

The Role of Certified Peers and Eating Disorders: Identifying Needs

Certified Peer Recovery Support Specialists Discuss Eating Disorder Recovery.

Certified Peer Recovery Support Specialists are people who are in recovery from substance use disorders (SUD) or other behavioral health (BH) issues like depression, anxiety, and/or trauma. They have specialized training and offer a unique perspective of recovery through their lived experience for those with SUD or BH issues. Certified Peers serve a valuable role and help people who have SUD/BH issues achieve and maintain long-term recovery.

Many people with SUD and/or BH issues also struggle with eating disorders, but little is understood about the potential role of Certified Peers for eating disorders. In June and July 2022, NCEED hosted a series of listening sessions with the Peer Recovery Center of Excellence and the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services in order to learn more. Here are the key takeaways from those sessions.

Certified Peers identified a need for specialized training in eating disorders to offer more effective support.

- ✓ Peers frequently see individuals who experience both eating disorders and SUD. There is ample training available for SUD, yet training on eating disorders is limited.
- ✓ Peers want training to help them support, listen, and guide individuals with eating disorders.
- ✓ Peers want information on eating disorder terminology, how past trauma can intersect with eating disorders, and the best language to use in these situations.
- ✓ Peers reference their personal experience with eating disorders when they talk with the recovery community, yet they need more specific training to do this effectively with eating disorders.
- ✓ Peers may fill an important gap in treatment for co-occurring SUD and eating disorders because many treatment programs aren't equipped to treat both. Patients who have both of these conditions may only receive treatment for one or the other, so peers may help provide support around the unaddressed condition.

Certified Peers reinforced that their role is distinct from that of a treatment professional.

- ✓ A peer plays a valuable role for those who are struggling. They offer support, listen without judgment, and show compassion.
- ✓ Peers can help individuals discuss and think about the pros and cons of different treatment options.
- ✓ Peers can help individuals learn to advocate for themselves in different situations, especially when they feel that a healthcare provider isn't a good fit for them.
- ✓ Even if a client never receives a formal eating disorder diagnosis, a peer can still provide crucial support. The kind of harmful relationship a person has with food or their body is an impactful lived experience that is worth sharing.



Peers expressed a desire to 'pay it forward' and help someone just as they were helped in the past.

- ✓ Peers want to help others have a positive experience with eating disorder treatment. To do that, peers need education, resources, and help navigating the process.
- ✓ Peers are eager to share their lived experience with eating disorders so they can provide that support to folks who are currently struggling. Many shared that their own support system was the most crucial part of their recovery.
- ✓ Matching individuals with peers who have the same or very similar lived experience may be crucial to the process so the journey the peer and client take together is a shared one.
- ✓ Peers want to create a safe place for their clients to talk about their eating disorder. They recognize that talking about an eating disorder can be scary and hope that the peer relationship can ease some of those fears.

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