

# Making Effective Use of Your Recovery Story in Peer Support Relationships

**Mark Parker, BA, Certified Peer Specialist**  
**Michael Uraine, Certified Peer Specialist**

**New England MIRECC Peer Education Center**



**VA** Defining  
**HEALTH CARE** **EXCELLENCE**  
in the 21st Century

# Learning Objectives

- ❖ Identify the importance of self-disclosure in providing peer support.
- ❖ Distinguish between illness and recovery stories.
- ❖ Define components of an *effective* recovery story.
- ❖ Outline the benefits and risks associated with sharing either an illness or recovery story.

# Activity #1 – Recovery Story

## *First Things First*

Please think about your answers to the following questions:



- ❖ What have you learned about yourself and your recovery that could inspire others working on their recovery if you share the information?
- ❖ How would you communicate your recovery story to others?

# Lived Experience as a Valuable Recovery Tool

- ❖ One of the major “recovery tools” that peer support providers bring to mental health services is sharing their own recovery story.
- ❖ The major reason why the recovery story is such a powerful tool is that it is your own personal story shared just the way it happened.
- ❖ In your peer support work, the Veterans you are supporting can be inspired by hearing the truth, hope, and possibilities implicit in your recovery story.

# The Importance of Self-Disclosure in Peer Support Relationships

When used appropriately, self-disclosure:

- ❖ Creates a climate of mutuality in peer support relationships.
- ❖ Fosters trust between peer support providers and the Veterans they are serving.
- ❖ Instills hope that things can change—that life can get better.

# Illness vs. Recovery

*What is your story?*



# Focus of an *Illness Story*

- ❖ Focuses on the impact of diagnosis.
- ❖ Features the disabling effect of the diagnosis.
- ❖ Limits the conversation to the sharing of war stories related to the illness.
- ❖ Promotes the reliving of difficult times.
- ❖ Supports thinking of life as limited.
- ❖ Lends to a pervasive hopelessness—the belief that this is the way life will always be.

# Risks and Benefits of Sharing an *Illness Story*

## Illness Story *Benefits*:

- ❖ Promotes a kind of connectedness—Shows you have “been there.”
- ❖ Shows understanding about what another person is going through.
- ❖ Promotes empathy.

## Illness Story *Risks*:

- ❖ May keep the person stuck in thinking of him/herself as being sick.
- ❖ Person hearing the illness story may believe the illness story is not as bad as his/her own story.

# Focus of a *Recovery* Story

- ❖ Focuses on change as being possible.
- ❖ Highlights an individual's strengths.
- ❖ Promotes health and wellness.
- ❖ Features overcoming barriers.
- ❖ Supports the sharing of what has worked for you in overcoming challenges and maintaining your wellness.

# Risks and Benefits of Sharing *a Recovery Story*

## Recovery Story *Benefits*:

- ❖ Supports recovery—Change is possible.
- ❖ Shows recovery as a process—It is non-linear.
- ❖ Promotes and instills hope.

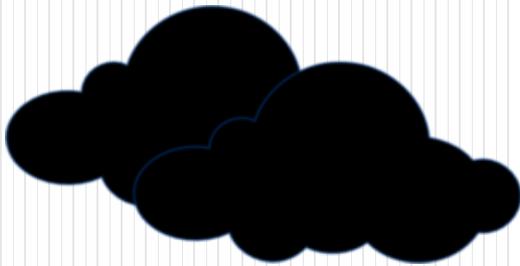
## Recovery Story *Risks*:

- ❖ May seem as if promoting that “my way” is the only way toward recovery.
- ❖ Unfair expectations; setting the bar too high (or too low).
- ❖ Focuses on the peer provider and not the person being supported.
- ❖ Your level of success may seem unattainable to someone in distress.

# Activity #2 – Recovery Story

## *Illness/Recovery Story...You Decide!*

Examples of Illness Stories & Recovery Stories



vs.



What makes them different?  
What makes them *helpful*?

# Components of Your Recovery Story

- ❖ What were some of the early indications that you were beginning to have difficulties?
- ❖ Describe yourself and your situation when you were at your worst.
- ❖ What helped you move from where you were to where you are now?
- ❖ How did you accomplish this? What did you do? What did others do to help you?
- ❖ What have you had to overcome to get where you are today?

# Components of Your Recovery Story (Continued)

- ❖ What have you learned about yourself and your recovery?
- ❖ What are some of the strengths you have developed and used?
- ❖ What types of supports have you developed and used?
- ❖ What are some of the things you do to remain on your path to wellness and recovery?

# Effectively Communicating Your Recovery Story

## What is the other person willing to hear?:

- ❖ Use where the person is in his/her own recovery journey to guide which part(s) of your story to share.
- ❖ Give careful consideration to the part(s) of your recovery story that may be helpful to the person at this time in his/her recovery.
- ❖ Be mindful—Are you involving the person in the conversation or are you talking at him/her?
- ❖ Use brief snippets of your recovery story when applicable.
- ❖ Remember—The purpose of self-disclosing is to *benefit others*. The focus should not stay on *you* for long.

# Contexts Where Sharing Your Recovery Story Could Occur

- ❖ One-on-one peer support interventions with Veterans
- ❖ Facilitation of peer support groups
- ❖ Presentations to VA clinical providers
- ❖ Presentations for community organizations
- ❖ Essentially....It could occur anywhere!

\*\*Remember\*\* : Use brief snippets and make sure what you share is relevant to your audience.



# Activity #3 – Recovery Story

## *When and What to Keep In/Leave Out of Your Recovery Story*

### Group Role Play



# Final Thoughts on Sharing Your Recovery Story

- ❖ Is the recovery story you are relating in your past or from the past? Ideally, your recovery story should include what is going well in your current life.
- ❖ Are the details you are sharing relevant and relatable to the individual(s) you are helping? This is key!
- ❖ Are the brief snippets you are sharing about your personal recovery story focused on tragedy or *transformation*? The positive, transformative experiences you have had should have a key place in your recovery story.

# References

Harrington, S., Dohoney, K., Gregory, W., O'Brien-Mazza, D., & Sweeney, P., (2011). *Department of Veterans Affairs peer specialist training manual—Instructor edition*, Washington, DC: United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

Transformation Center (2007, March). Using support groups to promote and sustain recovery. *Peer specialist certification training* (Session 21, pp. 1-6). (Available from the Transformation Center, 98 Magazine Street, Roxbury, MA 02119).

# Contact Information for New England MIRECC Peer Education Center

## **Mark Parker, BA, Certified Peer Specialist**

Co-Director of New England MIRECC Peer Education Center  
Bedford VAMC OEF/OIF/OND Returning Veterans Program, Vet SEdu Specialist  
Telephone: (781) 687-3315 (Office); (781) 879-0179 (VA Cell)  
Email: [Mark.Parker2@va.gov](mailto:Mark.Parker2@va.gov)

## **Patricia Sweeney, Psy.D., CPRP**

Education Director of VISN 1 MIRECC  
Co-Director of New England MIRECC Peer Education Center  
Telephone: (781) 687-3015  
Email: [Patricia.Sweeney@va.gov](mailto:Patricia.Sweeney@va.gov)