

Manual about peer support among young LGBTIQ+ people

“PEER SUPPORT CAN HELP YOU FIND MISSING PIECES OF YOURSELF”



Impressum

AUTHOR:

Sateenkaari-ikkuna ry - a Finnish LGBTQ+ movement against homelessness, Finland

CONTRIBUTOR:

Ljubljana Pride Association, Slovenia

EDITORS:

Sari Rantaniemi and Vesna Štefanec

EXECUTIVE EDITOR:

Simona Muršec, Ljubljana Pride Association, Slovenia

DESIGNED BY

Massar Tawfeeq, Ljubljana Pride Association, Slovenia

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Contents

● Introduction	4
● Part 1 – Theoretical Background	5
● LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health	6
● Minority Stress and LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health	10
● Experience-based Knowledge - What Does it Mean?	13
● Becoming a Peer Supporter	16
● Peer Support for LGBTQ+ Youth with Refugee and Migrant Backgrounds	21
● Part 2 – Practical Experiences From the Project	23
● Youth Worker's Experiences of Working with Young Peer Supporters	24
● Accessibility of Peer Support Activities	28
● Taking Neurodiversity into Account in Peer Support Activities	32
● Part 3 – Peer Support Training Programme	35
● Appendix	56
● References	81





Introduction

The aim of the *“Youth workers alliance for the development and promotion of youth peer support in the area of youth mental health”* (YAPS) project was to create peer support practices that will help mitigate the risks of mental health issues in young LGBTQ+ people. Several studies and the practical experience of youth workers show that there is a causal link between mental health problems and socio-economic problems among these young people.

The mental health of minority youth is also affected by minority stress. Minority stress is one of the reasons why marginalised young people do not seek help from the service system but rely on each other. This kind of informal peer support is important, but it can also be overwhelming for young people. We see that peer support is important for young people and that, in addition, peer support can lower the threshold for young people to seek help from the service system.

Therefore, we focused on developing practices that help young people to act as peer supporters for each other in a socially sustainable way.

The good practices of the project have been compiled in this manual and are freely available to all professionals in the youth field, peer supporters and young people themselves. The manual focuses on working with young LGBTQ+ peer supporters but also provides perspectives on peer support for LGBTQ+ youth with refugee and migrant backgrounds and how to consider neurodiversity in peer support activities.

In addition to project staff, other youth workers and young peer supporters have been involved in the production of the manual. This manual has three parts. The first part presents a theoretical background on the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth and peer support practices. To the second part, we collected themes, which emerged from the concrete work during the project. The third part describes the peer support training we carried out during the project in Slovenia.

It is a concrete tool for youth workers to train young people to become peer supporters. We hope you find this manual useful. You can use it in a way that suits you best.

Part 1 — THEORETICAL BACKGROUND



LGBTIQ+ Youth Mental Health

Youth mental health has become a growing concern globally, as adolescents and young adults are increasingly exposed to a range of pressures, including academic stress, social media influences, and identity development challenges. The mental health challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ (*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, and other sexual and gender minorities*) youth are particularly pronounced, reflecting a combination of societal stigmas, discrimination, and unique identity-related stressors. This essay examines the general landscape of youth mental health, with a special emphasis on the LGBTIQ+ community, highlighting specific risks and vulnerabilities that this population faces.



The Broader Context of Youth Mental Health

Adolescence is a critical period for mental health development, with the majority of mental disorders having their onset before the age of 25. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in seven 10-19 year olds experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group (WHO, 2021).

Common mental health issues among youth include anxiety, depression, self-harm, and eating disorders. The causes of these mental health challenges are multifactorial, encompassing genetic, environmental, and psychological factors.

The pressures of modern life, such as academic competition, social media influence, and the struggle for identity and belonging, contribute to the growing prevalence of mental health issues among young people. The rise of social media, while providing platforms for self-expression and connection, has also introduced new forms of stress, such as cyberbullying and the pressure to maintain an idealized online persona.

Additionally, societal issues such as poverty, family breakdown, and exposure to violence or abuse further exacerbate the risks for mental health problems in young people.

LGBTIQ+ Youth Mental Health: Specific Risks and Challenges

While youth in general face significant mental health challenges, LGBTIQ+ youth are at an even greater risk. The heightened vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ youth stems from the unique stressors related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and the pervasive discrimination they often face.

The concept of “minority stress,” first proposed by Meyer (2003), is central to understanding the mental health disparities seen in LGBTIQ+ populations. Minority stress refers to the chronic stress experienced by members of stigmatized minority groups, resulting from societal prejudice, discrimination, and internalized homophobia or transphobia.

Discrimination and Stigma

One of the primary contributors to poor mental health among LGBTIQ+ youth is the experience of discrimination and stigma. LGBTIQ+ youth are often subjected to homophobic or transphobic bullying, rejection by family and peers, and societal discrimination. Studies have shown that LGBTIQ+ youth are more likely to experience bullying and harassment in school settings compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

For example, a national survey conducted by GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) in the United States found that 70.1% of LGBTIQ+ students reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation, and 59.1% because of their gender expression.

This discrimination and harassment can lead to a range of negative mental health outcomes, including increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The Trevor Project’s 2021 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health reported that 42% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, with that number rising to over 50% among transgender and nonbinary youth.

These alarming statistics underscore the profound impact that societal rejection and stigma can have on the mental well-being of LGBTIQ+ youth.

Family Rejection

Family acceptance is crucial to the mental health of all youth, but for LGBTQ+ individuals, the stakes are particularly high. Research has consistently shown that LGBTQ+ youth who experience family rejection are at a significantly increased risk for negative mental health outcomes.

A study by Ryan et al. (2009) found that LGBTQ+ youth who reported high levels of family rejection were 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide and 5.9 times more likely to experience high levels of depression compared to their peers who reported low levels of family rejection.

Family rejection often forces LGBTQ+ youth into precarious situations, such as homelessness. The Williams Institute (2012) estimated that 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+, and family rejection was a leading cause of homelessness among this group.

Homelessness exacerbates mental health problems, as these youth are more likely to experience violence, substance abuse, and lack of access to mental health care.

Internalized Stigma and Identity Struggles

In addition to external discrimination, LGBTQ+ youth often struggle with internalized stigma, which can severely impact their mental health. Internalized homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia refers to the internalization of society's negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ identities, leading to self-hatred, shame, and low self-esteem. This internalized stigma can be particularly damaging during adolescence, a time when self-identity is being formed.

Studies have shown that internalized stigma is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ youth.

Moreover, the process of coming to terms with one's sexual orientation or gender identity can be a source of significant stress. The fear of rejection or violence may lead LGBTQ+ youth to conceal their identity, resulting in feelings of isolation and loneliness.

For transgender and nonbinary youth, the dysphoria associated with gender incongruence can also contribute to mental health challenges, particularly if they are unable to access gender-affirming care.



Barriers to Mental Health Care

Despite the increased mental health needs of LGBTIQ+ youth, they often face barriers to accessing appropriate care. These barriers include a lack of LGBTIQ+ competent mental health providers, fear of discrimination within the healthcare system, and financial constraints. According to a survey by Lambda Legal(2010), nearly 56% of LGBTIQ+ individuals reported experiencing discrimination from healthcare providers, which can discourage them from seeking necessary care. Moreover, there is a shortage of mental health services that are specifically tailored to the needs of LGBTIQ+ youth. Standard mental health interventions may not adequately address the unique challenges faced by this population, such as coping with identity-related stressors and navigating societal stigma. The need for culturally competent care that affirms and supports LGBTIQ+ identities is critical in addressing the mental health disparities in this population.



Conclusion

Youth mental health is a pressing concern, with LGBTIQ+ youth facing particularly severe challenges due to the intersection of societal discrimination, family rejection, internalized stigma, and barriers to care. Addressing the mental health needs of LGBTIQ+ youth requires a multifaceted approach that includes anti-discrimination policies, supportive educational environments, family acceptance initiatives, and accessible, culturally competent mental health care. By creating a more inclusive and supportive society, we can help mitigate the mental health risks faced by LGBTIQ+ youth and promote their overall well-being.

Minority Stress and LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health

Minority stress refers to the unique psychological and social stressors experienced by individuals belonging to marginalized groups within society. These stressors arise from the discrimination, prejudice, and systemic inequalities that these individuals face based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other aspects that identify them as part of a minority group. The concept of minority stress has gained significant recognition as researchers and mental health professionals seek to understand its profound impact on the well-being and mental health of marginalized individuals.

The Nature of Minority Stress

Minority stress is distinct from generalized forms of stress because it is specifically tied to an individual's membership in a marginalized community. It emerges from the unique experiences of discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion that are pervasive in the lives of those belonging to minority groups. This form of stress is persistent and deeply embedded in the daily experiences of marginalized individuals, making it a chronic source of psychological strain. Unlike episodic stressors that may be temporary, minority stress is ongoing, with

long-term exposure leading to enduring effects on both mental and physical health. The structural nature of minority stress reflects the systemic inequalities ingrained within society. These include discriminatory policies, institutional racism, and pervasive prejudiced attitudes that sustain the conditions for minority stress to thrive. Recognizing the structural roots of minority stress highlights the necessity for broader societal changes and systemic interventions aimed at addressing and mitigating its impact on marginalized communities.

Minority Stress in the Context of LGBTQ+ Youth

Within the framework of minority stress, LGBTQ+ (*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, and other sexual and gender minorities*) youth represent a group that is particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of this form of stress. The journey of LGBTQ+ youth toward self-discovery and acceptance is fraught with challenges that

are deeply intertwined with societal norms, structural inequalities and interpersonal dynamics. Understanding the manifestations of minority stress in this context requires an exploration of the complex and interconnected factors that shape their experiences.

Structural Discrimination and Its Impact

For LGBTQ+ youth, structural discrimination serves as a formidable source of minority stress. This discrimination can manifest in various forms, including laws and policies that restrict their rights and freedoms. For instance, legal barriers to marriage or adoption, as well as inadequate protection against discrimination in employment and housing, place LGBTQ+ youth in precarious positions. These structural inequities contribute to disparities in economic security and housing stability, increasing the likelihood

of job insecurity and homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth. Educational institutions often exacerbate these challenges by failing to provide comprehensive and inclusive sex education, leaving LGBTQ+ youth without essential information about their own sexual health and relationships. The absence of inclusive curricula not only marginalizes LGBTQ+ students but also perpetuates ignorance and stigma among their peers, further isolating these youth within school environments.

Interpersonal Discrimination and Social Exclusion

On a more personal level, LGBTQ+ youth frequently encounter discrimination and social exclusion within their daily lives, particularly in school settings and within their own families. Bullying, harassment, and ostracism are common experiences that contribute to a hostile and fear-laden environment for these young individuals. The constant need to navigate potential threats to their safety and well-being heightens their stress levels, often leading to significant mental health challenges such as

depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The importance of peer relationships during adolescence cannot be overstated, as they play a crucial role in personal development. For LGBTQ+ youth, the disruption of these relationships due to discrimination and exclusion can have profound psychological effects, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and hopelessness.

Internalized Stigma and Identity Struggles

Another significant aspect of minority stress for LGBTQ+ youth is the internalization of societal stigma. Internalized stigma refers to the process by which LGBTQ+ individuals absorb and internalize the negative messages and stereotypes that society perpetuates about their identities. This internalization can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem, and it may compel LGBTQ+ youth to suppress or conceal their true identities. The effects of internalized stigma are particularly damaging

during adolescence, a critical period for identity formation. The pressure to conform to societal norms and the fear of rejection can lead to significant psychological distress. In some cases, LGBTQ+ youth may struggle to fully accept their own identities, leading to a disconnection from their true selves and contributing to long-term mental health challenges.

Addressing the Mental Health Needs of LGBTQ+ Youth

Given the complex and multifaceted nature of minority stress among LGBTQ+ youth, addressing their mental health needs requires comprehensive and culturally competent interventions. These interventions must acknowledge the unique stressors faced by LGBTQ+ youth and provide support that is affirming of their identities.

Moreover, there is a critical need for systemic changes to address the structural inequalities that underlie minority stress. This includes implementing anti-discrimination policies, promoting inclusive education, and increasing access to mental health care that is specifically tailored to the needs of LGBTQ+ youth.


Conclusion

Minority stress presents a significant and persistent challenge to the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. The discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion they face, both at the structural and interpersonal levels, contribute to a heightened risk of mental health issues. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes both systemic change and the provision of culturally competent support. By understanding and addressing the specific risks faced by LGBTQ+ youth, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment that promotes their mental health and overall well-being.



Experience-based knowledge what does it mean?

Experience-based knowledge is the understanding and wisdom that comes from your lived experiences. Everyone has life experiences that can be used in different ways to help other people in everyday life. Experience-based knowledge can also bring an experiential perspective to the work in social services and healthcare, alongside the professional and scientific knowledge. Experience-based knowledge can be used in several ways and through different roles. This manual focuses on peer support, but we also want to briefly introduce the model of educated experts by experience.



The Finnish model of educated expert by experience

Educated experts by experience

An expert by experience is a person who has undergone problematic experiences in their past and who wants to share these experiences with others. They act as experts based on those experiences alongside professionals in social welfare and healthcare organisations. Educated expert by experience is a person who has undergone specific training. They often work for an organisation or are freelancers. The Finnish expert by experience - model is a form of action that was developed in civic and non-governmental organisations. It has its roots in peer support activities. The objectives of the experts by experience are to improve the functionality of services, to increase client orientation and

inclusion, to increase understanding of illness and recovery, to change attitudes and influence society. Educated experts by experience work alongside professionals in the service system in client work and development tasks. The tasks of an expert by experience include telling their own story and giving lectures, visiting schools and educational institutions, speaking at training sessions or seminars, developing services with professionals, working with clients alongside professionals, facilitating peer support groups with professionals, communication tasks, advocacy work, giving interviews to the media, influencing in social media and other expert tasks.

