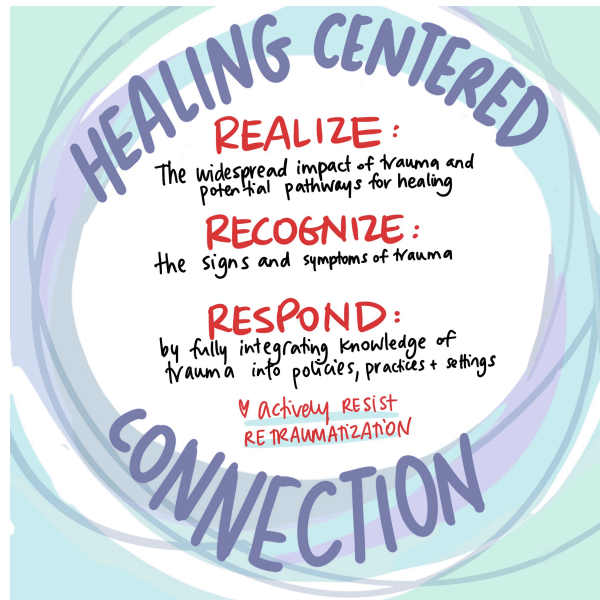
- As a leader, how will trauma-informed care principles impact communication with your team?
- What are three things you can do to create a sense of safety with your team?
- What will you do to ensure transparency with people on your team, while still having boundaries, and respecting confidentiality?
- How can we encourage and support psychological health and safety on our teams? What self-care practices can we encourage?

Offer Generosity of Assumption in Communication and Conflict

Conflict is something that will always come up when human beings gather. Even without a magic crystal ball, you can pretty much guarantee that conflict will come up on your team. Know that conflict is not a sign of failure or mismanagement! As leaders we must do our best to normalize conflict, and create an environment that is open and accepting of multiple perspectives in order to address and transform conflict for the good of our team.

Again, when we get rigid and stuck in a single perspective, we begin to assume things that are not likely accurate.

In times of conflict, a good leader:

- Gets curious about their own beliefs and assumptions

- Asks questions so they can understand each person's perspective
- Understands that there is often not one absolute truth, that everything is nuanced and has multiple layers
- Knows that there is always more to the story–like an iceberg where 90% is underneath the water
- Knows that the brain craves certainty, and that means that we fill in the blanks and make assumptions, even if that facts aren't there
- Understands that conflict can be an opportunity to see things differently, and that can equal innovation and new approaches
- Understands their own triggers, and has a plan on how they can support their own nervous system
- Responds rather than reacts
- Is aware of the power of language, and how words can hurt.

What are some ways you can become more comfortable with conflict?

What can you do to support yourself when you are triggered?

Who can you talk to when you are triggered or stressed out who can support and challenge you to see from a different perspective?

Mindfully Address Personal Biases

The most important thing we can do to address our biases, is to recognize we have them. Even the best leaders, professors, teachers and parents have biases. We are not exempt from this. When we recognize we have biases, we can then address them. If we think we are seeing objectively, then we are stuck in a single perspective. A good leader is able to recognize when they are wrong, and knows how important it is to seek out different opinions and perspectives.

- What are some things you can do to become more aware of your own biases?
- As a leader, how do you create a culture where others become more comfortable with noticing and addressing their own biases?
- As a leader how do you create the environment that encourages people to let go of defensiveness and the need to be right?

Belonging and Community

Definition from the Core Values: Peer support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those

social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.

Balancing the goals of accomplishing tasks or achieving goals while building and maintaining a strong team can be challenging. It is very easy to get caught up in a power over mindset when we are only focused on a narrow idea of success as accomplishing goals.

- Have you been in a situation where you have felt micromanaged by someone? This could be at school, perhaps working on a group project, within your family of origin, or even when you have worked in a part-time job? (Micromanaging is when someone takes control over someone else's work. They require constant updates and discourage independent thinking.)
- If you have been in this situation, how did it make you feel? Did it make you feel connected to the team, or disconnected?
- What would you have appreciated instead of being micromanaged?
- When you lead, how will you challenge yourself to not micromanage others, yet keep them accountable?

When we are leading, we must challenge ourselves to hold multiple perspectives while we approach decision-making. We must be willing to let go of what we think is the "right thing" to do, and instead seek out the thoughts and ideas of others. As we have talked about in the *Creating an Ecology of Self-Determination* module, we can only see through our past experiences and our own worldview. In order to see differently we must intentionally seek out other perspectives. This means that we must create checks and balances on our teams that support everyone to challenge and let go of rigid mindsets. When we are rigid and singularly focused, we steamroll people and breakdown trust and connection.

Holding up this core value is not easy though, especially when we have to answer to people above us who may be working with a different leadership paradigm.

Going back to the core value of community is essential to ensure that we lead with a power to, power with, and power within approach.
See more about this in the Power and Leadership section of this module.

A good leader,

- Is able to be humble, honest, and say "I don't know"
- Surrounds themselves with people who are willing to speak up and share different perspectives
- Is willing to listen deeply to others, and to listen to understand
- Recognizes that everyone messes up, and is able to offer kindness and grace to themselves and others when mistakes happen

- Practices self-compassion and recognizes that those who practice self-compassion are more likely to take personal responsibility for their actions, because they don't feel the need to be defensive
- Recognizes their privilege, and chooses to open their eyes to see injustices that they might be dealing with personally
- Creates an open and inclusive culture
- Views team members with compassion as people with full and meaningful lives
- Asks what happened, with a generosity of assumption, rather than placing blame on others
- Knows how to laugh and have fun

Curiosity

"Stopping gives you the chance of knowing less, of halting the perception-narrowing force of the cognitive biases that we are always trying to confirm, of taking the jerk out of knee-jerk and sitting with the meaninglessness of the stimuli, even if it doesn't feel meaningless."
~ Beau Lotto

Definition from the Core Values: We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.

This curiosity isn't fueled by personal gain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support.

