

New England MIRECC Peer Education Center
Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital
200 Springs Road, Bedford, MA 01730

Making Effective Use of Your Personal Recovery Story in
Professional Peer Support Relationships

Activity #2: Personal Illness Story or Recovery Story...You Decide!

Instructions: Read each vignette and then answer the related questions.

Vignette #1:

Sal is a Vietnam War Veteran who recently had a relapse related to alcohol abuse and then entered treatment at the local VHA medical center. While in treatment, Sal meets with Joe, a peer specialist who is also a Vietnam War Veteran. During their conversation, Joe tells Sal a brief personal story about his history with post-traumatic stress disorder and alcoholism to put Sal at ease about Sal's recent relapse. Joe shares that, over the years, he suffered several relapses, but he feels he has "finally gotten it right." With the help of therapy, medication, and being able to share his painful war experiences with other Veterans, Joe feels that he might finally be on the right track. Joe states that he wants to help Sal and other Veterans to also feel better.

Questions for Vignette #1:

- Is this an example of an illness story or a recovery story? Why?
- Do you think that Joe sharing his personal story with Sal was helpful or harmful? Why?

Vignette #2:

Suzette is a Gulf War Veteran who recently enrolled for health care services at the local VHA medical center. She wants to receive help because her mood frequently changes and she does not understand why. Lately, she has been feeling depressed, and she wonders if she might have bipolar disorder. At the medical center's Women's Health Clinic, Suzette meets Martine, a Veteran who is a peer specialist. Suzette feels excited to have another female Veteran to talk to, and she and Martine go to Martine's office to talk further. During their conversation, Suzette tells Martine about her concerns regarding her recent depression and her speculation about whether she might have bipolar disorder because she experiences severe mood swings. Martine listens to Suzette and then tells Suzette about her own experiences living with depression and using VHA mental health services for assistance. Martine tells Suzette that her

own recovery has transformed her life. Martine shares that she went from severe drug use and homelessness in her past to her current life that is now focused on helping others through her work as a VHA peer specialist. As Martine states how much her life has changed for the better since beginning her path to recovery, Suzette admits that she feels hopeful that she can get a handle on her own issues and return to living a meaningful and productive life.

Questions for Vignette #2:

- Is this an example of an illness story or a recovery story? Why?
- Do you think Martine telling her personal story to Suzette was helpful or harmful? Why?

Vignette #3:

Jorge and Melinda are VHA peer specialists who work in the inpatient substance abuse treatment program at the local VHA medical center. They have agreed to co-facilitate a “Life Changes” peer support group in the program. As part of their role, it is expected that Jorge and Melinda will share part of their personal recovery stories with the Veterans in the group. During the first group meeting, Jorge tells the group members about his history of addiction and how years of physical and emotional abuse took their toll, leaving him feeling hopeless for much of his life. After Jorge finishes, Melinda tells the group members about the many ways that her life has changed since entering treatment and beginning her own recovery. Wanting to be a positive example for the group, Melinda shares details about the new apartment that she recently obtained with the help of the VA Supported Housing Program and the service connection rating that she was awarded. She also tells the group members that she will soon be going back to school to study to become a social worker, thanks to the assistance that she received from the medical center’s vocational rehabilitation services program. As Melinda continues to discuss the details of her recovery and recent life changes, some of the group members grow restless. One group member walks out of the room.

Questions for Vignette #3:

- Are these examples of illness stories or recovery stories? Why?
- Do you think that Jorge and Melinda sharing their personal stories was helpful or harmful? Why?