Training for educated experts by experience

Experts by experience are experts in their own field, and becoming one requires a process of refining your own experience into structured expertise through training and mentoring. Different organisations provide specific training for experts by experience to become educated experts by experience. But it is also possible to work as one without formal training if the needed skills are acquired in other ways. In Finland, the title *“educated expert by experience”* is not protected nor registered and the training courses differ from one to another. It is recommended that the training lasts at least 50 hours and is spread

over 4 months to enable people to properly process their own experiences and grow into the role of expert by experience. Some trainings are specific trainings that are only meant for people who are recovering from substance abuse and mental health issues. There are also trainings where participants may have a wide range of different experiences, such as school bullying, racism, disability, belonging to a gender or sexual minority, being in child protection services as a child, death of a loved one.

Examples of the content of the training of experts of experience:

- Who is an expert by experience?
- The possibilities of expertise by experience.
- Interaction skills and encountering others.
- Working as a member of a group, team skills.
- Learning to build and tell your own story.
- Basic knowledge of mental health issues and addiction.
- Rehabilitation and treatment options.
- The service system and legislation of social care and health care.
- The rights and responsibilities of the person in recovery.
- Self-determination.
- Importance and role of the family members and loved ones in recovery.
- Motivation, change and attitudes.
- Performing skills and abilities.
- Working with the media.
- Group management skills.
- Networking with different actors and agents.
- Visits to different services.
- Working in pairs with a professional.
- Fees, contracts.
- Responsibilities and obligations.
- Self-care.

Young experts by experience

There are not many young experts by experience because it takes time, often years, to overcome difficult situations in life. Youth as a phase of life can be over by the time a person is willing and ready to become an expert by experience. Experts by experience are a resource that youth work could benefit from and young people should be encouraged to use their own life experiences to help others. Young people should be offered decent training that is designed together with young people so that it is interesting and relevant to their needs. In addition to training, sufficient resources should be allocated towards professionals who are mentoring young people in their work as experts by experience.

Young people do not necessarily need to have particularly difficult experiences when working as experts by experience. In itself, the experience of living as a young person today is a valuable asset for youth work professionals to draw on. Young people from different minorities have a lot of valuable knowledge about their needs and how youth work could be more accessible. A young expert by experience working alongside professionals is a concrete demonstration to their peers that professionals want to listen to young people, are genuinely on their side and are ready to develop their activities to better meet young people's needs.

Individual peer support

Peer support is a one-on-one service where individuals who have lived through specific challenges and healed from those experiences use their personal journeys to support others facing similar issues. This form of support is unique in that it leverages shared experiences and empathy, allowing peers to provide emotional, social, and practical assistance in a way that is often more relatable and accessible than traditional forms of support. Through peer support, individuals can offer a sense of understanding, validation, and hope, creating

a supportive environment where the person being helped feels less isolated and more empowered to navigate their challenges. The power of peer support lies in mutual experience; the peer supporter uses their insights and coping strategies to guide others, fostering a connection based on shared history and understanding. This relationship can help to normalize experiences, reduce stigma, and build resilience in those receiving support.



Becoming a Peer Supporter

Becoming a peer supporter is a journey rooted in personal experience, empathy, and a commitment to helping others navigate challenges similar to those one has overcome. Peer support is a powerful tool in mental health and social services, particularly within marginalized communities such as the LGBTQ+ population. This paper explores the path to becoming a peer supporter, the benefits of this role, the specifics of LGBTQ+ peer support, emotional support for peer supporters, and strategies for recruiting and empowering young people to take on this vital role.



The Path to Becoming a Peer Supporter

Personal Experience and Recovery

The first step in becoming a peer supporter is the individual's journey through their own experiences and challenges. Peer supporters are often people who have faced significant obstacles, whether related to mental health, addiction, trauma, or identity struggles, and have reached a point of recovery or stability where they feel ready to help others. This process involves not only overcoming personal difficulties but also developing an understanding of one's journey in a way that can be communicated to and benefit others.

Training and Certification

While lived experience is the foundation of peer support, formal training is often necessary to ensure that peer supporters are equipped with the skills needed to effectively help others. Training programs typically cover topics such as active listening, boundary setting, confidentiality, crisis intervention, and ethical guidelines. Many programs also include modules on cultural competency, particularly important in LGBTQ+ contexts, to ensure that peer supporters can effectively serve diverse populations. Certification may be required or offered as part of this training, depending on the organization or the region in which the peer supporter operates. Certification can enhance the credibility and professionalism of peer supporters, providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to offer effective and ethical support.

Supervision and Ongoing Development

Once trained and certified, peer supporters typically work under the supervision of experienced professionals. Ongoing supervision is crucial for maintaining the quality of support provided and for the continued development of

the peer supporter's skills. Regular supervision also provides a space for peer supporters to reflect on their experiences, receive feedback, and address any challenges they encounter in their work.

The Benefits of Being a Peer Supporter

Personal Growth and Healing

One of the most significant benefits of being a peer supporter is the potential for personal growth and further healing. Helping others navigate similar challenges can reinforce the peer supporter's own recovery process,

providing a sense of purpose and fulfillment. This role allows individuals to transform their pain and experiences into a source of strength and empowerment, which can be deeply therapeutic.

Building Community and Connections

Peer supporters often find that their role allows them to build strong connections within their communities. By offering support to others, they become an integral part of a network of care, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity.

This is particularly important in LGBTQ+ communities, where peer supporters can help create safe and inclusive spaces for individuals who may feel isolated or marginalized.

Skill Development and Career Opportunities

Being a peer supporter also provides opportunities for skill development that can be valuable in both personal and professional contexts. Skills such as communication, empathy, problem-solving, and crisis management are highly transferable and can enhance

employability in a range of fields. For some, the experience of being a peer supporter may inspire them to pursue further education or careers in social work, counselling, or related fields.

LGBTIQ+ Specifics of Individual Peer Support

Addressing Unique Challenges

LGBTIQ+ individuals often face unique challenges related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression, including discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion. Peer support within this community requires a deep understanding of these specific issues. Peer supporters in LGBTIQ+ contexts not only provide emotional and practical support but also help their peers navigate the complexities of identity development, coming out, and dealing with societal rejection.

Creating Safe and Affirming Spaces

For LGBTIQ+ individuals, finding safe and affirming spaces can be a challenge. Peer supporters play a crucial role in creating and maintaining these spaces, whether online or in person. By offering non-judgmental support and affirming their peers' identities, LGBTIQ+ peer supporters help to combat the isolation and loneliness that many in this community experience. This support is particularly important for young people who may lack family or community acceptance.

Advocacy and Empowerment

In addition to providing direct support, LGBTIQ+ peer supporters often engage in advocacy efforts to promote equality and reduce stigma. They empower their peers by encouraging self-advocacy, helping them access resources, and connecting them with supportive communities and services. This advocacy can be a critical aspect of peer support, as it addresses the broader societal issues that contribute to the challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Emotional Support for Peer Supporters

The Need for Emotional Support

While peer supporters offer invaluable assistance to others, they also need emotional support to sustain their well-being. The work of peer support can be emotionally taxing, particularly when dealing with challenging situations or hearing about the traumas of others. Without adequate support, peer supporters may experience burnout, compassion fatigue, or secondary trauma.

Group Counseling and Supervision

To address these challenges, many organizations provide group counseling and supervision for peer supporters. Group counseling offers a space for peer supporters to share their experiences, process difficult emotions, and receive support from others who understand

the demands of the role. Supervision, often provided by a trained mental health professional, allows peer supporters to discuss specific cases, receive guidance, and reflect on their practice in a structured environment.

Mentoring Relationships

Mentoring is another valuable form of support for peer supporters. More experienced peer supporters can offer guidance, advice, and emotional support to those who are newer to the

role. These mentoring relationships provide an additional layer of support and contribute to the professional and personal growth of peer supporters.

Recruitment of Peer Supporters

Motivations for Becoming a Peer Supporter

Young people are often motivated to become peer supporters by a desire to help others and to give back to their communities. Many are inspired by their own experiences and the support they received during difficult times, feeling a strong

sense of empathy for others in similar situations. The opportunity to make a difference, to be a part of something meaningful, and to contribute to positive change in their communities are powerful motivators.

Empowerment and Encouragement


To encourage young people to become peer supporters, it is essential to empower them and provide the necessary resources and support. This includes offering accessible training programs, providing information about the role and its benefits, and creating pathways for

involvement that are inclusive and supportive. Young people need to feel that they have the skills, knowledge, and confidence to take on the role of a peer supporter, and this empowerment can be achieved through targeted outreach, education, and mentoring.

Creating Inclusive Recruitment Strategies


Recruitment strategies should be inclusive and actively seek to engage diverse groups of young people, particularly those from marginalized communities such as the LGBTQ+ population. Outreach efforts should be culturally competent and designed to reach young people where they are, whether through schools, community organizations, or online platforms. By creating an inclusive and supportive recruitment process, organizations can attract a diverse group of peer supporters who bring a wide range of experiences and perspectives to the role. The path to becoming a peer supporter is one of personal growth, healing, and empowerment. For those who take on this role, the benefits are numerous, including personal fulfillment, skill

development, and the opportunity to make a meaningful impact on the lives of others. In the context of LGBTQ+ peer support, these benefits are amplified by the unique challenges and opportunities associated with supporting a marginalized community. To sustain and grow the peer support movement, it is essential to provide emotional support to peer supporters, through group counseling, supervision, and mentoring. Additionally, effective recruitment strategies that empower and encourage young people to become peer supporters are crucial for the continued success of peer support programs. By investing in the training, support, and recruitment of peer supporters, we can create a network of care that is inclusive, empathetic, and transformative.



Peer Support for LGBTIQ+ Youth with Refugee and Migrant Backgrounds

LGBTIQ+ youth with refugee or migrant backgrounds face an intersection of challenges that can significantly impact their mental health and well-being. These challenges often stem from the compounded effects of being part of both the LGBTIQ+ community and a displaced or migrant population. Peer support plays a crucial role in addressing the unique needs of these individuals, providing them with emotional, social, and practical assistance as they navigate complex issues related to identity, migration, and integration.



Unique Challenges Faced by LGBTIQ+ Refugee and Migrant Youth

LGBTIQ+ youth who are refugees or migrants often grapple with multiple layers of discrimination and trauma. Many have fled their home countries due to persecution based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, only to face new challenges in host countries, such as xenophobia, racism, and further discrimination based on their LGBTIQ+ identity. The trauma of displacement, loss of community, and exposure to violence or hostility in their home countries can exacerbate the stress associated with their

identity as LGBTIQ+ individuals. Moreover, the legal and social environments in host countries can be unfamiliar and unwelcoming. Refugee and migrant youth often encounter significant barriers in accessing essential services, including healthcare, education, and legal support. These barriers can be even more pronounced for LGBTIQ+ individuals, who may struggle to find culturally competent and inclusive services that understand and respect their specific needs.

The Role of Peer Support

Peer support is particularly valuable for LGBTQ+ refugee and migrant youth because it offers a space where they can connect with others who share similar experiences. Peer supporters who understand both the challenges of being LGBTQ+ and the complexities of migration can provide crucial empathy and understanding, helping these youth feel less isolated. This connection can be instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and community, which is often lacking for refugee and migrant

populations. In addition to emotional support, peer supporters can assist LGBTQ+ refugee and migrant youth in navigating practical challenges, such as understanding their legal rights, accessing healthcare, and integrating into new social and cultural environments. Peer supporters can also help connect these youth with other resources, such as legal assistance for asylum claims, language classes, and culturally competent mental health services.

Creating Safe Spaces and Promoting Resilience

Peer support programs for LGBTQ+ refugee and migrant youth are most effective when they prioritize the creation of safe and affirming spaces. These programs should be designed to accommodate the unique cultural backgrounds and experiences of these youth, providing them with an environment where they can openly discuss their experiences without fear of judgement or reprisal. Furthermore, peer support can play a critical role in promoting resilience among LGBTQ+ refugee and migrant youth. By connecting with peers who have successfully navigated similar challenges, these youth can gain confidence and hope for their own futures. This empowerment can help them develop the resilience needed to overcome the significant obstacles they face, including

trauma, discrimination, and the challenges of adapting to a new country. Peer support is a vital resource for LGBTQ+ youth with refugee and migrant backgrounds. It addresses the unique intersectional challenges these youth face, offering them a lifeline in the form of emotional, social, and practical support. By fostering connections with peers who share similar experiences, these programs not only help LGBTQ+ refugee and migrant youth navigate their current challenges but also build resilience and empower them to thrive in their new environments. The success of such peer support initiatives hinges on their ability to create safe, culturally competent, and inclusive spaces that honor the diverse identities and experiences of these vulnerable youth.



Part 2 — PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES FROM THE PROJECT

Youth Worker's Experiences of Working with Young Peer Supporters

This chapter is the experience of two youth workers mentoring LGBTIQ+ young people in peer support activities. We want to invite you to reflect on your practice as a professional and we hope that you will find some peer support for your own work with young people.