We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

Curiosity is one of the Core Values, and it's so important to keep nurturing curiosity as you move into leadership and/or facilitation–both for yourself, and for participants. When we are curious, we foster a beginner's mindset that is open to possibilities. Curiosity can also interrupt the stress response and keep us from reacting in anger to others around us. When things don't go as planned, or we feel like we messed up, we can avoid getting stuck in a shame spiral when we get curious and choose to learn instead of ruminating on our mistakes.

Embracing curiosity is about choosing to step into uncertainty and possibility by asking good questions. We often get stuck on wanting to know the answers, but the question is often more important than the answer, because it opens the door to exploration. Question everything. Don't get stuck in the status quo.

- *As a leader, how can you practice curiosity on a daily basis?*
- *What can you get curious about?*
- *How can you remind yourself to let go of assumptions, realize that you can't possibly see the whole picture, and get curious instead?*

In the Forbes article, *Curiosity: A Leadership Trait That Can Transform Your Business To Achieve Extraordinary Results* (Malik, 2020), says,

> Another benefit of modeling the behavior of curiosity is your actions will be viewed by many as permission to do the same. The most significant barriers to engagement and the root cause of toxic work culture is fear — fear of reprisal for offering their opinion, fear of rejection of their ideas and plain old fear. Identifying and removing sources of anxiety is the first step in credibly changing engagement and culture.

"Choosing to be curious is choosing to be vulnerable because it requires us to surrender to uncertainty. It wasn't always a choice; we were born curious. But over time, we learn that curiosity, like vulnerability, can lead to hurt. As a result, we turn to self-protecting—choosing certainty over curiosity, armor over vulnerability, and knowing over learning."
~Brené Brown, (Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.)

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Section 2: Personal Leadership Exercises

Reflections on Leadership

Leadership is a term used often – and often means different things to different people. There are so many approaches to leadership, so it's important to examine our own ideas around and experience of leadership.

Before we move too far ahead in this module, spend a bit of time reflecting on what leadership means to you. Also, consider what goals you have – or would like to set – for developing your own leadership skills.

For Reflection

- How would you personally define leadership?
- Have you had an opportunity to lead others? If so, what were some positive aspects of the experience?
- What were some opportunities for growth that you would like to develop in the future?
- Think of someone you know, who you believe to be a good leader. What are some qualities and characteristics that you think makes them a good leader?
- How did interactions with this leader make you feel about yourself and your own skills and abilities?
- Think about someone you know who is or has been in a leadership role but who you believe doesn't have good leadership skills. Why do you feel like they aren't a good leader?
- How did interactions with this leader make you feel about yourself and your own skills and abilities?
- What are some things you have learned from these people that you can apply to your own growth as a leader? What are your own leadership goals?
- Do you feel that leadership skills have application outside of managing people in a work setting? If so, what are those applications?

Exercises in Developing Your Leadership Skills

"Great Leaders Create More Leaders Good leaders have vision and inspire others to help them turn vision into reality. Great leaders create more leaders, not followers. Great leaders have vision, share vision, and inspire others to create their own."
~Roy T. Bennett

This next section of the module is here for you to consider and explore your own leadership skill development. Consider some personal goals you might have as you work through this section of the module.

Developing Your Vision: A Personal Goal and Vision Planning Exercise

"You've got to think about big things while you're doing small things so that all the small things go in the right direction." ~ Alvin Toffler

Discovering Your Purpose

What gets you out of bed in the morning? What excites or moves you? What are your hopes and dreams for the future? What are some ideas that you hold close to your heart?

Feeling fulfilled often starts with asking big, deep questions. **Your WHY is the bigger vision for what you want your life to be like, and how you want to feel.**

At its best, exploring your *why* taps into uncovering the vision you have for your life. If you struggle in this process, that's okay. When you keep your *why* in mind, you will at the very least choose some goals that are a little richer and more aligned with where you feel you want to go.

If the idea of finding your why is new or hard for you, we invite you to explore some bigger thoughts. Think of some foundational experiences in your life that made you who you are. What has motivated you to take this training? What are some things that inspire hope in you? What gives you a little spark of purpose?

You are the hero of your own life

Even though it might not feel like you're a hero, you are! Think of a real-life hero, or even a favourite movie character or comic book character. All heroes have an origin story; most of the time we have some awareness of our hero's origin story – the compelling and often difficult journey that shaped them.

Who did you think of? Why did you pick that person/character as a hero? What about their strengths, or character appeals to you? Do you see some of yourself in them?

Consider your own origin story

- You have been through some hard things. You've had some ah ha moments. Let's tap into that.
- Can you think of a defining moment that made you decide to take this training?
- What are bits of your story that make you, YOU? (They can be good, or difficult experiences.)
- What was the hardest thing you had to overcome?
- Who supported you? Who are your allies and mentors?
- What are your superpowers (we all have superpowers/strengths)?
- How do you see all of this supporting your WHY?
- Spend some time over these next few weeks thinking about these things, and how all of them are connected to your WHY, or your sense of purpose.

Stay curious.

Identifying Your Strengths

In general, most people struggle with identifying personal strengths. Outside of a job interview when we are asked to identify our strengths, it can feel braggy, narcissistic or immodest.

But identifying personal strengths is essential to creating the life we want. We all have strengths, whether we see them or not. Discovering what they are and then building on them supports us to grow our character and our resiliency. Strengths aren't static; they can shift and change, especially when we are intentional about developing them.

Owning our personal core strengths supports community and interconnection. When each of us are clear on what strengths we bring to the table, we can work together to be a stronger whole.

In the book Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification (Peterson, Seligman, 2004), the authors identify the following 24 character strengths:

- Integrity
- Enthusiasm
- Social Intelligence
- Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
- Gratitude
- Optimism
- Humour
- Purpose
- Self-Control
- Prudence
- Humility

- Forgiveness
- Leadership
- Fairness
- Teamwork
- Perspective
- Love of Learning
- Open-mindedness
- Curiosity
- Creativity
- Bravery
- Perseverance

All of us have most of these character strengths, but some will be stronger or more developed in us than others.

- What are some strengths that you feel are missing from this list?
- What would you say are your top 3 strengths?

The Positivity Project website article *Character Strengths* (n.d.) states:

> Character strengths aren't about ignoring the negative. Instead, they help us overcome life's inevitable adversities. For example, you can't be brave without first feeling fear; you can't show perseverance without first wanting to quit; you can't show self-control without first being tempted to do something you know you shouldn't.

