

Creating and maintaining connections to family and friends is an important part of recovery for many people.

Session 9

Recovery and Relationships Part 1

explores the art of creating, developing, maintaining, and repairing supportive relationships.

SUPPORTIVE RECOVERY RELATIONSHIPS

The art of creating, developing, maintaining, and repairing supportive relationships

Introduction

A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words.

— Bernard Meltzer

The goal of this module is to identify skills that can be practiced and shared with people you support that can help them to find, develop, and maintain (or repair) supportive relationships.

Objectives

The learning objectives for this session are for you to be able to:

- Describe why healthy relationships are important to recovery.
- Identify *at least* three attributes of relationships that support recovery.
- Recognize *at least* three ways to help people find, develop, and maintain (or repair) relationships that support recovery.
- Locate *at least* three resources for further study.

Relationships that support recovery

Attributes of relationships

Attributes of relationships that hinder recovery

Think about a relationship (work or personal) that made your recovery journey more difficult. List five things about the relationship that made it so challenging.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Attributes of relationships that support recovery

Think about a relationship (work or personal) that made your recovery journey easier. List five things about the relationship that made it supportive.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Discussion: You may share with the large group some of the things you identified about relationships that made your recovery easier or more challenging. How are yours similar and different to what others shared?

Supportive relationships

Like recovery, every relationship is unique to the people in the relationship.

There is no “right way” to have supportive relationships. There are many ways. As peer supporters we know, perhaps intuitively, that relationships are vital to virtually everyone. Indeed, we can be best described as “social creatures.” Why is this so? What benefits come from relationships? What problems can arise?

We know that healthy, supportive relationships are especially important for persons in recovery from behavioral health disorders. Studies have shown relationships are an important part of almost everyone’s recovery.

The importance and role of supportive relationships is directly expressed in one of SAMHSA’s Guiding Principles of Recovery:

Recovery is supported through relationships and social networks:

An important factor in the recovery process is the presence and involvement of people who believe in the person’s ability to recover; who offer hope, support, and encouragement; and who also suggest strategies and resources for change. Family members, peers, providers, faith groups, community members, and other allies form vital support networks. Through these relationships, people leave unhealthy and/or unfulfilling life roles behind and engage in new roles (e.g., partner, caregiver, friend, student, or employee) that lead to a greater sense of belonging, personhood, empowerment, autonomy, social inclusion, and community participation.

The purpose of this session is to explore the benefits and dynamics of relationships not only in our own lives, but in the lives of those we support. The intent is for you to gain more skills to share with the peers you support so that they, in turn, can develop (or restore) more, better, healthier relationships in their own lives.

Benefits of supportive relationships

Just as we recognize the benefits of healthy relationships for our own lives, these benefits are important for everyone. It is unfortunate that some in our society believe people with behavioral health conditions cannot feel love as others do or value relationships “appropriately.”

Studies have shown that positive, healthy relationships increase positive chemicals in the brain that help us build trust and fight depression and obesity. The same appears to be true for people who observe closeness between people and observe touch and acts of kindness. The positive chemical (oxytocin) produced by the body through touch associated with positive relationships helps reduce stress and may result in health benefits such as resilience to common colds, diabetes, and even cancer.

There are many dimensions to relationships - each with risks, challenges and rewards. But the rewards of healthy, supportive relationships far outweigh the difficulties.

When you think about the positive relationships that support your recovery, what are the benefits (things you gain) from being in those relationships? (Identify the top three)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Challenges in relationships

As you might know from personal experience, people with behavioral health and similar conditions face many challenges in relationships. Some of those challenges are more difficult than people without behavioral health conditions face. Many of these challenges relate to symptoms, isolation, side effects/activators and stigma (both internal and external).

But as a result of the recovery journey, people with these conditions have learned much about themselves. This self-awareness can be a valuable asset when it comes to creating and building healthy, supportive relationships.

One role of the peer specialist is to recognize a peer's strengths and encourage the peer to build upon those strengths to stretch their comfort zones and take the risks necessary to bring social relationships into their lives.

Meeting new people

Where people go to try to meet others is a personal decision. That decision, of course, should be made by the individual, not other people. Many times, places where people share a common interest (such as recreation) are good places to meet people. Starting a conversation is easier when there is a common interest. It is a starting place to learn more about other people and for them to learn more about you.

As peer specialists, we can offer ideas and strategies about where and how to meet new people. At the same time, the process (discussion) is person-centered and belongs to the peer. It is not our role to tell peers what their interests are or predict what their challenges will be, even when those challenges are obvious to us. Instead, if we ask questions and allow peers to answer them thoughtfully, it can help peers learn to identify interests, preferences, and barriers on their own.

It is useful and appropriate, if they get stuck, to offer ideas and options. It may even be appropriate to ask peers to role play (rehearse) what to say and how to say it to gain a sense of comfort. Role plays can boost confidence and encourage peers to stretch their comfort zones.

Natural vs paid/formal supports

People in recovery often have access to many people who are paid to help them and to be a positive impact in their lives. These relationships are known as formal supports. A peer support specialist should encourage and assist peers in identifying and developing robust natural and community supports.

Natural supports are help and support provided as part of a relationship developed outside of a formal support system. Natural supports include friends, family, and neighbors who provide help and support as part of a relationship to the person receiving support.

Community supports are help and support that are available to most people in a community and include public transportation, libraries, places of worship, and community centers.

Formal supports are typically provided by people or organizations who are paid for their time in providing that support. Formal supports include counselors, social service workers, peer specialists, doctors, and community support specialists.

Discussion Question: What are some ways to determine if a support is formal or a natural/community support?

Take a few moments and answer the following questions, then share your answers with the large group if you wish.

What barriers did you face early in your recovery when trying to meet new people to create new and healthy relationships?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are some places in your community where you can go to meet new people who share your interests?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What questions would you ask a peer to find out what interests the peer might share with others in the community?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Based on your experience, what skills can you help peers to practice that can help them to meet new people and start new relationships? (Identify the top three)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

When you meet a new person for the first time (including peers you support), what are some of your opening lines – the first things you say to someone? (Identify the top three)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Session 9: Review Questions

1. Name three types of natural supports.
2. Name three types of formal supports.
3. Name 3 benefits of supportive relationships.