When a young person wants to become a peer supporter

A peer supporter uses the knowledge and skills of an ordinary person, drawing on their own life experience. They are volunteers who want to help and support someone who is going through similar life experiences to their own. It is important that the peer supporter not only has a genuine desire to help other people but also has dealt with their own life experiences in a way that enables them to offer support to others. The peer supporter should have a sufficiently stable life situation, and they should not be in an acute crisis or changing situations. It is not always easy to define a sufficiently stable life situation, especially in adolescence, when life is often undergoing many changes. It is therefore useful to consider the situation of each young person individually. If the time is not yet right to become a peer supporter, set goals to become one together with the young person.

The suitability of a young person as a peer supporter can also be considered through the different roles and tasks of a peer supporter. What kind of roles would they like to play and what skills do they need for them? What resources and strengths do the young person have? Peer support can be started in small steps and with the tasks that suit best for the young people. Discussing how there is no one ideal peer supporter whose would you should fit, is also of importance with young people. Everyone has something to give to someone else, especially considering our individual resources and strengths. In the beginning, it is good to consider what changes in young peer supporter's life might make it difficult to be a peer supporter and how you can stop or take a break from peer support if your life situation or otherwise becomes too much for you.

A relationship between professional and young peer supporter

Peer supporters need and are entitled to adequate support for their work. Many peer supporters benefit from peer support training and regular mentoring throughout their peer support work. It is the responsibility of professionals and organisations to provide peer supporters with adequate support. Professionals need to be aware of their position in relation to young people and the impact this has on the support they provide. The most equal possible starting points enable genuine cooperation and trust to be built between the professional and the young peer supporter. Trust is particularly important when difficult situations arise in peer support work. Power structures are influenced by factors such as professional status and age difference. Professionals should be aware of any privileges

associated with their position as part of a majority group, especially when working with young people who are a part of a minority or minorities. Power cannot be completely dismantled from these power structures, but it can be reduced by being yourself when in the presence of the young person, by expressing your own human needs, by daring to mess up or by asking young people for advice on something. The balance of power is smoothed out when the professional articulates their role and the responsibilities that come with the job. Young people must be genuinely heard and involved in decision-making. Equality is created if the professional and the young person find a common ground, for example by belonging to the same minority or by sharing a similar life experience.

Peer support training

Peer support training should be tailored to suit the needs and wishes of young people, as well as the organisation and the context. In addition to the initial induction training, it is useful to provide regular training for young people on more in-depth topics while they act as peer supporters.

Examples of topics to cover in peer support training with young people:

- What is a peer? What are the different ways of being a peer? What do peer supporters do? What are the roles of a peer?
- What kind of a peer am I? In what areas can I work as a peer? How do I want to be a peer to others? For example, do I like having long conversation or do I feel more comfortable doing sports together?
- My strengths and resources. What kind of resources do I have? What am I good at?
- My boundaries and limits. What kind of mental and physical resources do I have? What do I share about myself? How do I limit my work?
- Interpersonal skills. What kind of interactor am I? How can I practise my interaction skills? What things can affect the way people interact?
- Confidentiality. What kinds of things are confidential in a peer support relationship?

What kinds of situations do I need to tell professionals about?

- Challenging situations. How do I deal with challenging situations? Who can I get help from? Going through different challenging situations through examples.
- My coping and well-being. What kind of

things stress me out? What things contribute to my well-being? How can I maintain my well-being in peer support work? Who can help me if I feel stressed in peer support work?

- Learning about compassion fatigue, state of alertness, mood and regulation. How can I regulate my own alertness and mood?

Even if the young person is a member of a minority, they should be given basic information on issues such as LGBTIQ+ issues and racism, as it cannot be assumed that the young person is an expert on all minorities or even their own minority. Sharing information also ensures that all young people working with peers have access to the same information and that the peer support activities of the organisation are equal.

Mentoring of young peer supporters

Mentoring a young peer supporter is the role of the professional and it is good that the professional understands youth as a life stage. Young peers will be more likely than adults to encounter situations that are completely new to them and for which they need support. It is important that the professional has sufficient time to listen to young people and their concerns and can be available outside normal working hours if necessary. Young people can be mentored in groups but with the possibility of individual support. The professional must be able to recognise when a young person can act as a peer and when they would benefit from support. In addition to peer support mentoring, the young person may also need support in their own life, and it is up to the professional to refer the young person to the services they need. The professional will monitor the young person's progress in peer support work and suggest a break or alternative

work if necessary. The responsibility for the well-being of underage young people is always particularly high. Discuss with young people what kind of situations may arise when acting as peer supporter and where they can get support for themselves. It is useful to go through different kinds of situations by using examples beforehand. Discuss things by their proper names, as it cannot be assumed that young people will be able to identify and verbalise different kinds of situations and topics. One concrete example of what to discuss is the possible situation where romantic and/or sexual feelings arise in a peer support relationship. In a mentoring relationship, it is also good to understand that young people may look up to the professional, which can lead to overwork, for example. Many young people may also anticipate that adults will be disappointed if they have not performed to expectations for one reason or another and therefore withdraw.

Even in difficult situations, it is always the professional's responsibility to support the young person first, and then to deal with their own feelings. Counselling for the professionals can be helpful in this kind of situation. As a professional, you can reflect on your own feelings by asking yourself the following questions:

- What can I expect from young people? Are my expectations realistic?
- Do I assume that all young people can perform in a certain way?
- How do I react in situations where I find myself disappointed with young people?
- How flexible am I?
- Which things are actually disasters, and which are my feelings?
- What tools do I have to support young people in difficult situations?
- What kind of support does a professional working with peers need?
- How should the organisation/team prepare for working with peers?

Peer support is a matter for the whole organisation


When young peer supporters are brought into an organisation, it is useful to consider what their role is within the organisation or team. Professionals should outline what the responsibilities and duties of peer supporters are and what they are entitled to do. These should be in writing so that the information is accessible to all. Especially in the start-up phase of peer work, it is good to have at least one person whose main responsibility is peer work. Their role is to ensure that the activities are regularly reviewed within the organisation and that feedback is collected. This will create a self-improving and

developing system. Appointing a person in charge will help to develop the work, as they will know everything about the process. However, all the people involved in the peer support activities must have sufficient knowledge of the activities. It is possible, for example in smaller organisations, that a volunteer will coordinate peer support activities. Ideally, however, and especially for young volunteers, peer support activities should be carried out by a professional, because professionals can be expected to provide continuity and security in the event of change, whereas volunteers cannot.



Accessibility of Peer Support Activities

The chapter is about the accessibility of peer support work, especially from the perspective of minority youth. It is written by a young expert by experience who was involved in the project. They suggest norm-criticism as a tool to improve accessibility.



Accessibility is part of equal participation

When peer support activities are aimed at young people in a particularly vulnerable situation, who belong to minority groups, or both, particular attention should be paid to accessibility. To be successful, peer support activities must be accessible to both the young people who are peer supporters and those who need peer support. Accessible peer support activities ensure that young people from minority groups have equal participation opportunities. All barriers to participation cannot be removed immediately, however, a first and important step is to identify and become aware of the barriers to participation that exist in your peer support activities. Identifying obstacles does not mean

that the planned peer support activities are not good. They show that barriers to participation are recognised and acknowledged. This is already of great importance for many young people from minority groups. Once barriers to participation are identified as widely as possible, they can be taken into consideration in the planning and implementation of peer support activities. Accessibility can be physical, for example, related to the facilities and other environments used for peer support activities. In addition to physical accessibility, the organisation of peer support activities should also consider issues such as social, cultural, psychological and economic accessibility.

Reflection on the accessibility of peer support activities:

- What can I expect from young people? Are my expectations realistic?
- Are the facilities physically accessible?
- Is participation in peer support activities equally accessible to people from different cultural backgrounds?
- Are the language and visuals used in communications accessible to as many people as possible?
- Are different ways of learning and communicating considered in the planning and implementation of the peer support activities?
- Is participation free of charge for young people, or do they have to pay for travel or food costs, for example?
- Are peer support activities safe, equal and accessible for people from different minority groups?
- Is the accessibility information described as widely as possible in the communications?

Breaking down barriers to inclusion through norm-criticism

● What are norms?

Norms are the rules on which our society is based. They are assumptions about people and groups of people. Norms can be related to a person's gender, skin colour, body, class, sexual orientation, ability, religion and language. Examples of norms related to these factors include being cisgender, white, middleweight, middle-class, straight, healthy, able-bodied, Christian and assuming that everyone speaks a specific language perfectly. Norms appear as unconscious assumptions that determine the way we understand the reality around us.

Norms create our understanding of what we consider normal. They also affect what things and characteristics we deem deviating from the norm. Norms determine whose voice is heard and considered. They also determine who has the most power in society and its activities. Norms otherize those individuals and groups of people who do not fit into the prevailing norms. Norms can create exclusion, invisibility and discrimination, in both societal structures and human encounters.

Practising norm-criticism, not just tolerance

Criticism of norms is a value base and a tool that can be utilised to eradicate discrimination and inequality. Norm-criticism means identifying prevailing norms and actively seeking to change them. It helps us to identify, examine and question the power structures in our society. It also helps us to identify discrimination and patterns of behaviour that do not support equality. In the discussion of minority groups and their rights, we often come across the concept of tolerance.

However, tolerance is based on normativity: it seeks to ensure that people who fit into norms tolerate other people and groups of people who do not fit into norms. Tolerance does not therefore call into question the underlying factors of discrimination. Hence, it is important that we strive for norm-criticism and not merely for tolerance. Tolerance maintains power structures, while norm-criticism seeks to dismantle them.

Norm-criticism in practice

Questioning and dismantling norms requires active work from each of us. Commonly, we do not even notice that we are acting or thinking in a normative way. Therefore, it is important to pause to think about norms and question them repeatedly. Dismantling norms is an ongoing process. Norm-criticism should be an underlying influence that permeates all peer-to-peer activities. Norm-criticism is most effective as a tool when it is used on all levels within an organization - both individual, team and organizational levels.

It is important to be aware of the existence and impact of norms. In addition, to actively reflect on your attitude and response towards them. It is essential to recognize situations in which one has chosen to maintain and reinforce the prevailing norms. Questioning your actions may feel difficult - it can be very uncomfortable to realize that you are acting in ways that do not promote equality. However, such realizations are particularly important: awareness is the first step in changing behaviour! Ignoring important issues, in turn, perpetuates norms.

It is important to avoid assuming that young people involved in peer-to-peer activities fit certain norms. Assumptions that participants do not belong to certain groups of people are harmful. The starting point should be that no one is left out of the conversation. In practice, normative speech can mean, for example, talking about people with disabilities as if they were not there. Normative speech excludes people and groups of people, and even if it is not intended as such, it is discriminatory. Challenging and dismantling norms is important for the overall culture of discourse and for the planning and implementation of peer sup activities.

Peer-to-peer activities should respect all the participants' right to self-determination. Young people are the best experts on their own lives, while our assumptions about others may be wrong. We must be able to put ourselves in other people's shoes. However, it is particularly important to listen to young people and let them express their own experiences.

Tackling discrimination

Professionals must always address any form of discrimination they witness. Young people must not be left to defend their rights alone. This means, for example, that it should never be the responsibility of a person from a particular minority group to represent the whole group and teach others. It should never be the case that a young person experiencing discrimination has to be the one to intervene. It is best to address situations that require intervention among those involved. This ensures that lessons concerning discrimination may be learned together.

Intervention is essential also in situations where discrimination may not be visible to all. For example, racism is deeply embedded in societal structures and attitudes, making awareness of this particularly important. It is essential to be aware that a behaviour or comment may be racist, even if you do not see it as such. In addition to educating ourselves, being critical of norms and reflecting on our actions, we must listen to and believe in young people's experiences of discrimination, rather than questioning them.


When implementing peer support activities, we can consider questions such as:

- | | |
|---|--|
| »...Do the images in the communication show many kinds of people? | »...Are young people offered different ways of participating, or is participation based on assumptions about, for example, young people's ability to function? |
| »...How can I practice norm-critical ways of acting and communicating in practice? | »...How do we ensure that the responsibility of raising issues concerning accessibility and inaccessibility is not left to young people themselves? |
| »...How are different minorities considered in the planning of activities? | »...How do we address situations where we see discrimination? |
| »...How can we ensure that everyone who wants to participate has an equal opportunity as possible to do so? | |



Taking neurodiversity into account in peer support activities

This chapter is written by a young neurodivergent peer supporter. In the text, they point out issues that they think are important for professionals to know when implementing peer support activities with young people. Taking into account the needs of neurodivergent people makes peer support activities more accessible to all young people.



Diversity of communication and being

Neuronormativity is the assumption that the people around us are neurotypical and communicate and act in ways that are considered neurotypical. As a neurodivergent young person I hope that workers would reflect on and unpack their neuronormative thoughts, as well as actively discourage behaviours that otherize neurodivergent people. Discussions about the diversity of communication and how different ways of communicating are equal to each other should take place between professionals and young people who act as peers. It is important that we young people

can participate in peer support activities in a way that suits us. Some of us are more focused when we can move around at the same time. Others prefer not to look others in the eye, while others connect with others through eye contact. Some people speak in a quiet voice and others in a loud voice. Some use communication aids. Young people should therefore be encouraged to participate in peer support activities in a way that suits them the best. It is important that we feel welcome and accepted just as they are.