Skills Inventory

Strengths are not the same as skills. People often use these terms interchangeably, but they are two different things.

Strengths = who you are.
Skills = what you can do.

Strengths are associated with character (e.g. focused, humourous, open-minded, kind), while skills are associated with our abilities. Some examples of skills include: cooking/culinary, carpentry, car repair and restoration, drawing, accounting, web design, etc.).

We can all build our skillset; we can learn to cook, rock climb, play guitar, or draw, and we can improve on those skillsets through practice. So many people discover new skill sets even later in life. Skill building is one of the key points within self-determination theory.

When goal or vision planning it is useful to be clear on your skills, knowing that you can and will continue to learn. Learning new skills is part of the magic of life. Skills are ever growing, and

everyone starts off rough in the journey of learning to do something new. Skill development requires practice, attention, and time.

- What are some of your skills?
- What are some skills you would like to develop?

Section 3: Facilitation Skills

Facilitation Skills for Delivering Workshops and Leading Events

Within your role on campus, you might choose to facilitate workshops or events. Facilitation is a skill that you will build and develop with time and practice. If you are just starting out, be patient with yourself, and try to arrange to co-facilitate with someone who has experience. Learn from them.

Facilitate means to make (an action or a process) easier.

Facilitating is different from teaching. A teacher is meant to be a subject matter expert; we expect our teachers to know what they are talking about! However, the role of a facilitator is a different role than that of a teacher. As a facilitator you don't have to be an expert. You don't need to know everything; you are there to facilitate and support the group process. Depending on what you are facilitating, you are there to support the group members to tap into their own self-determination.

Exploring Your WHY as a Facilitator

If you have chosen to be a facilitator, this section is an opportunity for you to explore your reasons for facilitating and getting clear on your WHY as you do this work.

Understanding why we do something – including facilitation – is so important. As we've talked about already in this module, we are more motivated and effective when we are clear on our WHY or our purpose. Also, participants will be more engaged in your workshop if you are excited about the work.

Grab a notebook, sit in a quiet place, and dig into the following questions and prompts. It may take a bit of time to go through them. The main point is to reflect on them and consider what they bring up for you; don't feel that you have to answer everything. Refer back to this throughout your time facilitating and notice changes in your answers and perspective.

1. This is the vision I have for the participants of the training (collectively and individually):
2. I will commit to develop my leadership and facilitation skills by:
3. The following are some of my unique strengths and abilities:
4. Starting something new can be uncomfortable. I commit to taking care of myself, while leaning into the discomfort. This is how I will take care of myself while I am facilitating:
5. I always want to improve. No one is perfect, and I let go of any expectations of perfection. I

will not allow my inner critic to boss me around. With great self-kindness, I choose to see the following as opportunities for growth in my journey as a facilitator:

6. We each have our own facilitation style. I want to develop my own style. If I co-facilitate, I will be open with them about me–including my strengths and struggles. This is how I see myself as a facilitator:

7. I am committed to creating a safe learning environment. These are some ways I will create a culture of safety (*we will address this in the next section*)

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Any learning environment needs to be trauma-informed. Many people have had difficult and even traumatic experiences within formal education, because trauma-informed practices weren't followed in classroom settings. As a review, please re-read the trauma-informed care module, this time through the lens of facilitation.

As facilitators it's our job to create a safe container/space where participants can feel free to be themselves and sit with the discomfort that comes with stretching and learning.

The differences between an emotionally safe and unsafe learning environment can sometimes be subtle. Other times the differences can be substantial and noticeable. When we feel safe in a group environment, the experience is always profound.

Here's a list of some actions facilitators can take to support a safe learning environment:

1. **Hold yourself to a standard of honouring each participant with unconditional high regard.** This is true even – especially! -when you might find someone challenging or irritating to work with. If you find that someone rubs you the wrong way, it is important to reflect on why that is, identify your triggers, and create a plan for how you will support yourself to relax when you get irritated. (This is another reason why it can be helpful to have a co-facilitator.)

2. **Use the Core Values to shape the training.** Read the Core Values before each session. Set some actionable intentions for the session based on the Core Values. After the session is over, reflect on how that went, and any opportunities for growth.

3. **Speak in a way that is calming to one's nervous system.** If you speak using words or a tone that is accusing or judgmental, it will cause people to get defensive. When people are defensive it triggers a stress response, and that decreases the possibility of connection and useful, productive dialogue. Shame spirals are so destructive, and they break down the safe learning environment.

4. **Don't be afraid of conflict or push back.** Remember from the Connection and Communication module that conflict doesn't need to be a bad thing. In fact, if a conflict comes up during a training, and you have worked to create a safe container, it can be a great

learning opportunity. *Review the section on conflict from the training, and the section on "Debate vs. Dialogue."*

5. **Lead with questions, not answers.** Embody the Core Value of curiosity. We want to facilitate a positive group experience; we are not there to be experts and have all the answers. This doesn't mean that we avoid answering questions people have, presenting the material, or sharing our personal learnings. Just keep in mind that adults learn better when they are self-directed, so leading with questions supports that kind of learning.

6. **Challenge your own assumptions and biases**. Reflect on the Categories and Containers module. Remember that you have a worldview. You have biases and judgements, because you are human. When we are aware of them, we can create space to challenge them. You will find yourself needing to challenge yourself often throughout the training.

7. **Let go of the need to be perfect. Model self-compassion.** It's important to have high expectations of ourselves when we are facilitating. We want to strive to honour the Core Values at all times. But we need to temper that with a sense of gentleness and fierce grace for our imperfection. You *will* mess up at some point. You might say something you regret. You may snap at someone. You may have a day when you feel off. It's ok. Be gentle. You are learning. If you ruminate on it, you may get dragged into a destructive shame spiral. There is a profound freedom that comes with balancing high expectations with self-compassion and accountability. If you mess up, process it, learn from it, commit to applying your learning in the future, and let it go. Don't allow the shame to stick around. If you need to address the group and apologize for something, please do that. That's a powerful way to model accountability, and self-compassion. No one can be perfect all that time, and we do ourselves, the participants, and everyone else a disservice when we are unable to offer ourselves kindness for our imperfections.

