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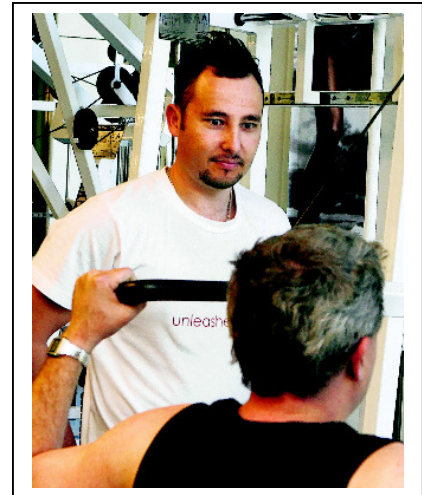


Peer Recovery Worker Makes a Difference

(by Maureen Maher BSc Health Promotion)

HealthRight Peer Recovery Worker Derek, knows first-hand, the feelings of despair and hopelessness that can come with mental illness, and he believes this personal experience with mental illness is the key to building the trust and rapport that are central to his peer recovery relationships.

“I find the rapport is quickly established as the supported person learns that I have been there too...it can be like a recognition that I will understand, and with that comes a sense of trust. There can be an element of surprise too that I seem so mentally healthy now, role modelling what is possible”, says Derek.



Derek supporting his peer's physical health goals

Derek has been a HealthRight Peer Recovery Worker for nearly two years and in that time he has helped more than sixteen people to work towards their physical health goals on their road to recovery from their illness. He currently works to support eight people with seven more on the waiting list.

The role of the Peer Recovery Worker is to be an advocate for recovery; bring hope and optimism; offer mentoring and positive role modelling and discuss ways to avoid relapse. Derek says it is important to have a keen interest in what his participant's goals are, and always work from the participant's perspective.

“I listen to the participant and together develop goals they want to achieve for their physical health for the period we are working together” says Derek. “I am always checking in with them, by asking...‘what do you want to do next?’ or ‘are you happy with how things are going – is there anything different I can do?’”

Goals include firstly referring the participant to a General Practitioner for a physical health check-up and clearance to begin exercise. “We work together to achieve physical health goals like weight loss, becoming more physically active by one on one walking and in-groups, attending the gym together, discussion about nutrition; referral to a dietician; teaching skills in healthy food preparation; shopping trips and utilising Lifescrpts* for gym memberships. Psychosocial aspects, like connecting with the community, are also important to recovery”, says Derek.

“I also encourage social skills by introducing the people I have supported to each other so they can form friendships and connect them to local support organisations in their community like the June O'Connor Centre”.

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A recent participant is just one example of the success of the HealthRight Peer Support Program. "I work with one man who this year set a goal of giving up smoking. Over three and a half months he has reduced from 50 to cigarettes per day to just 20 to 25, and he continues to work towards giving up completely", says Derek. "The process included talking about all the ways he could go about giving up, providing written materials about quitting smoking, discussing the importance of having other activities to replace the smoking, including work, support from others and physical activity."

Derek helped his peer access other resources, such as free nicotine lozenges and gum provided by the local Mental Health Service. He also linked him with the Workpower program and now he is employed 2 days a week. Derek admits there were definite challenges involved in breaking the smoking habit and getting the other supports in place, but that taking one step at a time the outcomes have been successful.

"One of the positive things that came out of the peer recovery process was the confidence and self esteem that I saw develop. As a result of this growing confidence, stress levels were reduced, he was more socially active, family relationships improved; he developed links to the community and gained employment."

Derek enjoys his job as a Peer Recovery Worker, and is passionate about helping people with mental illness to improve their health.

"Seeing people improving physically and mentally is a very rewarding part of the job. You can clearly see that when people exercise it improves mood, stress and anxiety are reduced, confidence and fitness increases. Those benefits then create more opportunities for people to socialise and become active in the community again".

Links

June O' Connor Centre Western Australia <http://www.joc.com.au/>

Report on HealthRight Peer Advocacy & Support Service Trial
<http://www.healthright.org.au/go/peer-support>

Workpower Incorporated <http://www.workpower.asn.au/>