Guiding young people in peer support activities

All participants of peer support activities benefit from clear guidance on what to do. However, the need for clarity may be more pronounced for neurodivergent people. It is important that the scheduling of activities, instructions and division of labour are planned and expressed as clearly as possible to the young people. People have different ways of structuring information and, where possible, instructions and schedules should be communicated to

young people in both verbal and written form. It is important to try to create an atmosphere in which young people feel safe to ask for clarification if something is unclear. It is essential to avoid assuming that information is internalised and processed in the same way by everyone. Young people should be encouraged to ask clarifying questions, even if it feels like repeating the same thing over and over again. Clarity contributes to inclusiveness.

Sensory sensitivity

Individuals with neurological conditions may have a wide range of sensory sensitivities. This should be considered wherever possible, for example in the choice of facilities and the planning of activities. The environment should be as accessible as possible to sensory stimuli. An example of this is bright lights: some people may not pay any attention to them, while for

others they can cause a great deal of discomfort - even physical pain. It is essential to understand that even if we do not find something stressful, it can act as a barrier to participation for some. It is important to recognise that such needs are genuine, even if they do not seem big or essential to us personally. You can ask from us what we need, light or dim, background music or silence.

Assistive devices

Some neurodivergent people use a variety of assistive devices to relieve the stress of different situations. These may include noise-cancelling headphones, earplugs and stimming toys. It is important to not question the use of assistive devices, and instead create a space where people feel safe to use them.

Using assistive devices can take a lot of courage. Peer support activities should aim to normalise the use of assistive devices and encourage young people to take care of their well-being. You can provide stimming toys that we can borrow in peer support activities.

The importance of timetables and breaks

Peer support activities should be scheduled in a way that avoids a sense of urgency and stress. For some young people, especially those with neurodivergence, it can also be very important to have a plan and schedule of activities in advance. This increases predictability and can therefore reduce the burden and lower the threshold for participation. For some young people, it can be very difficult to enter a new situation without clear prior information that would have enabled them to prepare for the meeting in advance. It is important to ensure that young people are

given the necessary number of breaks. The need for breaks varies from person to person. It is good to agree on breaks in advance, but it is also important to allow young people to ask for additional breaks and to leave the room outside the agreed breaks if necessary. For some, it may be particularly important to be able to move around and leave the room freely. It is a good idea to inform participants of this possibility at the outset so that they do not have to raise the issue themselves.

Masking


Many neurodivergent people have learned from childhood to mask neurodivergent traits in themselves, also known as masking. Some neurodivergent young people may think that they do not want to express their needs to avoid attracting negative attention from others. For this reason, they may, for example, not make use of the assistive devices they need or not ask for breaks and clearer instructions. Some try to stay as still as possible, even if it takes a huge amount of energy, concentration and effort. Some neurodivergent young people look others

in the eye, even if it feels very uncomfortable, as they are used to having to do so despite their own needs. Acting naturally and expressing your own needs can take a tremendous amount of courage as a neurodivergent person. It is therefore particularly important to try to create spaces where we neurodivergent people can feel that we belong and are on an equal footing with others, without feeling the need to perform masking. All young people with their individual characteristics and needs should be able to feel heard and seen equally in peer support activities.

Peer Support Training for LGBTIQ+ Youth

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of essential training for youth workers, focusing on effective peer support and inclusive communication. It is designed to equip professionals with the skills and knowledge required to offer impactful support and create inclusive environments, particularly for individuals within the LGBTIQ+ community. The chapter outlines key components of the peer supporter-mentor relationship, emphasizing the importance of active listening, crisis management, and conflict resolution. It also addresses the principles of inclusive communication, offering guidance on navigating diverse communication styles and cultural norms with sensitivity and respect. Through a combination of theoretical knowledge and

practical exercises, including role-playing and group discussions, this chapter aims to ensure that youth workers not only grasp these concepts but also apply them effectively in their professional practice. The objective is to enhance the ability of youth workers to provide supportive and safe spaces, ultimately contributing positively to the well-being and development of the young people they serve. The training was piloted in the project over three days: Friday evening, Saturday the whole day and Sunday morning. You can modify the training and its schedule as you wish. For example, instead of an intensive weekend, the training can be implemented as one session per week during the month.



Day 1

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION (30 MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

- **Create a Welcoming Environment:** Establish a comfortable and inclusive atmosphere where participants feel safe to share and engage.
- **Introduce the Project and Team:** Provide participants with an understanding of the training program's objectives, the roles of the team members, and what they can expect from the sessions.
- **Foster Group Cohesion:** Encourage participants to connect with one another through interactive icebreaker activities, promoting a sense of community and belonging.
- **Enhance Self-Awareness and Identity Exploration:** Through activities like *"Identity Flags"* and *"Storytelling Circles,"* participants will reflect on and express their identities, helping them build confidence and self-awareness.
- **Build Trust and Rapport:** Activities like *"Two Truths and a Lie"* and *"Common Ground"* are designed to help participants learn about each other in a fun and engaging way, laying the groundwork for trust and mutual respect.

Description:

This session is the introductory phase of the training program, which includes a welcome speech, an introduction to the project, the team, and the facilitators, as well as a series of icebreaker activities designed to build group cohesion and set a positive tone for the training. The icebreakers—*Identity Flags*, *Two Truths and a Lie*, *Storytelling Circles*, and *Common Ground*—are selected to encourage participants to explore and share aspects of their identity, learn about each other, and find commonalities within the group. These activities are essential for establishing a supportive and connected group dynamic, which will be critical for the success of the training program.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:

1. Welcome Speech and Introduction

Instructions:

Start the session with a warm welcome to all participants. Introduce yourself, the team, and the project. Briefly explain the goals of the training program and what participants can expect. Keep the tone positive and inclusive, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and open-mindedness throughout the sessions.

Tips:

Make eye contact, speak clearly, and express genuine enthusiasm. Encourage participants to ask questions about the program or the team to foster openness from the outset.

2. Introduction to the Training Program

Instructions:

Provide an overview of the training program, including the schedule, key topics, and any expectations from participants. Highlight the importance of active participation and how it will contribute to both individual and group learning experiences.

Tips:

Use visual aids (like a slideshow or handouts) to reinforce the key points. Allow a few minutes for participants to ask questions and clarify any doubts they may have.

3. Icebreaker Activities

● Identity Flags - Worksheet 1

Instructions:

Distribute blank flag templates and colored markers to each participant. Ask them to design a flag that represents their identity or personality. After completing their flags, invite each participant to share their creation with the group, explaining the meaning behind the symbols and colors they chose.

Tips:

Encourage creativity and reassure participants that there are no wrong answers. For those who may be shy, gently encourage participation but do not force anyone to share more than they are comfortable with.

● Two Truths and a Lie

Instructions:

Each participant takes turns sharing three statements about themselves—two of which are true and one that is a lie. The group then guesses which statement is the lie.

Tips:

Start with an example to illustrate how the game works. Encourage participants to think of interesting or surprising truths to make the game more engaging. Keep the atmosphere light-hearted and fun.

● **Storytelling Circles**

Instructions:

Divide the participants into small circles (3-5 people). Ask each person to share a brief story about a moment when they felt particularly proud of their LGBTQ+ identity or supported by their community. After each story, others in the circle can ask questions or share similar experiences.

Tips:

Provide a few moments for participants to gather their thoughts before starting. Ensure that the sharing is respectful and that everyone gets a chance to speak. Be mindful of time and gently guide the discussions to keep them within the allotted time frame.

● **Common Ground**

Instructions:

Form pairs or small groups and instruct them to list as many things they have in common as they can within a set time (e.g., 5 minutes). Afterward, each group shares their list with the larger group.

Tips:

Emphasize the importance of active listening and open-mindedness. Encourage participants to think beyond obvious commonalities (e.g. “We are all in this room”) and explore deeper connections. Use this activity to highlight the diversity within the group and the shared experiences that bring them together.

Overall, the key to facilitating this session is to maintain a positive, inclusive, and engaging atmosphere where all participants feel valued and heard. The goal is to set a strong foundation for the training program by fostering trust, connection, and a sense of community.

THE ROLES OF A PEER SUPPORTER

EXPECTATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS (90MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

- **Strengthen motivation:** The basis of being a peer supporter is to understand the reasons to become one. Sharing thoughts with other participants increases the collective motivation of the group.
- **Find your own strengths:** Encourage participants to discover their own strengths as peer supporters.
- **Grow as a peer supporter:** Learning together and being mentored by a facilitator supports growth as a peer supporter.

Description:

The aim of this session is to get participants to think about why they want to become peer supporters, what motivates them and what kind of peer supporter they could be. Participants will define what peer support means and through exercises will explore what roles and tasks a peer support can have. By discussing together, participants can discover that there is no one right way to be a peer. Everyone is good and worthy enough. The final section looks at confidentiality through practical examples.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:**1. My Motivation (30min)****Instructions:**

Discuss with participants the following topics:

- Why are you interested in becoming a peer supporter?
- What motivated you to come to the training?
- What would you like to learn?

Ask the participants to think about the first two questions individually and after that go through the answers together as a group. Move next to question. Ask participants to write on post-it notes things they would like to learn in this training and collect answers on a flipchart.

Tips:

The first two questions can also be worked through in pairs, if participants so wish. Save the post it notes, that you can come back to them at the end of the training.

2. Defining Peer Support (30min)**Instructions:**

Briefly define what peer support means. For example, you could draw a mind map of it on a flipchart.

You can use the following:

- Brings together people who are experiencing or have experienced similar things.
- A supportive relationship between people who share a common lived experience.
- Giving each other information, experience, emotional, social or practical help.
- Voluntary and mutual.
- Acting with the knowledge and skills of an ordinary person.
- There are many types of peer support, there is no one right way to give peer support.

Tips:

You can also ask participants how they would define peer support. It is important that you have a common understanding of this during the training.

3. Roles of Peer Supporter (30min)

Instructions:

Brainstorm together about the roles of a peer supporter.

1. What are the roles of a peer supporter?
2. What are the tasks of a peer supporter?

Ask participants to write their answers on post-it notes and collect answers to a flipchart or wall, for example. Then ask participants to select from the post-it notes those roles and tasks that would suit them as peer supporters. Discuss together what roles participants would feel would be suitable for them.

Tips:

Participants can also think of examples from their own lives: what kind of peer support they have received and in what situations. What helped them? Remind you that there are no wrong answers. The purpose of the exercise is to help participants find their own way of being a peer. You can use a following list of different peer support roles to help brainstorming:

- Providing support by listening and discussion
- Providing practical help with everyday tasks
- Accompanying to the services
- Sharing the peer supporters own lived experiences
- Advocating for people in recovery
- Seeking information about services
- Helping people to find meaningful leisure activities
- Teaching self-care skills and setting boundaries
- Building communities and support networks
- Creating hope for a better future

4. Confidentiality in Peer Support (20min)

Instructions:

- Arrange the space so that participants can move around. Choose a spot in the space where standing means YES and a spot where standing means NO.
- Read the cases to the participants one by one and ask them to move to the spot according to whether they agree or disagree. Discuss together where each person stands and why.

Cases:

1. The peer supporter and the person they is supporting meet by chance in a café. Both are there to spend the evening with their friends.

Is it ok for the peer supporter to say hello to the person being supported?

2. You act as a peer supporter for a young person aged 16. He tells you that he is experiencing violence at home from his parents and asks you not to tell anyone.

Will you tell someone? who is the person you tell?

3. You will meet another peer supporter and you exchange experiences of what it has been like to be a peer supporter. The other peer supporter asks some detailed questions about that person you are giving peer support.

Will you answer the questions?

Tips:

If it is difficult to move in the space, you can implement the exercise that instead of moving, participants give a thumbs-up if they say yes and a thumbs-down if they say no. The exercise can also be done outside.

Break (30 MIN)**DIVERSITY AND CRITICAL THINKING** (90 MIN)**LGBTIQ+ 101** (30 MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

1. **Encourage Open Dialogue:** Create a safe space for participants to ask questions and discuss dilemmas related to the LGBTIQ+ community.
2. **Promote Understanding:** Facilitate deeper understanding of LGBTIQ+ identities and issues by addressing participants' genuine concerns and curiosities.
3. **Foster Group Engagement:** Engage all participants in a collective discussion, encouraging active participation and shared learning.

Description:

In this activity, participants anonymously write down 2-5 questions or dilemmas related to the LGBTIQ+ community, identities, or related topics. These questions are placed in a box. The facilitator then picks out the questions one by one, reads them aloud, and leads a group discussion on each topic. This activity allows for the exploration of important and potentially sensitive topics in a structured and supportive environment.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:

Instructions:

- Provide participants with paper and pens to write down their questions or dilemmas.
- Collect the questions in a box or container.
- Randomly pick a question, read it aloud, and facilitate a group discussion on the topic.
- Encourage participants to share their thoughts, experiences, and knowledge.

Tips:

- Ensure anonymity to make participants feel comfortable asking any question.
- Be prepared to provide factual information or clarify misconceptions.
- Keep the discussion respectful and inclusive, guiding the conversation to ensure all voices are heard.

AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS (45 MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

1. **Increase Awareness of Bias:** Educate participants on various types of biases and their impact on perceptions and behaviors.
2. **Encourage Critical Reflection:** Prompt participants to reflect on and recognize their own biases through real-life examples.
3. **Promote Inclusive Thinking:** Foster a more inclusive mindset by challenging participants to think critically about how biases affect the LGBTIQ+ community.