8. **Normalize emotions.** We are safe psychologically when we accept ourselves as we are. This includes accepting our emotions. The society we live in often encourages a detachment from our emotions. Talking about emotions is good and can create a safe container for people to really show up. This doesn't mean that people need to spill everything. Remember that you are not a therapist, so workshops should not be group therapy. However, during check-ins, you can ask people to share a word that describes how they are feeling that day. Or after a presentation you can ask people how they felt about it. You can share some of your feelings, and even struggles. Your vulnerability will encourage a sense of safety for others in the group. Often when people share that they are nervous before a presentation, the very act of sharing that fact brings a sense of calm!

9. **Work with the group to create a Community Agreement**. We will explore that in the next section.

10. **Begin each session with a commitment to supporting yourself**. We will also explore that next.

Community Agreements

At the beginning of the first day, take some time to create a Community Agreement (CA). This is basically a set of intentions that the group creates together to ensure a safe learning environment. It's best to keep this agreement strength-based. It isn't a set of arbitrary rules, but instead a commitment to intentionally uphold the Core Values.

It might take a ½ hour to an hour to create this agreement.

You will likely need to give examples.

Explain the purpose: that this is to support a safe learning environment.

Explain what strength-based means in this situation. You may have to kindly, and compassionately support someone to shift their language to be more strength-based.

Some examples of common group rules (not strength-based).	What we are aiming for in a Community Agreement. (strength-based)
No crosstalk	We will choose to give our attention to the person speaking.
No yelling, or conflict.	We will support ourselves when we are irritated or activated. If we encounter conflict we will calm down and address it with compassion.
No sharing of personal information outside the training space.	We will respect all personal stories that are shared in this space, and we will treat it as sacred.
Don't be late.	I will do my absolute best to be on time. If I am running late, I will let the facilitator know.

Once you have created your Community Agreement, start every session by reading it. Make sure it's posted where everyone can see it. Always ask if anyone has anything to contribute.

A Commitment to Support Myself Today

The purpose of the Community Agreement (CA) is to create that sense of safety within the group.

In addition to the CA, it is also important to ask the group at the beginning of *every* session what they will do to support themselves personally during that session. This is a chance for people to make a commitment to their own well-being.

Have easel paper at the front of the room, and scribe people's commitments. If you are using an online format, you can use the chat, or blackboard feature. You are also a part of the group, so

feel free to share as well. In fact, you can start off. Here are some examples of what can show up there, although let the dialogue be natural and come from participants themselves. Only share your own personal commitments.

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Examples

A Commitment to Support Myself Today:

- I will make sure I have coffee close by.
- I will stretch when my body needs it.
- If I am really distracted, I will take a short break to get some fresh air so that I can re-engage.
- I will bring snacks, so I don't get hungry.
- I will be kind to myself.
- It's ok if I cry.
- I will practice mindfulness.
- I will keep my phone on vibrate, and only answer it if I need to support my kids.
- etc...

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In Summary

As a facilitator, creating a safe learning environment means safety and connection are always at the forefront of our minds. We must practice all of these things ourselves and make them a priority in each session.

# Comfort, Sitting with Discomfort, & Growth

Depending on what you are facilitating, people could feel nervous or uncomfortable. In this section we will explore the ideas of comfort and sitting with discomfort.

Safety and Discomfort are not Mutually Exclusive

When people feel safe, they are more apt to move into discomfort and then growth. Discomfort and safety can co-exist.

Generally, we can say that most people prefer comfort over discomfort. However, comfort keeps us in our status quo. All growth requires some level of discomfort. Think of learning any new skill, whether that's riding a bike, learning to cook, or learning watercolour painting. We must pass through discomfort to get to growth. There's sadly no way around it.

As a facilitator it is important to talk about discomfort and normalize it. At the same time, we want to do everything we can to maintain a safe learning environment. It is not our job to take away someone's discomfort, that would be like stealing away their self-determination, but we can support them to feel as safe as possible in spite of the discomfort.
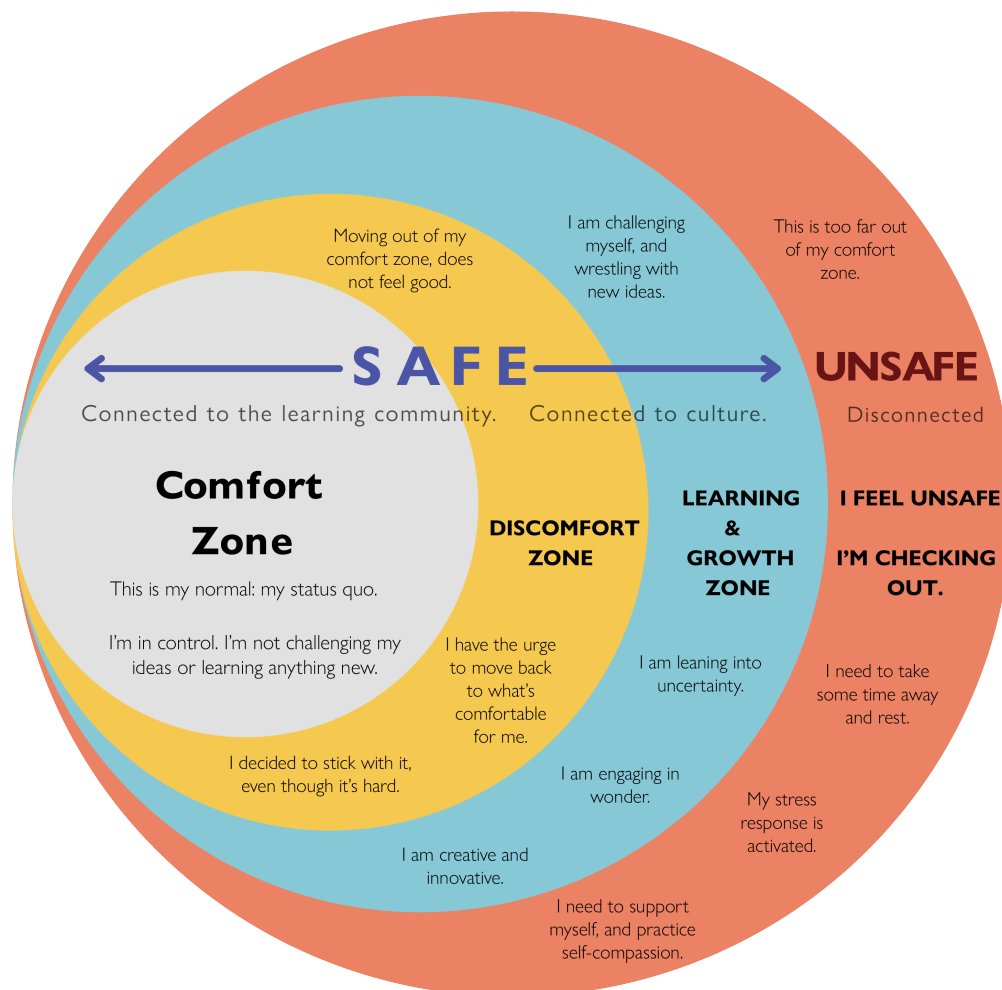
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For optimal learning in trainings, it is important to stay in the yellow and blue zones.