Description:

This activity involves a presentation on different types of biases, such as implicit bias, confirmation bias, and stereotyping. After the presentation, each participant is given a specific example illustrating a type of bias. They are asked to reflect on the example and consider how biases influence thoughts, actions, and attitudes, especially towards the LGBTIQ+ community. The activity concludes with participants sharing their reflections in a group discussion.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:

Instructions:

- Present different types of biases with clear definitions and real-life examples. You can use the **WORKSHEET 2** in the appendix of the manual.
- Distribute specific examples of bias to each participant for individual reflection **WORKSHEET 3**.
- After reflection, invite participants to share their thoughts and insights with the group.

Tips:

- Use relatable examples to make the concept of bias more tangible.
- Encourage participants to be honest and open in their reflections.
- Facilitate the discussion in a non-judgmental way, focusing on learning and growth.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION, UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENT NORMS (45 MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

1. **Promote Inclusive Communication:** Educate participants on the importance of using inclusive language and respecting diverse communication norms.
2. **Enhance Cultural Competency:** Increase understanding of how language can reflect and reinforce inclusivity, especially within the LGBTQ+ community.
3. **Foster Respectful Dialogue:** Encourage participants to engage in discussions that respect and honor different cultural and social norms.

Description:

This activity focuses on understanding and practicing inclusive language and respectful communication. Participants engage in a group discussion about the significance of inclusive language, particularly in relation to the LGBTQ+ community. The discussion also covers how different cultural and social norms influence communication styles. The goal is to help participants recognize the power of language in creating an inclusive environment and to encourage them to adopt communication practices that respect diversity.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:**Instructions:**

- Introduce the concept of inclusive language and explain its importance.
- Facilitate a group discussion where participants share their experiences and thoughts on how language can include or exclude individuals.
- Discuss different communication norms across cultures and identities, emphasizing respect and understanding.

Tips:

- Provide examples of inclusive vs. non-inclusive language to clarify the discussion.
- Encourage participants to reflect on their own language use and consider areas for improvement.
- Ensure that the discussion remains respectful and that all participants feel comfortable sharing their perspectives.

Day 2

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND SAFE SPACE (90 MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

1. **Enhance Communication Skills:** Equip participants with effective communication strategies, focusing on active listening, creating safe spaces, and being present.
2. **Promote Inclusive Environments:** Foster an understanding of the principles required to create safe and inclusive spaces where everyone feels heard and respected.
3. **Encourage Self-Reflection:** Provide participants with opportunities to reflect on their communication styles and improve their ability to listen and support others without judgment.

Description:

This 90-minute activity focuses on developing effective communication skills, particularly within the context of diversity and inclusion. Participants will engage in group activities and discussions that highlight the importance of active listening, creating safe spaces, and being present during conversations. The session includes a series of structured exercises where participants take on different roles (*speaker, listener, observer*) to practice these skills in a supportive environment. After each exercise, the group discusses the concepts of safe space, active listening, and holding space, exploring how these can be applied in real-life interactions.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:

1. Diversity of Communication (10 min)

Instructions:

Start with a brief introduction on the diversity of communication styles, emphasizing that effective communication can vary based on cultural, social, and individual differences.

Tips:

Use examples to illustrate how different communication norms can impact interactions. Encourage participants to consider their own communication preferences and how these might differ from others.

2. Active Listening Exercise (45 min)

Instructions:

Divide participants into small groups of three. Each person will take turns being the speaker, listener, and observer across three rounds.

- **1st Round:** The listener focuses on creating a safe space for the speaker. The observer notes how the listener establishes this space.
- **2nd Round:** The listener practices active listening, with the observer identifying successful techniques.
- **3rd Round:** The listener holds space without speaking, allowing the speaker to express themselves freely.

Tips:

- Encourage listeners to use body language, eye contact, and non-verbal cues to demonstrate support.
- Remind participants to avoid interrupting or questioning the speaker, focusing instead on understanding and empathy.
- Observers should be constructive in their feedback, highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement.

3. Group Discussion (30 min)

- **1st Discussion:**

What is a safe space? Review the observer's notes and discuss how listeners succeeded in creating a safe space, how it impacted the speaker, and explore additional strategies for establishing a safe environment.

- **2nd Discussion:**

What is active listening? Discuss how the listener's actions during the exercise exemplified active listening, the effect on the speaker, and brainstorm further ways to enhance active listening skills.

- **3rd Discussion:**

What does it mean to hold space? Explore how the listener effectively held space without speaking and how this practice can benefit conversations.

Tips:

Use flip chart paper to record key insights from each discussion, making it easier to refer back to these points later in the session.

Encourage all participants to contribute their observations and thoughts, ensuring that the discussion remains inclusive and balanced.

4. Practical strategies and conclusion (5 min)

Instructions:

Summarize the key takeaways from the exercises and discussions. Provide practical strategies for applying these communication skills in everyday interactions, particularly in creating safe and inclusive spaces.

Tips:

Reinforce the importance of continuous self-reflection and practice in developing effective communication skills. Encourage participants to continue these practices beyond the session, both in personal and professional contexts.

**ME AS A PEER SUPPORTER
BOUNDARIES AND SELF-CARE (90 MIN)**

The goals of this activity are to:

- **Increase wellbeing:** Creating an understanding that taking care of your own wellbeing is an indispensable part for being a peer supporter. To become aware of their own resources and ability to influence matters that affect them.
- **Identify own needs:** Practice identifying your own needs as a peer supporter. Learning this together in a group creates an understanding that it is ok to have needs and say them out loud.
- **Set boundaries:** Setting boundaries in peer support work can be difficult. Therefore participants practice setting boundaries together. Giving practical examples of how to set your own boundaries.
- **View own story:** Provide an opportunity for participants to look at your own lived life and what they are willing to share about it in peer support work.

Description:

This session will focus on strengthening the well-being of participants in peer support work. First participants will look at experiences in their own lives and assess what they are willing to share with others in peer support work. Second activity will look practically at the steps peers can take to ensure their own privacy. As setting boundaries is not always easy, the final question is to consider what skills and resources each participant has to set boundaries.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:**Lifeline (40 min)****Instructions:**

Hand out paper and pens to the participants. Ask them to make a lifeline where they write things they have experienced in their life. **Ask participants to mark in different colors:**

1. The experiences they are willing to share with others
2. Things they do not want to share with others
3. Things they are not yet sure about or still need to process with themselves.

The activity is done individually and it is important to tell participants in advance that they don't have to share anything with others if they do not want to. However, you can offer the possibility to share an experience that they marked as something they are willing to share in peer support work.

Tips:

- Doing this task can bring up some difficult emotions and it's something it is good to tell to participants in advance. Arrange the room so that everyone can do the task in their own space.
- Instead of discussing the experiences you have written down, it may be more important to share how it felt to do the task at the end of this session.

Good practices (40 min)**Instructions:**

- Divide the participants into pairs. Guide them to brainstorm how, in practical terms, a peer supporter can set boundaries between peer support work and private life. **Participants can use the following questions:**

How to keep contact with the person that you are supporting? What are your physical boundaries? What to do if you find each other on social media? What practicalities should be agreed together at the beginning of the peer support relationship?

- Next the pairs present their answers to the whole group. If there is time, you can choose some questions that are important to the participants and discuss them in more detail.

Tips:

If you find some useful and concrete phrases that help to set personal boundaries, write them down.

Instructions:

Your own resources (10 min)

Instructions:

The session ends with a round where everyone shares at least one good personal characteristic that helps them to take care of themselves and set boundaries. You can use picture cards and ask each participant to choose a card that describes them in a positive way.

Lunch Break (60 MIN)

MAPPING THE PATHWAYS (180 MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

1. **Develop Practical Skills:** Enhance participants' abilities to effectively handle real-life scenarios as peer supporters, including problem-solving, planning actions, and addressing challenges.
2. **Simulate Peer Support Dynamics:** Provide hands-on experience in role-playing peer supporter-mentor interactions, allowing participants to practice and refine their skills in a controlled setting.
3. **Explore Crisis and Conflict Resolution:** Equip participants with strategies for resolving crises, managing conflicts, and de-escalating challenging situations.

Description:

The “*Mapping the Pathways*” activity is a 180-minute skill-building session designed to simulate the dynamics between peer supporters and mentors through role-playing. Participants are given vignettes—short, concrete scenarios describing various peer support cases. They are tasked with planning their responses, discussing strategies with peers, and then engaging in role-play sessions where they act out their planned actions with a mentor. After each role-play session, participants receive new information or face additional challenges related to their scenarios. This iterative process includes six rounds of role-playing, followed by a debriefing session focusing on crisis resolution, conflict resolution, and de-escalation strategies.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:

1. Introduction and Setup (15 min)

Instructions:

Introduce the activity, outlining the goals and structure. Explain the role of the vignettes and how participants will engage in role-playing peer supporter-mentor dynamics.

Tips:

Emphasize the importance of using real-life scenarios to develop practical skills. Provide clear instructions on how to use the vignettes and what to expect during the role-playing sessions.

2. Role-Playing Sessions (90 min)

Instructions:

- Distribute vignettes to each participant, describing specific peer support scenarios use *WORKSHEET 4*.
- Participants have 5 minutes to review and plan their peer support actions based on the vignette.
- Conduct a 10-minute role-playing session where participants enact their responses with a mentor while the rest of the group observes.
- After each round, participants receive new information or face additional challenges related to their vignette.
- Repeat this process for six rounds, allowing time for planning, role-playing, and receiving new information.

Tips:

- Encourage participants to think critically and creatively about their responses.
- Remind participants to stay in character and engage fully during the role-play.
- Ensure mentors provide constructive feedback and pose thoughtful questions to deepen the discussion.

3. Debriefing and Discussion (45 min)

Instructions:

- After the role-playing sessions, lead a debriefing discussion where participants reflect on their experiences.
- Discuss crisis resolution methods, conflict resolution strategies, and de-escalation techniques used during the role-plays.
- Identify key takeaways and practical strategies for handling similar situations in real-life peer support roles.

Tips:

- Use flip chart paper or a whiteboard to capture key points and strategies discussed.
- Encourage participants to share their reflections and insights from the role-playing sessions.
- Address any unresolved questions or concerns, and provide additional guidance as needed.

4. Conclusion and Next Steps (15 min)

Instructions:

Summarize the main lessons learned from the activity. Provide participants with resources or handouts on crisis resolution, conflict management, and de-escalation strategies.

Tips:

- Reinforce the importance of continued practice and reflection in developing effective peer support skills.
- Encourage participants to apply the skills and strategies learned in their own peer support roles.

This activity aims to provide participants with a comprehensive understanding of peer supporter-mentor dynamics and practical skills for managing various challenges. By simulating real-life scenarios and engaging in role-play, participants can build confidence and competence in their peer support roles.

Break (30min)

SHARING STORIES (90 MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

Grow to a peer supporter. To prepare participants to share their own story. To learn to recognise the emotions that come from telling your own story and hearing someone else's story. To increase the understanding that peer support can be experienced in many different ways and about many different issues.

Description:

The purpose of this session is to get known about someone's story as a peer supporter and to experience what it is like to share your own story with another. It also gives an opportunity to reflect the emotions that come up when hearing someone else's story. Session diversifies participants' understanding of how peer support can be experienced in many different situations.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:

Instructions:

- Ask someone who is already a peer supporter to join the session to talk about their own experience as a peer supporter. The peer supporter tells the participants their story; what has happened in their life, what peer support means to them and why they became a peer supporter.

- It is important that before the presentation starts, you all agree on practices for making the space as safe as possible for everyone, for example when and what kind of questions are ok to ask and what to do if something feels triggering.
- After the presentation, discuss together the thoughts and feelings that the presentation evoked.

Tips:

If it is not possible to have a peer supporter to tell their story, you can use the attached story in the session. **WORKSHEET 5** - It is a true story of a young peer supporter. It is also an option to find videos of peer supporters on YouTube. Arrange enough time for this session and take a short break if necessary.

Day 3

LOOKING BACK, STEPPING FORWARD (120 MIN)

The goals of this activity are to:

- **Concretise and summarise:** Provide a tool that brings together all the learnings from the training
- **Have and give feedback:** Feedback is an important part of training. Good and constructive feedback increases participants' motivation to act as peer supporters.
- **Increase awareness of peer support opportunities:** Participants will be given information on concrete opportunities to act as peers.

Description:

In this activity, participants will bring together what they have learned in the training and orient their thoughts towards becoming a peer supporter. The activity will use creative methods that will allow participants to explore their own peer supporter identity in their own way. Participants are given feedback and they can also give it to each other. In the end, the facilitators will tell the participants about concrete opportunities to become peer supporters in their organisation.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:

Me as a Peer Support Person

- collage (90 MIN)

Instructions:

- Prepare space with papers, colored cardboards, pencils, markers, watercolors, scissors, glue, magazines etc.

- Present the task to the participants. It is supposed to put together what is important to the participants on the topic of *"me as a peer supporter"*.
 - You can give participants some topics that they can use in their work:
 - » Identifying my peers - who can I support?
 - » What am I ready to share?
 - » What are my strong points?
 - » What kind of skills do I have?
 - » What do I still need to learn?
 - » How do I take care of myself?
 - » Who can I turn to in case of problems?
- Participants can choose how they want to work. The output can be a collage, a zine, a mind map, a treasure map, a CV, etc.
- End of the session participants present their work. Each participant will be given some good and constructive feedback.

Tips:

Using creative methods is not natural for everyone. Tell them that it's also okay to just list things that come to mind, for example.

Next steps (30 MIN)

Instructions:

Present the concrete possibilities for participants to start working as a peer supporter in your organisation. If your organisation does not yet have an existing peer support activity, you can start to plan the next steps together.