Within your workshops or trainings, there is a time and a place to be in the comfort zone. For example, checking in, ice-breakers, and even tangential chit chat are comfortable and can support a sense of safety. However, staying in the comfort zone suspends learning.

As the infographic above shows, a certain amount of time in the comfort zone is important, but no one can stay there forever and still experience growth. A certain amount of uncertainty is essential for growth.

The unsafe orange zone should always be avoided, though. Remember to always be working to create an ecology that supports safety, transparency, and choice. Set up the space so that people know they can take care of themselves when they feel triggered. Regular check-ins with your group is essential so everyone has a chance to share if anything needs adjustment.

Image Description

Comfort zone

An infographic that demonstrates safe and unsafe zones using circles.

Safe – connected to the learning community and culture. From the most inner circle:

- Comfort Zone
  - This is my normal: my status quo
  - I'm in control. I'm not challenging my ideas or learning anything new.
- Discomfort Zone
  - Moving out of my comfort zone, does not feel good.
  - I have the urge to move back to what's comfortable for me.
  - I decided to stick with it, even though it's hard.
- Learning & Growth Zone
- I am challenging myself, and wrestling with new ideas.
- I am learning into uncertainty.
- I am engaging in wonder.
- I am creative and innovative.

Unsafe – disconnected

- This is too far out of my comfort zone.
- I feel unsafe, I'm checking out.
- I need to take some time away and rest.
- My stress response is activated.
- I need to support myself, and practice self-compassion.

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Media Attribution

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The Facilitation Process

Notice how the Core Values show up in the following sections.

Be Prepared and Show up Early

Depending on what kind of group you are facilitating and how well you know the material, plan to spend some time preparing ahead of time. If you are not well-prepared, you could feel like a deer in the headlights if things don't go as you expected.

You should arrive early to each session. You may have to set up the physical room before people get there and take care of things like making coffee or getting snacks ready. The way the room is set up makes a huge difference in the feeling of connection in the space.

When you are early, you also have time to get comfortable in the space, and relax.

Greet people as they arrive.

Power of Language

Words have power. Be aware of the power they wield and how deeply people can be affected by words. Notice how people are affected by language in the workshop.

As facilitators, we are aware of our language in regard to creating a sense of safety in the group. We want our words to be strength-based and to reflect hope.

We are aware of using people's preferred pronouns. We remember to have people introduce themselves with their preferred pronouns, and ask people to include them on any name tags or place cards.

We take a decolonization mindset. We always remember to give time at the beginning of each session for a meaningful land acknowledgement. We are aware of how groups choose to identify themselves, and we use those preferred terms: Indigenous people, or First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

We use inclusive language. Instead of saying something like "ladies and gentlemen" or "guys," we say "folks."

We are aware of avoiding stigmatizing language that could be triggering for participants. We choose to be intentional about avoiding words like "crazy," "insane."

We avoid words that create a hierarchy in the group.

When we mess up, we apologize, we say we will do better next time, and we move on.

We are also aware that words and language can mean different things to different people. When someone says something that could be open to interpretation (for example the words respect, or self-care) we ask the person to define what that means to them.

It's Okay Not to Know

You do not need to know everything. It's impossible to be knowledgeable on every single topic that could come up in a workshop. It's expected that there will be questions that come up that you won't have the answers to. Don't make something up or share something you have a hunch about. It can cause damage to the group if you don't own the fact that you just don't know. When something comes up you don't have the answer to, try the following:

- Ask the group! Draw on the wisdom in the room
- Look it up online or ask someone in the group to look it up
- Tell people you will research it and get back to them

You Don't Have to be an Expert

Participants are the experts of their own experiences. *Always honour that expertise.*

Create a space where that wisdom and experience can be shared. There's always room for different perspectives. If someone states something that is a clear violation to the Core Values, it will be important to have a dialogue about that, as it could be a really valuable learning moment for the group.

Ask for Volunteers, Don't Call on People

Many people had difficult experiences in school settings growing up. Again, we want to take a trauma-informed approach and create safety, and support choice. One of the ways we ensure safety is that we never call on people directly if they are not volunteering to speak. If you want to ask a question, put the question out to the whole group, not directly to one individual. If you want someone to help with something in the session, ask for volunteers.

Take a *"popcorn" approach* with everything. That means that people volunteer to speak up when they are ready, rather than going around in a circle. This is the case for check-ins and check-outs as well.

Create a Space Where People Feel Empowered to Take Care of Themselves

As a facilitator it is your role to guide the group process, to present material in a way that meets the groups varying needs, and to create a safe learning environment. It is not your role to take care of everyone's individual needs. It's impossible for you to do that. Don't take it on. Everyone has different needs and wants (even around something like the temperature in the room). As a facilitator, you can model what taking care of yourself looks like, and constantly invite others to take care of themselves.

This is why it is important to open each session up with a dialogue about supporting oneselves.

You will give breaks according to the schedule, but if someone needs to take a break for a phone call, or some fresh air, then create an environment where people feel empowered to do that.