Tips:

It is also good to mention that it is totally ok if participants do not yet know whether they want to become a peer supporter. Tell them to take their time to think about it and get back to you later.

Closing (60min)

The goals of this activity are to:

1. **Reflect on Learning:** Provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences and the insights gained throughout the training.
2. **Gather Feedback:** Collect feedback on the training program to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
3. **Evaluate Personal Growth:** Encourage participants to assess their personal development and learning outcomes from the training.

Description:

The closing session is a 60-minute activity designed to wrap up the training program. It includes an open discussion where participants can share their reflections and feedback, and an evaluation segment where participants assess both their personal growth and the effectiveness of the training. The session aims to consolidate learning, address any final questions or concerns, and gather valuable input to enhance future training sessions.

Instructions and tips for facilitating:**1. Open Discussion (30 min)****Instructions:**

- Invite participants to share their reflections on the training experience. Encourage them to discuss what they found most valuable, any challenges they encountered, and how the training has impacted their understanding and skills.
- Facilitate a group discussion where participants can express their thoughts and insights in an open and supportive environment.

Tips:

- Create a welcoming atmosphere where all participants feel comfortable sharing their opinions.
- Use open-ended questions to prompt discussion, such as ***“What was the most significant learning for you?”*** or ***“How do you plan to apply what you’ve learned?”***
- Listen actively and acknowledge participants’ contributions to ensure a respectful and inclusive dialogue.

2. Feedback Collection (15 min)**Instructions:**

- Distribute feedback forms or surveys to participants, asking them to evaluate various aspects of the training program, including content, delivery, and overall effectiveness.
- Provide a brief overview of the feedback topics, such as what worked well, what could be improved, and any additional suggestions for future training sessions.

Tips:

- Ensure that feedback forms are anonymous to encourage honest and constructive responses.
- Allow participants sufficient time to complete the forms and emphasize the importance of their input in improving the training.

3. Personal and Training Evaluation (15 min)

Instructions:

- Guide participants in reflecting on their personal growth and the progress they have made during the training. Ask them to consider how their skills and understanding have evolved.
- Facilitate a brief discussion or individual reflection on their personal evaluations and any goals they have set for applying their new skills.

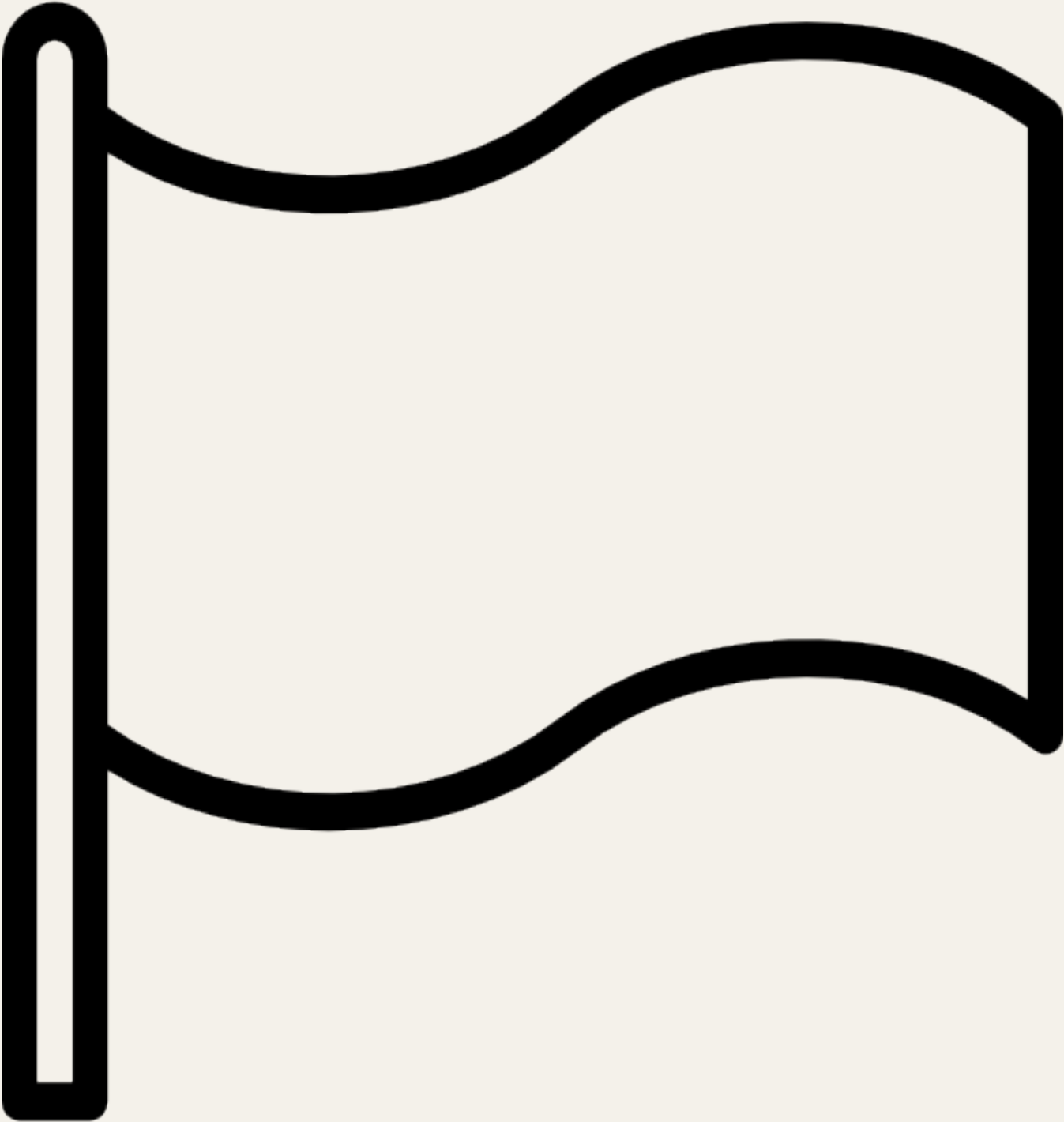
Tips:

- Use reflective questions to prompt personal evaluation, such as “*What skills have you developed that you’re most proud of?*” or “*What are your next steps for implementing what you’ve learned?*”
- Provide a summary of key takeaways and encourage participants to set actionable goals for applying their new skills in real-life situations.

By structuring the closing session to include open discussion, feedback collection, and personal evaluation, participants can consolidate their learning, provide valuable input for future improvements, and reflect on their personal growth. This comprehensive approach ensures that the training program concludes on a constructive and forward-looking note.

WORKSHEET 1

Blank Flag



WORKSHEET 2

Understanding Different Types of Biases

1. Implicit Bias

Definition:

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions. These biases are not always visible to us and can influence our behavior without us realizing it.

Example:

A person might unconsciously favor someone who shares their background or interests, even if they believe they are being objective.

2. Explicit Bias

Definition:

Explicit bias involves conscious beliefs or attitudes that a person is aware of and can openly express. These biases are deliberate and can influence behavior and decision-making.

Example:

An individual who openly expresses prejudiced views against a particular group is demonstrating explicit bias.

3. Confirmation Bias

Definition:

Confirmation bias occurs when individuals favor information that confirms their preexisting beliefs or hypotheses, while disregarding information that contradicts them.

Example:

A person who believes in a stereotype may selectively notice and remember instances that support the stereotype, while ignoring evidence that disproves it.

4. Stereotyping

Definition:

Stereotyping involves making generalized assumptions about individuals based on their membership in a particular group. These assumptions often ignore the individuality and complexity of people.

Example:

Assuming all members of a particular gender or ethnic group share the same traits or behaviors.

5. Affinity Bias

Definition:

Affinity bias is the tendency to favor people who are similar to ourselves in some way, whether that's through background, interests, or experiences.

Example:

Hiring managers might prefer candidates who share their alma mater or hobbies, overlooking other qualified candidates who differ from them.

6. Attribution Bias

Definition:

Attribution bias occurs when individuals attribute others' behaviors to their character or disposition, while attributing their own behaviors to external circumstances.

Example:

If someone else is late, we might assume it's because they're disorganized, while if we're late, we attribute it to external factors like traffic.

7. Halo Effect

Definition:

The halo effect is the tendency to let our overall impression of a person (*whether positive or negative*) influence our judgments about their specific traits or behaviors.

Example:

If someone is likable, we might also rate their work as higher quality, even if it's not objectively better.

8. In-Group Bias

Definition:

In-group bias is the tendency to favor and give preferential treatment to members of our own group, while discriminating against those from other groups.

Example:

People might show more trust and support to colleagues who share their cultural background, potentially sidelining others.

9. Out-Group Bias

Definition:

Out-group bias involves holding negative attitudes towards people who are not part of our own group, often based on stereotypes or lack of understanding.

Example:

Viewing members of a different social or ethnic group as less competent or less trustworthy than members of one's own group.

10. Recency Bias

Definition:

Recency bias is the tendency to give undue weight to recent events or information when evaluating a person or situation.

Example:

Evaluating a team member's performance based primarily on their most recent work, rather than their overall performance.

11. Anchoring Bias

Definition:

Anchoring bias occurs when individuals rely too heavily on the first piece of information they receive (the “anchor”) when making decisions or judgments.

Example:

If a job candidate's first salary expectation is high, it might skew negotiations even if the candidate's worth is assessed differently later.

12. Overconfidence Bias

Definition:

Overconfidence bias involves having more confidence in one's abilities or knowledge than is warranted by actual performance or evidence.

Example:

A person might overestimate their ability to complete a task or predict outcomes without adequate information.

WORKSHEET 3

Examples for Bias Reflection

Maja

Scenario:

Maja is a **17-year-old transgender woman** who recently came out to her deeply religious parents. They reacted with hostility, expressing their disapproval of her gender identity. As a result, Maja feels isolated at home and struggles with anxiety and depression. She has also been facing difficulties at school because she fears being bullied or discriminated against if her peers find out about her gender identity. Maja wants to transition and be her true self but is afraid of losing her family's support and facing social rejection.

Reflection Questions:

- What might Maja be feeling in this situation? Consider her emotional and mental state.
- How does the lack of family acceptance impact Maja's daily life and her ability to thrive in school?
- What kind of support and resources would Maja need to navigate her situation effectively?

Alex

Scenario:

Alex is a **19-year-old bisexual individual** who recently left their home due to conflicts with their parents over their sexual orientation. The parents have been openly hostile towards the LGBTQ+ community and have threatened Alex with eviction if they continued to express their identity. Alex is now living in a temporary shelter for LGBTQ+ youth but is worried about their future. They are also struggling with the lack of stability, which affects their mental health and ability to focus on their studies and job search.

Reflection Questions:

- How might Alex feel about being displaced from their home and living in a shelter?
- What are the emotional and practical challenges Alex faces as they try to rebuild their life?
- How can peer supporters and community organizations help Alex find stability and support during this transition?

Ravi

Scenario:

Ravi is a **22-year-old South Asian gay man** who recently moved to a new city for university. He is excited about finding a supportive LGBTQ+ community but has encountered both racial and LGBTQ+ discrimination. Ravi feels alienated as he faces microaggressions related to his ethnicity from his peers and is unsure how to address the cultural barriers within the LGBTQ+ spaces he wants to be part of. He is also struggling with feelings of isolation and anxiety about fitting in both as a racial minority and as a gay individual.

Reflection Questions:

- What emotional and psychological impacts might Ravi experience due to facing dual discrimination?
- How does the intersection of racial and LGBTQ+ discrimination affect Ravi's sense of belonging and self-esteem?
- What support strategies can be implemented to help Ravi navigate these challenges and find a supportive community?

Nia

Scenario:

Nia is a **19-year-old Black transgender woman** who is grappling with cultural expectations from her family and community. Her family holds traditional views on gender roles and has expressed strong disapproval of her transition. Nia feels pressured to conform to these cultural expectations while also dealing with her gender dysphoria and the lack of acceptance from those around her. She is anxious about the impact of her identity on her relationship with her family and feels isolated from both her cultural community and the broader LGBTQ+ community.

Reflection Questions:

- How might Nia's cultural expectations and family pressures affect her mental health and identity expression?
- What are the challenges she faces in reconciling her gender identity with her cultural and familial expectations?
- How can support systems provide Nia with the resources and understanding needed to navigate these complex intersections?

Jamal

Scenario:

Jamal is a **24-year-old Latino non-binary person** who works in an environment where LGBTQ+ issues are rarely discussed and racial diversity is minimal. Jamal feels invisible both as a non-binary individual and as a person of color. He experiences discomfort and isolation at work and in social settings where his identities are neither acknowledged nor understood. Jamal is also struggling with anxiety and depression, partly due to the lack of representation and acceptance in both his workplace and the broader community.

Reflection Questions:

- How might Jamal's experiences of invisibility and lack of representation affect his mental health and sense of belonging?
- What are the specific challenges Jamal faces in both his work environment and social interactions?
- What kinds of support or changes could be made to help Jamal feel more seen and accepted in both his workplace and community?

Casey

Scenario:

Casey is a **21-year-old queer individual** living in a small rural town. The community is close-knit but not very open-minded, and Casey feels isolated due to the lack of visible LGBTQ+ support and acceptance. They have not come out to their family, fearing rejection and potential hostility, as their family holds conservative views. Casey struggles with feelings of loneliness and depression because they don't have access to local LGBTQ+ support networks or resources. They are also worried about the safety of expressing their identity openly in such a tight-knit and traditional environment.

Reflection Questions:

- How might Casey's rural environment and lack of local LGBTQ+ support affect their mental health and sense of self?
- What are the specific challenges Casey faces due to the isolation and conservative attitudes in their community?
- What strategies or resources can be developed to help Casey feel more supported and less isolated despite their geographical limitations?

Maya

Scenario:

Maya is a 20-year-old trans woman who is struggling with financial insecurity. She works part-time at a minimum-wage job and is living paycheck to paycheck. Maya has faced significant discrimination in her job due to her gender identity, which has made it difficult for her to advance and secure better employment opportunities. She has limited access to health care, including the hormone therapy she needs for her transition, and is unable to afford the costs associated with changing her legal documents to reflect her gender identity. Maya feels overwhelmed by the financial pressure and the lack of support, which exacerbates her anxiety and depression.

Reflection Questions:

- How do Maya's financial struggles impact her ability to access essential services and support for her gender transition?
- What additional stressors might Maya experience due to the combination of economic hardship and discrimination?
- What kinds of support and resources can be provided to help Maya manage her economic challenges while addressing her needs related to her gender identity?

WORKSHEET 4

Cases

CASE 1. Luna

Case Introduction:

Luna, a 19-year-old bisexual individual, recently dropped out of school due to depression and anxiety. They have sought your support to help them restart their studies. Luna has not come out to their deeply religious parents, fearing rejection. While Luna is also religious, they have not shared details about their faith. Luna has felt isolated from the LGBTQ+ community until meeting you, which has made them very happy. Over the past few weeks, Luna has started messaging you frequently, including at night, and sometimes deletes messages before you can read them. Recently, you heard from another young person that Luna has a crush on you. You are meeting Luna tomorrow and are uncertain whether or not to address what you heard.

Situation 1

During your next meeting, Luna brings up their desire to return to school but feels overwhelmed by the thought of re-entering an academic environment. How would you support Luna in creating a plan to manage their anxiety and depression while pursuing their studies?

Situation 3

Luna expresses feeling isolated and mentions how meeting you has been a bright spot in their life. They want to make more LGBTQ+ friends but don't know where to start. How would you assist Luna in finding and connecting with supportive LGBTQ+ communities?

Situation 5

You are meeting Luna tomorrow and have heard from another young person that Luna has a crush on you. This could potentially impact the peer support relationship. How would you handle this situation in a sensitive and professional manner during your meeting?

Situation 2

Luna shares their struggle with not being able to come out to their parents due to their parent's religious beliefs. They feel conflicted between their sexual orientation and their faith. How would you help Luna navigate this internal conflict and find a sense of peace and acceptance?

Situation 4

Luna's frequent and confusing messages, sometimes sent at night, are causing you concern. You want to understand what Luna needs but find the communication challenging. How would you address this issue with Luna to improve communication and establish healthy boundaries?

CASE 2. Max**Case Introduction:**

Max, a 23-year-old Black transgender man, is also autistic and has been diagnosed with PTSD. Throughout his life, Max has faced significant discrimination and prejudice, which has compounded his experiences of minority stress due to his intersecting identities. Max recently joined a peer support program, hoping to find a space where he can feel understood and supported. However, communication between you and Max has been challenging since the beginning. There have been constant misunderstandings, leading to frustration on both sides. Max feels that you might have something against him, despite your reassurances to the contrary. He has shared his feelings of being misunderstood and unsupported, but conversations about these issues have only reinforced his beliefs. Despite these difficulties, Max remains committed to working with you as his peer supporter. You are determined to improve your communication and better understand the type of support Max needs and wants from you.

Situation 1

In your next meeting, Max expresses his frustration with the ongoing miscommunications and feels that you are not understanding his perspective. How would you approach this conversation to improve your communication and understanding with Max?

Situation 3

Max mentions that he feels isolated and misunderstood not just in your sessions, but also in his daily life. He wants to build a support network but doesn't know where to start. How would you help Max develop a plan to connect with supportive communities and individuals?

Situation 5

Max is interested in finding professional mental health support but feels overwhelmed by the process and fears further discrimination. How would you assist Max in navigating the healthcare system to find a therapist who is knowledgeable and supportive of his intersecting identities?

Situation 2

Max shares that he recently experienced a distressing incident of discrimination at work, which has heightened his PTSD symptoms. He feels overwhelmed and unsure how to cope. How would you support Max in managing his PTSD symptoms and addressing the discrimination he faced?

Situation 4

Max tells you that he often feels judged and invalidated when he tries to talk about his experiences with minority stress. He is hesitant to open up further because of past negative experiences. How would you create a safe and validating space for Max to share his feelings and experiences?

CASE 3. Jordan**Case Introduction:**

You are a **peer supporter** for Jordan, a person with a long history of mental illness who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Jordan has not been taking their prescribed medication and is currently not receiving any professional help. Recently, Jordan confided in you that they are experiencing active suicidal thoughts. They stressed that they trust you and do not want anyone else to know about their situation. You realize that the support you can provide is insufficient for Jordan's current crisis. Despite your efforts to encourage them to seek professional help, Jordan is resistant due to previous negative experiences with mental health services as a queer person. You are deeply concerned that Jordan may be a danger to themselves and are unsure of the best course of action.

Situation 1

Jordan reiterates that they are feeling actively suicidal and expresses frustration with their previous experiences with mental health services. They feel betrayed by the system and are adamant about not seeking professional help. How would you respond to Jordan's immediate crisis and their distrust of professional help?

Situation 3

Jordan tells you that their feelings of hopelessness and despair are overwhelming, and they don't see a way out of their current situation. They feel isolated and unsupported. How would you support Jordan in this moment and help them see the possibility of hope and recovery?

Situation 5

Jordan expresses a desire to connect with mental health professionals who understand and respect their queer identity but is afraid of encountering more discrimination. How would you assist Jordan in finding LGBTQ+-affirming mental health services and support groups?

Situation 2

Jordan mentions that they have stopped taking their medication because they feel it wasn't helping and that it made them feel worse. They are currently experiencing severe mood swings. How would you approach the conversation about the importance of medication adherence and finding a medication that works for them?

Situation 4

Despite Jordan's resistance, you believe that they need immediate professional intervention to ensure their safety. How would you approach the delicate situation of ensuring Jordan receives the help they need while respecting their feelings and confidentiality to the best of your ability?

CASE 4. Alex**Case Introduction:**

Alex, a 19-year-old non-binary person, recently moved to a new city for university. They were excited about this new chapter in their life but soon began to feel overwhelmed and anxious. Despite being an extrovert in high school, Alex now finds it difficult to make new friends and feels isolated. They experience frequent anxiety attacks, especially in social situations, and often avoid leaving their apartment. Alex is passionate about LGBTQ+ activism and longs to join the university's LGBTQ+ club, but the fear of rejection and judgment holds them back. They struggle with their identity in this new environment, feeling unseen and misunderstood by peers and professors. Alex misses their supportive high school friends who always understood and accepted them. They are now reaching out to the university's peer support program, hoping to find someone who can understand their struggles and help them navigate this challenging time. Alex has never sought professional help for their anxiety before, fearing stigma and not knowing where to start. They feel trapped in a cycle of loneliness and fear, desperate for connection and understanding.

Situation 1

Alex attends their first meeting with you, their peer supporter, and shares their feelings of anxiety and isolation. They express a desire to join the LGBTQ+ club but are paralyzed by fear. How would you support Alex in this initial meeting?

Situation 3

Alex mentions that they have received some hurtful comments about their gender identity from a classmate. They are deeply affected and feel unsafe and unsupported at university. How would you address this issue with Alex?

Situation 5

Alex is interested in seeking professional help for their anxiety but feels overwhelmed by the process. They have never navigated the healthcare system for mental health support before. How would you assist Alex in finding and accessing the resources they need?

Situation 2

During your next session, Alex reveals that they had a panic attack in one of their classes and are now too anxious to attend. They are worried about falling behind in their studies. How would you help Alex manage their anxiety related to academics?

Situation 4

Alex confides in you that they have been avoiding social events because they feel like they don't fit in and fear being judged. They miss having friends but don't know how to start building new relationships. How would you guide Alex through this challenge?

CASE 5. Ahmed

Case Introduction:

You are a **peer supporter** for **Ahmed**, a **gay asylum seeker** living in an **asylum camp**. Ahmed struggles with severe anxiety due to the homophobic and dangerous environment of the facility. His communication with you is erratic, often jumping from topic to topic, making it difficult to follow his thoughts. Ahmed frequently texts you, sharing information and pictures from his daily life, and often sends urgent messages pleading for help to relocate from the asylum home and find work. Despite the challenging communication, Ahmed trusts you and relies on your support to navigate this stressful period.

Situation 1

Ahmed expresses his fear and anxiety about the homophobic environment in the asylum camp and pleads for help to relocate. He feels unsafe and is desperate for a solution. How would you support Ahmed in this immediate crisis and help him explore options for improving his safety and well-being?

Situation 3

Ahmed sends you a series of messages, including pictures of his daily life, mixed with urgent pleas for help to find work. He feels that securing a job would help him gain independence and improve his situation. How would you help Ahmed explore employment opportunities while managing his expectations and anxiety?

Situation 5

Despite your ongoing support, Ahmed's anxiety and pleas for relocation become more frequent and urgent. You realize that he needs more help than you can provide alone. How would you approach the situation to ensure Ahmed gets the professional help and support he needs, while respecting his trust and maintaining your supportive relationship?

Situation 2

Ahmed's erratic communication style makes it difficult for you to understand his needs and provide effective support. During your next interaction, he jumps from one topic to another without giving you a chance to respond. How would you address this communication challenge and establish a more structured way of interacting with Ahmed?

Situation 4

Ahmed confides that he feels isolated and has no support system within the asylum camp. He is struggling to cope with the constant fear and anxiety and does not know how to find a sense of community. How would you assist Ahmed in finding support networks, both within and outside the asylum camp, that could provide him with a sense of belonging and safety?

CASE 6. Emma**Case Introduction:**

You are a **peer supporter** for Emma, a young trans woman who is struggling with her **gender expression**. Emma has never used make-up or dressed in female clothes, and she is also autistic, which makes it difficult for her to keep appointments with you and maintain regular attendance in school. Emma has no friends and is desperate to be part of the LGBTQ+ community. During your meetings, Emma doesn't talk much, and you struggle to find topics to discuss, making the support sessions feel unproductive to you. However, Emma insists that she enjoys these sessions very much and values your support.

Situation 1

Emma expresses a strong desire to explore her gender expression but feels overwhelmed and unsure where to start with make-up and dressing in female clothes. How would you support Emma in taking the first steps towards expressing her gender identity in a way that feels comfortable and affirming for her?

Situation 3

During your sessions, Emma doesn't talk much, making it challenging to engage in meaningful conversations. You want to ensure the sessions are beneficial for her. How would you approach this communication barrier and find ways to facilitate more effective and supportive discussions?

Situation 5

Despite your concerns that the support sessions are not going well, Emma insists that she enjoys them and finds them helpful. You want to ensure you are providing the best support possible. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of your sessions and make any necessary adjustments to better meet Emma's needs and expectations?

Situation 2

Emma often misses appointments with you and struggles with keeping up in school, which adds to her stress and anxiety. How would you help Emma develop strategies for better managing her schedule and improving her academic performance while being sensitive to her autistic traits?

Situation 4

Emma is feeling isolated and longs to be part of the LGBTQ+ community but doesn't know how to connect with others. How would you assist Emma in finding and engaging with supportive LGBTQ+ groups or communities where she can make friends and feel accepted?

CASE 7. Taylor

Case Introduction:

You are a **peer supporter for Taylor, an LGBTQ+ youth struggling with housing**. Taylor's parents are extremely homophobic and outspoken against the LGBTQ+ community and its rights. They frequently ridicule Taylor for not conforming to traditional gender roles. Taylor, who is still in school, is deeply anxious and fearful about coming out to their parents. They worry that doing so could lead to being thrown out of the house, losing financial support, or even facing physical violence. Despite longing to join the LGBTQ+ community, Taylor is paralyzed by the fear of their parent's potential reaction, which leaves them feeling isolated and unsupported.

Situation 1

Taylor confides that their parents' homophobic remarks and ridicule are causing significant anxiety and making them feel unsafe at home. They are unsure how to cope with the constant stress. How would you support Taylor in managing their anxiety and finding ways to create a sense of safety and self-acceptance in a hostile environment?

Situation 3

Taylor mentions that their parents' financial support is crucial for their education, and they fear losing it if they come out. They feel stuck and powerless, unsure how to navigate this situation. How would you help Taylor explore potential resources and options for financial independence and support?

Situation 5

Despite the challenges, Taylor is committed to their education and wants to ensure they can continue their studies while dealing with these issues. How would you support Taylor in balancing their academic responsibilities with their mental health needs, and in finding ways to succeed in their studies despite the difficult home environment?

Situation 2

Taylor expresses a desire to connect with the LGBTQ+ community but is terrified of their parents finding out. They feel trapped and isolated, unable to reach out for support. How would you assist Taylor in exploring safe ways to connect with the community without risking their safety at home?

Situation 4

Taylor's fear of physical violence from their parents if they were to come out is a constant source of distress. They are unsure where to turn for help or protection. How would you help Taylor develop a safety plan and identify resources that can provide immediate and long-term support?

WORKSHEET 5

Story of a Peer Supporter

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

abuse (*physical, sexual & emotional*), mental illness, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, self-harm, hospitals, medications/medical talk, queerphobia, eating disorder. Trigger warnings are for the topics I'm going to mention in this story. I will not dive deep into any of the topics mentioned, and this text does not involve any graphic details of them!