Time Keeping

As a facilitator it is essential that you are always aware of the time. Managing time can actually be one of the most challenging parts of facilitation, especially if you have a keen group of participants.

Here are some things to keep in mind regarding time management

- **Know how much time you have for the topic you are covering**.
- **Check the time throughout your session**. Time passes quicker than you think!
- **You may have to pivot in the moment if something is taking longer than you thought.** Be flexible and willing to cut something shorter. You might have to cut out a whole activity.
- **Have extra activities that you can pull out if you end up having too much time.** Simple reflection/dialogue questions are great for this!
- **If you are co-facilitating, make sure your session doesn't eat into your co-facilitators time!** It is so hard for your co-facilitator to have to adapt to less time on the fly
- **If you are short on time and you want to pose a group question, you can say**

something like, *"I'd love to hear from 2 more people."*
- **If the group is on a tangent unrelated to the topic at hand, you will have to redirect them**. You can always jot down the tangent topic on an easel paper and when you have extra time, you can address it.
- **Know that group activities always take longer than you think.** If people have to physically gather in different rooms, work together, come back to the main training space, and present to the larger group–that will take a good amount of time. Prepare accordingly.
- **Keep your instructions clear.**
- **Start on time, and end on time.**

Be OK with Silence

It's very easy to want to fill up all the space with talking. Be ok with silence–even a couple minutes. If you put out a question to the group and no one answers right away, give them time. People need time to think and process. Some people will need more time than others. It may feel awkward for you, but the group will appreciate the time, and your patience.

If people are particularly quiet, you could try an activity, or small group to wake people up.

*Note: If you are doing small groups, always lean towards groups of 3, that way if someone isn't feeling up to talking that day, they have the option to remain quiet. In a group of 2, they don't have a choice.

Remember the acronym W.A.I.T. (Why Am I Talking). If it's just to fill the space, take a breath and allow the silence.

**Also note that some neuro-atypical learners will not be vocal. It's important to be accepting of that. We won't know who is neuro-atypical and who isn't, so we treat everyone the same.

Be Clear with Instructions

When you are explaining steps for group activities, try to be as clear as possible when you explain the steps. It's very easy for people to get confused when hearing instructions. Consider having the instructions written on a white board if possible. If not, ask if anyone needs clarification before people leave to move into their small groups. It's much trickier to sort out instructions when people are already in small groups.

Learn People's Names and Pronouns

Always have name tents and name tags. Preferably for the whole time, but at least for the first few sessions. It's important for you to learn people's names, and it's important for others to also learn them too. People feel valued and accepted when others know their names.

Have thick, dark markers for the name tents/tags so they are easy to read. Some people like to have stickers and fun things that people can add as well.

You will also want people to include their preferred pronouns right on the name tent/tags.

Avoid Sharing Stories that can be Triggering to Others.

Ensuring that the safe space is respected, we must avoid telling triggering stories that talk about details of traumatic events. This will need to be clearly defined and spoken about in the group. Instead, we can use more general words to describe what happened and talk about how we felt in that season of life, rather than sharing details of situations that could be triggering.

Responding to Questions

When someone asks a question in the group, it's important to repeat or paraphrase the question back to them. That way you are making sure you got the question right.

Answer the question or use the group to support you to answer it.

Then ask the person if that answered their question.

Be Prepared: Challenges will Come up.

If you and your co-facilitator have done a good job of creating a safe learning environment (community agreement and support document), you have created a safe container to deal with potential challenges.

Remember in the Connection and Communication module, we talked about how conflict doesn't have to be a big scary thing? This is also the case when challenges come up in a workshop. If you've created a safe space, you can feel more equipped to deal with challenges. The most important thing you can do is to calm your own nervous system, so that you can respond to the challenge, instead of reacting to it.

Co-facilitation is preferable because you will be extra equipped to deal with potential challenges.

For example, if someone in the group is triggered and needs to talk to someone, one of the facilitators can go support them.

You can also create a supportive community, where participants support each other if they are triggered or upset.

Triggers, Trauma, and Different Perspectives

Remember that pain and trauma live in the body. Not everyone feels that pain in the same way. Always facilitate with a trauma-informed approach and know that other people's trauma is different from your own. You can't possibly know everyone's pain or triggers, but when we take a trauma-informed approach, we are far less likely to unintentionally trigger someone.

Always make compassion and empathy a priority. If you're having a rough day before the training, consider taking some time to practice self-compassion before you begin. You are an equal part of the group. It's important that you also take care of yourself when you are feeling triggered or overwhelmed.

You are not the teacher or a trauma therapist. Though you get to support the creation of the container for the safe learning environment, you also can't control everything. You have limitations. Everyone will have different needs, and even a different idea of what safety means to them. You cannot meet everyone's needs, and you cannot guarantee that people won't get triggered in the training. This is why the invitation and expectation of self-care is so important. We can't take care of everyone, but we can invite people to do what they need to do to take care of themselves.

Practice humility and offer generosity of assumption to others. We get into trouble when we start assuming that people are trying to get under our skin on purpose. What if everyone is just doing the best they can in any given moment? When we assume positive intent, we are generous with others, and it keeps *us* out of resentment, and more connected to the group.

Remember to create space for differing perspectives. People will feel less triggered if there is room for differences. But what do you do if someone says something that is just plain offensive, and people in the room are triggered? Since we have created a safe container, the group may address this issue in a constructive way. As facilitators we may still need to say something or guide the conversation. It's important to remember that as humans we need to have a calm nervous system before we can engage in constructive conversations. If our stress hormones are pumping, we will not be able to listen properly. If confronted with an accusatory tone, or judgmental way, a person will get defensive.

That's not to say that we shouldn't say something, but HOW we say it is very important. When

people are defensive, their stress response is engaged, and they are unable to process what we are saying.

> *What are some ways that you can address an issue in a way that encourages constructive dialogue, and not defensiveness?*

Encourage responsible sharing among the participants. Confidentiality is never guaranteed, even if it is talked about in the community agreement. Because of this, it's important to encourage participants to be aware of what they share. In essence, people should only share what they are comfortable having other people know about them. If it feels raw, and really uncomfortable to share, then it might be better not to share in the group setting.

Scribing and Easel Paper

Visuals can really support the learning process for people. Some training spaces have large white boards. However, if they don't, make sure you have some easel paper and a stand with you. If you are online, use the chat and blackboard features. Check with your supervisor about supplies needed. It can be helpful to have a list.

You can use the paper to write down instructions for activities, and to record brainstorm sessions. It's best to have someone else scribe for you. You lose momentum if you are facilitating and scribing at the same time.

Always record participants' comments in their own words. If they say something really long, say "how can I capture what you said to record on the easel paper?"

Use multiple colours so the words are easier to read. Ask people if they can see the colours you are using (Sometimes red or orange can be hard to see. Blue, black, brown, and dark purple tend to be the easiest to see).

Don't write in cursive, as it's also harder to read. Words should be at least an inch tall, so that people in the back of the room can see (Of course if you're in a larger room, adjust accordingly).

Spelling doesn't matter. Just say it right up front! Erase any shame about spelling.

Brainstorming: Know the Difference Between Divergent and Convergent Thinking

Divergent thinking is creative and free flowing. When we are brainstorming, for example, we are

engaging in divergent thinking. Convergent thinking happens when we refine and work out the nitty gritty details of an idea. Convergent thinking must always come after divergent thinking.

The challenge when facilitating a flow of ideas is that people tend to want to move into convergent thinking too soon. For example, an idea gets shared and someone says, "we've tried that before and it doesn't work." or "That is too expensive. We can't possibly do that on our budget." What happens is the flow of ideas stops, and it stops the innovation process.

It's impossible to be both divergent and convergent at the same time. Therefore be strategic about when you choose to dig into the refining process.

If you are facilitating a brainstorm session, make sure to set it up so that participants stay in a creative flow. This might look like laying out some ground rules for the process that involve setting up two separate and distinct parts to the process – the first being a safe and open "sandbox" for ideas to be shared first without any judgement or evaluation, and then a second being a time of examining and discussing ideas that have been shared.

Create an Agenda or Lesson Plan

It is important to have a plan for each session, especially if you are new to facilitating. Without a plan, your session can go off on different tangents and you may miss covering some key things. We know that students are busy, and their time is precious, so one way we honour their time is by making sure we stay on track. Take note of the section on time keeping, as managing your time goes hand-in-hand with using an agenda or lesson plan.

Participants in your workshop will appreciate having their own copy of the agenda as well, so that they can be aware of what is coming in the workshop. You can choose to write an agenda up on a white board, or give them a printed copy.

Your agenda will reflect your topic and your timeframe, so you may have to adjust it each time you facilitate a workshop. However, there are some common components that you'll likely have in every agenda. You can follow the basic overview below for in-person or virtual workshops.

Here are some basic elements

- **Welcome & Housekeeping:** This is where you welcome people to the workshop. Let them know any details they might need to know including timing of breaks, where the washrooms are, whether there are snacks and food provided, where they can buy coffee or snacks if they aren't provided, etc.
- **Share a Land Acknowledgement**
- **Introductions:** Depending on how many people are in your group, introductions are a great warm-up. If it's a large group (more than 20) then introductions will take too long. You can instead ask people to introduce themselves to the people beside them.

  - You must give people some very specific questions to answer in their introduction.
  - The number of questions you ask will depend on your topic and the amount of time you have.
  - Remember that some people might be nervous or uncomfortable, so don't ask anything too personal or deep at this point.
  - Don't call on people ever. Make introductions voluntary. If someone chooses

not to say anything, don't make a big deal of it, just move on.

- ◦ Get people to share popcorn style. Which means people choose to talk when they want to, instead of going around in a circle. This is a more trauma-informed approach, because it's easier for someone to pass. They also speak when they are ready, as opposed to being put on the spot.
- ◦ Here are some sample questions:

  - ■ Name
    Pronouns
  - ■ What do you hope to get out of this workshop? *(This question is really important for you as a facilitator, as it helps you to manage group expectations. You can address some things right then and there if expectations are different than what you are providing, or you can make spontaneous adjustments to your agenda.)*
  - ■ What are you studying?
  - ■ A fun question. *(What are you watching right now? What's your favourite ice cream flavour? What is one of your hobbies? What do you do when you have a break from school?)*

- **Icebreaker:** If you have time, this can be a fun way to start a workshop. An icebreaker can be a little game or challenge that gets the group relaxed, talking, and comfortable. The workshop will flow better if people are warmed up. There are many websites that share ideas for icebreakers. Perhaps at a peer support meeting, together your whole team can brainstorm some ideas of potential ice breakers that will work with the groups you are working with. It can be helpful to have a list to pull from. Some people choose to have the ice breaker related to the topic, but that's not necessary.
- **Talk about Safety:**
  Sometimes a participant in your workshop might feel triggered or overwhelmed. At the beginning of the workshop talk about what people can do when they are triggered. Let people know that it is ok if big emotions come up. As a group you can make an agreement that if someone leaves the room and wants support, then they give a signal. If you are co-facilitating, the person who is in the support role can leave to go talk with the person. Another option is to ask if someone in the workshop wants to be a volunteer support person, and they can go speak with the person if they want support.It's good practice to have a box of tissue in the workshop space, just in case someone needs it.

- **Check-in:** If you are meeting more than once, do a check-in at the beginning of subsequent sessions. You can ask questions like:

  - What's one thing you did to take care of yourself this past week?
  - Describe how you are feeling today in one sentence?

- **Community Agreement:** Take a few minutes to create a safe space by talking about what people need to be able to fully show up in the space. (We cover this in more detail above.) Encourage people to do what they need to do to take care of themselves. If they need to step out and take a break, even if it's not break time, that's ok. Since this isn't a class, the guidelines are different.
- **Preview the agenda:** Like we mentioned, it's great if people have a physical agenda in front of them. Share a little preview of what you will cover in that session
- **Prepare and Plan:** Be very clear on what topics you are covering in the workshop, and be prepared: New facilitators can sometimes go into a workshop underprepared and frazzled, or overprepared and rigid. The more practice you get facilitating, the more you will get to know your facilitation style. As a rule of thumb when you are presenting on a new topic, you will likely need to spend at least a few hours preparing.
- **If you are co-facilitating, be clear on who is presenting what topic:** Divide up the agenda in a way that feels good to both facilitators. This way you can spend more time preparing for the topics you are facilitating on. (However, there is always a chance that someone could be sick, so it's a good idea to be familiar with all of the content.)
- **Know exactly how much time is available for each topic:** We mentioned time-keeping earlier, as it's an important aspect of facilitating. Have a few questions or exercises up your sleeve in case you end early and need to fill some time. If you are co-facilitating, and you end your section a ½ hour early, that means your co-facilitator needs to fill that time. Also if you go over, you will be taking time away from another topic.