Who am I?

I'm a nearly 30-year-old queer person and an educated expert by experience. I am currently studying social counseling at university of applied sciences. I take part in different kinds of activism when I have the time and capacity to do so. Peer support has been a big part of my life for many years, and I have had many different roles in the context of peer support. A part of being an educated expert by experience is telling my life story to others. Hearing other people opening about their lives, struggles and healing processes has given me so much hope along the years. I'm now at a place in my life where I feel comfortable enough to be vulnerable and share my story with you. I'm going to talk about my past and why I ended up becoming

an educated expert by experience. I will also discuss the importance of community and peer support. So, I'll start by telling you more facts about myself. I'm autistic and have ADHD, and as those things are an important part of my identity, it has not been easy for me to navigate this neurotypical world. I got the diagnoses as an adult, so I grew up without knowing those things about me. I also have a long history with mental illness. Along the years I have had different kinds of mental health issues. My struggles with mental health have been mainly related to a mood disorder, traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and general anxiety. I also have experience with an eating disorder and substance abuse.

A brief look into my childhood and teenage years

I come from an academic middle-class family. My family has had its issues, but my home life was relatively safe growing up and I had many privileges that I do not take for granted. However, as a child I often felt like I was different from the other kids. I was quite serious, and my thinking was very black and white. I was not that good at playing with others and had a hard time fitting into social norms. I have always been a high masking autistic and done a lot of research about how to behave in ways that are socially accepted. So, while my autism was definitely there as a kid, it wasn't obvious to the people in my life. Although I think that my family tried their best to be there for me, even they didn't understand me very well.

My teenage years were traumatic. Along those years I experienced physical, sexual and emotional violence and it obviously impacted my mental health in a very negative way. I was super anxious, scared of people and paranoid about everything. I was also severely depressed and self-harming constantly. My body image and problems with eating started to also get bad in my teenage years. I skipped school constantly and barely got through the mandatory education. I felt like I was this problem child that was always underachieving at everything in life.

I started to use substances when I was like 12 years old. My substance use increased gradually in my teenage years, and it became this self-destructive way to cope with all the stress in my life. As a teen I hanged out in groups where drug use and different kinds of abusive behaviors were normal. A lot of people I spent time with were adults who had substance abuse issues. The environment I was in most of the time was not suitable for a kid at all. At 14 years old I was also dating a person that was much older than me. They were abusive towards me in many ways and my self-esteem dropped completely within the two years I was in that so-called relationship. I thought that I deserved the abuse and as it was so normalized in the culture I was living in then, I could not see it as that bad of a thing. I also didn't have friends or adults in my life that I would feel safe to open up to about it or anything else in that matter.

Queerphobia and misogyny were thriving in my friend groups when I was a teen. I was closeted with my queerness and felt so much shame around it that I tried to avoid even thinking about it. I had always felt I was different from the others in many ways, and I tried to hide every part of me that I felt would not be accepted by the people I was with. I dressed in a way that

felt very wrong for me. I made my voice sound different. I dated people who I was not attracted to in a romantic way. My communication was mainly just repeating the things I had heard other people saying because I was so insecure about my own thoughts and opinions. I was never actually vulnerable with anyone in my life.

I feel like I lost my whole identity and a sense of self completely in my teenage years. It has taken me all my adult years to try to find out who I am as a person. I have had to break down everything I thought about myself and build something completely new from the ground up.

Still not living my best life in my early twenties

In my early twenties I still had absolutely no hope for the future. I could not see anything past my current situation. I felt like I was a hopeless case with so many different issues that there was no point in even trying to recover. Everything was all or nothing and black and white for me. I was either doing chaotic and impulsive things constantly or locked myself in my home and didn't get out of bed for long periods of time. I still engaged in different types of self-destructive behaviors, main ones being substance use, self-harm and disordered eating. My relationships were unstable, and I

was chronically suicidal. In my early twenties I was constantly in and out of psychiatric hospitals. For a couple of years, I was a so-called revolving door patient. Some of the hospital stays were ok while some of them were horrific and re-traumatizing. I don't know if hospital treatment helped me that much but at least there were people who understood my situation and didn't judge me for it. By those people I mean mainly other patients though, not the staff. I feel so much love for the people I met there and couple of them are still my friends.

No rest for the wicked, right?

At 20-years old I was also officially not able to work and got on disability benefits. I still could not take care of my own well-being at all. I did part-time jobs and studied even though I didn't have to money wise. Needless to say that it was exhausting. There were times I didn't work or study, but there were also times I ran away from psychiatric hospital to go to work because I couldn't call in sick. When I was younger, I had a compulsive need to be seen like I had my sh*t together. While to the people close to me it was obvious that

I was in a constant crisis, I still very much tried to seem like I was more okay than I was, especially to the people I didn't know that well. I took part in the entrance exams and got accepted to the school I'm in now all while I was a patient in a psychiatric hospital. I think it's kind of a funny story especially because I'm now specializing in mental health work in my studies. In retrospect it was a well spent day leave from hospital but it's also a good example of me not knowing how to give myself time to rest ever. Wouldn't recommend to anyone to be honest.

The importance of understanding neurodivergence

I have now been over 4 years clean of active self-harm and haven't needed psychiatric hospital treatment in many years. One of the huge turning points in my healing process was when I got my diagnoses of autism and ADHD at 24 years old. I had like eight different mental health diagnoses at the time, and some of them were actually describing my neurodivergent traits. Especially with non-cis-men it's typical that doctors diagnose you with a lot of mental health disorders before anyone even considering the possibility of you being autistic or having ADHD.

I was kind of sure I was autistic even before my clinical diagnosis. Topics related to mental health, psychology, and social and disability justice have been my special interests for a long time. When I was younger there was not that much information about neurodivergence, but at the time I started the diagnosis process I had already searched all the information I could possibly find about autism. I got most of my knowledge from autistic activists. I'm forever grateful for the peer support and information I have gotten from them online when I was younger.

Feeling invisible in the health care system

I feel like I was not being seen in mental health services at least before my diagnoses of autism and ADHD. I felt like the professionals saw me as a hopeless case with so many different problems that it's kind of pointless to even try to help me to get better. Or if not that, they just tried to treat my symptoms of one specific diagnosis and ignored all the others, completely missing the whole picture. While depression for example can be so-called clinical, I think it's important to note how life situations can contribute to a person's mental health. It is hard to not be depressed if you are lonely, traumatized, isolated and have substance abuse issues. It's hard to not be depressed when you don't get the right support as a neurodivergent person. I also feel like being closeted with my queerness, minority stress and discrimination contributed to my mental illness in many ways. When I was treated for

my mental illnesses, I was basically just offered a lot of different medications and hospital treatment when in crisis. I was in some group therapies, but a lot of them were designed for cis het neurotypical people, I felt like an alien in many of these groups. While many people with mental illnesses need medicine to stay alive, for me they were kind of just prescribed without getting to know anything about my situation. In my early twenties I was on this antipsychotic medication that affected my mental health in horrible ways. Instead of listening to me and questioning if these meds or even my diagnoses were right for me, doctors just offered more antipsychotics to ease the symptoms that were partly caused by the meds I was taking. When I got off the wrong medications, I was able to think more clearly and really start my healing process for the first time in my life.

Madness as an identity

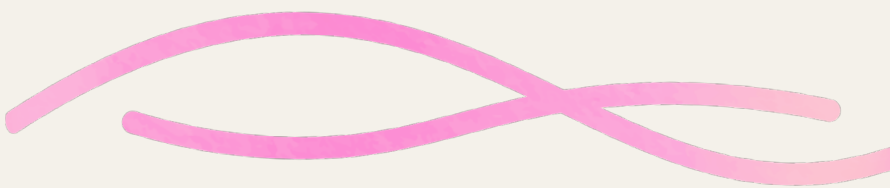
I feel like somewhere along the years being mad became my identity. For a long time, I didn't know anyone with the same kind of experiences with mental health that I have. I felt like I was The Crazy One in every group I was in. I wanted to own that identity rather than run away from it because God knows it had not worked well for me. I call myself mad or crazy without feeling any shame about it now. It has been very empowering to feel a sense of belonging with people who have been through similar things as I have. I have so much love for my fellow mad people and I love to rage about our rights. It's my favorite past time hobby. On the flip side I feel like it was also harmful for me to make madness my identity. I felt like I had no hope of recovery, and my thoughts about myself revolved around my mental illnesses. I did very little to make changes in my life or take care of myself because I felt that it would be kind of pointless as I would always be mad either way. I was kind of not taking accountability of anything really because I believed and was made to believe that I couldn't. There were many times my actions were hurtful to the people I love because I couldn't put the work in. It took me many years and a ton of self-reflection to see the

problematic patterns in my own actions. So, I had to learn how to take accountability as an adult. For me that meant that I had to leave behind the thoughts of not being able to work on anything. I also had a lot of internalized ableism and classism that I had to unpack. What a terrible way to think that you only deserve self-care, community and growth if you are healthy. I never ever thought those things about other people, but in my mind, I was an exception. I sometimes still struggle with not defining my self-worth through my productivity, but at least now I am aware of the conditionings that we get from living in a capitalist society. That awareness is an important tool I can use in challenging how I see myself – understanding that I am not the only thing that needs fixed makes prioritizing my well-being easier. Being mad is still a big part of my identity and I absolutely love the fact that I can give peer support to people in my life. In my communities I'm often the one people turn to when they need advice or someone to listen to them about mental health stuff. It's definitely not because I'm studying social counseling, it's because they know that I really, really get it. It's because they know that I don't judge, even if they have f*cked up badly.

Finding community, peer support and safe spaces

Finding communities and a sense of belonging has literally saved my life. Peer support has given me so much that it's hard to even describe. When I was younger, I felt like I couldn't be myself with literally anyone. Before I was twenty-something, I almost never told anyone about any of my struggles unless I was forced to do so. It is a very lonely place to feel like you are the only one experiencing the things you are. I have been given the best advice and support by people who have gone through similar things as me. It has also been so important for me to feel a sense of meaningfulness that come with giving peer support. For a long time, I believed that I'm just not good at anything and that there is nothing I can ever offer to anyone. I think that it would have made a huge difference in my life if I would have found peer support earlier than I did. I have been openly queer for many years now. That is not something I thought would be possible for me growing up. I remember that the teenage me thought that I will end my life if anyone ever finds out that I'm queer. I was so sure that it will be that way for the rest of my life that in my mind it wasn't even a question. It's heartbreaking how many of the people that I have spoken to about this share the same experience. It's also healing to know how wrong I and many people close to me were. When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I gradually started to let go of people in my life that were queerphobic, ableist and had other values that I don't agree with. I have slowly

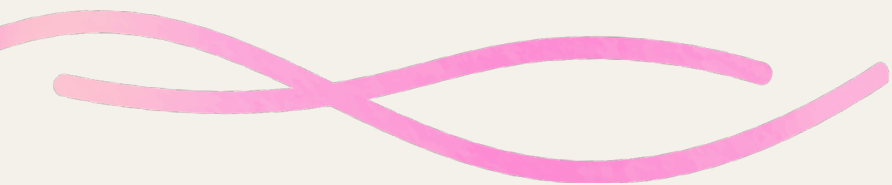
but surely learned that being myself attracts the kind of people I actually want in my life. I have slowly but surely learnt that I have the right to choose who I want to spend my time with. I have found people who share my values and accept me as who I am. My circle is small but tight-knitted and I'm forever thankful of my chosen family. They allow me to take space and do things in my own way. They have taught me so much about unconditional love, the kind of love I didn't know even existed before. I strongly believe in communal care. The best support I have ever received has come from the communities I'm part of. There was a time my friends moved my stuff to a new apartment for me because I had to go to psychiatric hospital in the middle of the moving process. They have eaten with me when I couldn't do it by myself. We have cleaned each other's homes when needed. I think that it's important to recognize that there are many ways we can show up for our communities. While sharing experiences and supporting each other through conversations is undeniably important, sometimes people also have the need for help in more concrete things. So peer support can also look like cooking, cleaning, researching information about something, doing laundry, going to the grocery store or just sitting in silence next to each other. We as humans can offer each other so much, even if we don't have the capacity to do certain things, there might be other, equally important ways in which we can help others.



Always a work in progress, forever growing

I would like to end this story by saying that I'm recovered now and that everything magically turned for the better in my life, but I would be lying. I have had to do so much work to get to this point and I still have to work every day for my own healing. I'm still trying to heal the relationship I have with food and my body. I have chronic physical symptoms partly because of all the stress I have put my body through along the years and partly because of physical conditions that have nothing to do with that. I will obviously always be neurodivergent and that comes with its own difficulties. I still struggle with my mental health and strongly believe that I will always be mad. But there is a huge difference to my past. I have found parts of me that I thought were gone forever. I have found my people - people who I love and can be vulnerable with. I have

found art, activism and other ways to use my voice. I have learned to take care of myself in ways that are suitable for my neurodivergent brain. I have nearly finished my studies which is great even though I think it's the least interesting thing about my story. I am still mad but I'm also a friend, a lover, self-healer, storyteller and a survivor. I know what I believe in and what I want to use my energy in. I believe that everything that I have been through has taught me many important things I can use to help others, things you cannot learn from books or social media. I feel like it gives a meaning to my past, present and future. Because of that I decided to become an educated expert by experience, it's the reason I study what I do. It's why I wrote this story and decided to share it with you. It's what gets me through the day when I'm feeling like I have nothing to offer to this world. <3





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