- **Facilitate group connection:**

  - Avoid talking all the time, as it can get boring for participants
  - Have some group activities planned
  - Use small groups of 3 or more
  - Ask lots of questions, and get lots of group interaction going

- **Summarize, debrief and check out at the end of the day** Give yourself about some time at the end of the day for this. You'll want to summarize everything you covered. Ask if there are outstanding questions. Spend some time debriefing the day ("how was today for you?"). You can do a check-out as well, asking questions such as:

  - What was a takeaway from today?
  - What will you do to take care of yourself tonight?
  - What was something fun that happened today? As well as debriefing, and checking out, it's a great idea to create some time for self-reflection at the end of the day. Self-reflection promotes learning.

Find Ways to Make it Fun!

Having fun and laughing together is so important! Find opportunities to have fun! Here are some ideas:

- Have fidget toys, pipe cleaners, or play dough at the tables for people who are more kinesthetic.
- Have markers or pencil crayons and colouring sheets available for people who like to doodle.
- Use movie clips or YouTube videos when it works with the topic.
- Have dollar store stickers for name tags.
- Play music when people arrive and leave. (Pick something as neutral as possible.)
- Some people might like doing something crafty. (Although if you choose this, make sure to let people know ahead of time. If they aren't interested, then they don't have to come.)
- Add in a group meditation, but again make it optional, as it may not appeal to everyone.
- Serve snacks and beverages if you have a budget to be able to do so.

Co-Facilitation

Facilitating with another person is ideal. These are reasons you should consider co-facilitation:

- You can divide up the content, and you have less to prepare.
- Whoever is not facilitating at the time, can scribe if needed. It is very awkward to talk and write on an easel pad at the same time.
- If you have two facilitators, one can deal with any issues that might come up during a

session, and the other one can keep on facilitating.

- If one facilitator is sick, then the workshop can continue.
- As facilitators you are able to offer different perspectives, as you both have different experiences.
- Facilitating can be draining. It is great to have someone there who you can share responsibilities with. Then you re-energize by taking a break when you need it.

There are many dynamics that will need to be intentionally talked about as you co-facilitate. Different people have different facilitation styles. It's really good to talk about your needs and preferences. It's recommended that you touch base before training sessions, and also take some time to debrief afterwards.

Adult Learning Principles

Adults learn differently than children. Adults need to know **WHY** they are learning what they are learning (*hence the need for purpose statements and learning objectives*). They also need to understand **HOW** the knowledge will be applied.

Young children are like little blank slates, and they soak up information without needing to know why they are learning something. Adults come to the table with an abundance of existing knowledge, experience, and wisdom. Adults also come with a well-defined worldview, and often fixed beliefs. This means we need to approach the facilitation of new ideas with deep respect and understanding for different perspectives.

As facilitators we need to build on existing knowledge.

Most adults engage in learning because it will lead them towards a specific goal, often but not always job-related. Adults tend to engage in learning for reasons such as personal growth and development (*a wellness workshop*), personal interest (*a pottery class, or guitar lessons*), or to achieve a career goal (*a new job, or a promotion*).

Utilize Pre-Existing Knowledge

Everyone is coming to the table with a wealth of knowledge. The role of the facilitator is to guide the learning process. This includes dissemination of the knowledge and experience already present in the room.

Some people might need some support to see things from a different perspective. We still need to tap into knowledge already present and build on it.

Be Goal-Oriented

Be clear on goals and objectives. When we facilitate, we must begin with the end in mind. We are clear about what we want people to leave the session with. Which means we need to be clear about what we are doing. Learning objectives need to be clear and measurable.

Stephen Covey writes about beginning with the end in mind in his book The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People:

"Begin with the end in mind" is based on the principle that all things are created twice. There's a mental or first creation, and a physical or second creation to all things."

Collaboration

Mutuality is one of our Core Values. Everyone is learning together. Collaboration enhances learning.

Knowledge Application

Adults learn better in an experiential setting–processing and working with the material encourages learning. Consider this: how possible is it for someone to learn computer coding, or watercolour painting by just reading about it? It's quite ridiculous to think that someone can learn any skill without actually doing the work.

Absorbing the material, and then applying it is a very important part of the learning process.

In Summary

Though this is a large module, the topic of leadership and facilitation goes much deeper than we can cover here. If you choose to take on a leadership role, this will be a long and beautiful journey of both challenge and growth for you. Know that it takes time to integrate this knowledge into practice. You will learn, you will grow, you will screw up, and that's all part of the process. Learn to be kind and gentle with both yourself and others as you walk this path, while still holding yourself up to a high standard.

Practicing self-compassion is essential for leaders. Offering kindness to ourselves when we make mistakes is important, because we are less apt to be defensive, and more likely to take personal responsibility and grow from difficult experiences.

You will screw up from time to time, because *everyone does*. No one is perfect. No one. Own your humanity.

Apologize with humility, learn from the experience, and do better next time. Let go of the shame. Because shame will make you angry, defensive, and keep you stuck.

You will work with people who are stronger leaders/facilitators than you are. This is because they have more experience. You will get there too! Don't expect to do something one or two times and be an expert. It's just not possible. Work with people who know more than you, learn from them without letting yourself be intimidated,

Just remember that every single human being is on a learning journey. We are constantly evolving. Embrace that.

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This page provides a record of edits and changes made to this book since its initial publication. Whenever edits or updates are made in the text, we provide a record and description of those changes here. If the change is minor, the version number increases by 0.01. If the edits involve substantial updates, the version number increases to the next full number.

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