

In peer support, self-awareness and self-care are essential to the development of mutually satisfying relationships. Self-awareness is defined as knowing enough about yourself—what nurtures you, what your vulnerabilities are, what upsets you—to be able to stay connected to yourself and to others. Self-care is defined as using that self-knowledge to create routines that keep you healthy, whether these are things you do alone or in groups, and understanding how this contributes to building communities of intentional healing.

Self-awareness

You may be wondering, “Don’t people already know themselves well enough to know what they need and want?” The truth is that people vary in their level of self-awareness. Some circumstances can interfere with people’s natural ability to know themselves. Being a good daughter, mother, partner, student, or a “good patient” may have meant listening to everyone else’s insights about you rather than listening to your own. When we rely on others to tell us what we need, we may not learn how to pay attention to our own inner wisdom. Developing self-awareness requires time and space for reflection.

Recognize Your Emotional Vulnerabilities

Becoming aware of what evokes a strong emotional reaction for you can help you respond in a way that feels right for you. If you have ever wished you could take back something you said or did, it might be helpful to consider the questions in the side bar “What Provokes Powerful Emotional Responses in You?” Many of those kneejerk reactions helped you survive. However, being aware of the factors that cause those reactions, often referred to by clinicians as “triggers,” can put you in charge of how you relate to others.

Those powerful emotional responses often relate to something from your own life story. They may include certain things others do or say. They might be specific smells, sights, sounds, or other people’s emotions or behaviors. For example, have you ever felt like someone “rubbed you the wrong way?” Perhaps you were picking up on traits in others that you were not fully aware of, characteristics you reject in yourself or associate with others in negative ways. Having your “buttons pushed”—igniting those “hotspots” or vulnerabilities—often prompts reactions that may have little to do with the other person, but a lot to do with you. Knowing where you are vulnerable will help you make decisions about how you want to participate in the world and in your relationships.

WHAT PROVOKES POWERFUL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES IN YOU?

Are there certain smells that bother you: a whiff of alcohol, or certain perfumes or aftershave lotions?

Does lighting affect you: fluorescent lighting or natural lighting at a certain time of day, month, or time of season?

Are you sensitive to noise? Do certain sounds distract you, create anxiety, or make it hard to focus?

How do you react when someone is angry at you?

How do you react when you think someone is not being truthful or seems to make demands on you?

At work, if someone feels controlling, do you back away, get angry, shut down, or avoid the person?

Are there things that people say or do that cause you to react intensely, even if you don’t know why?

Once you have identified specific environmental factors, personal traits, or characteristics that can cause you discomfort or alarm, it is possible to avoid them or to develop strategies to manage your emotional reactions. Being aware of how strong a grip these environmental and personal cues can have will help you to empathize with the people you are supporting, rather than reacting and causing disconnections that take time to heal.

The purpose of paying attention to self-care practices is that, in the thick of this work, we often forget about our own needs until they're so big that we can no longer meet them in simple ways. Then, perhaps, we get resentful, drop out of everything, or get really depressed. We also think self-care is dependent on someone else's approval. Is it self-care when you work 75 hours a week so that you can feel accomplished?

– Shery Mead

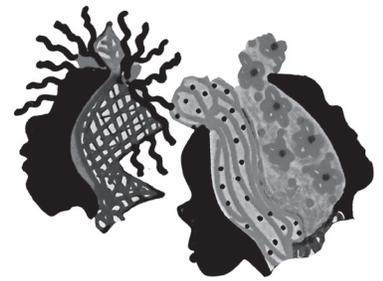
Self-care

Anyone who offers support to others probably knows how easy it is to slip into caretaking or rescuing behavior. Rescuing others or taking care of them can happen when the decisions others make feel risky and uncomfortable, or if a peer supporter does not really believe in a woman's ability to manage her own life. Rescuing and caretaking can be ways you deal with your own distress. Most peer supporters realize how necessary risk is to growth and change, so being able to sit with your own discomfort when you do not agree with the decisions of women you support is very important. Learning ways to manage your own stress and being able to respect your own limits and needs is important.

Messages about Taking Care of Yourself

What are some of the messages you have learned about taking care of yourself? For example, certain religious traditions view self-denial and suffering as a means of strength and purification or as a path to God. If you come from a military family, you probably are familiar with the phrase, "pull yourself up by your boot straps." Many girls grow up with the message that their primary role is caretaking as a mother, wife, or older sibling. Perhaps you came from a family where taking care of yourself was equated with weakness.

Or perhaps self-care was not something that was discussed in your family. These social/cultural messages reinforce the idea that taking care of oneself is not necessary, or is even indulgent or selfish. While respecting the teachings from your own traditions that have added value to your life, you may decide that there are other practices that are not meeting your needs.



Choosing Self-care Techniques that Work for You

The purpose of self-care is to strengthen your ability to be in charge of your own life. It is in many ways a practice of wellness. Its focus is health in mind, body, and spirit. Choose strategies that fit your lifestyle, needs, and interests. Many of us think of self-care as activities one does alone, but, for many people, self-care involves being with others and doing activities as a group.

Four Components of Self-care

There are four primary components of self-care: physical health, intellectual health, emotional health, and spiritual health. All four are equally important. You might think of self-care as the four legs of a chair. If any one leg is short, the whole chair rocks; if it is too short, the chair tips over!

Physical health includes playing sports, participating in exercise classes, dancing, walking, swimming, and stretching, as well as getting enough sleep and eating healthy, fresh food.

Intellectual health comes with reading, having stimulating conversations, learning a new skill or language, doing crossword puzzles, exploring new areas of interest by taking classes, going to museums and libraries, or listening to lectures.

There are many ways to enrich our emotional lives, including journaling, writing poetry, listening to or playing music, or spending time with people or companion animals. Many people have found that animals are especially attuned to the emotional needs of their caretakers, and both the human and the animal find reward in their bond.



Interacting with animals and nature has often been a source of great healing for many survivors of trauma. One survivor talks about what she has learned from her commitment to rescue abused and abandoned dogs. “I take the ones that no one wants—the ones that are too mean or too old or too sick, like I was. We heal together.” Other peers talk about finding new levels of emotional wellbeing through their bond with service animals that are specially trained to provide comfort and support. If you would like more information about support animals, check out the resources at the end of this chapter.

Connecting to nature and animals can also be a source of nurturing one’s spiritual dimension. Many people find that meditation, prayer, doing breathwork or yoga, as well as healing touch, and other mind/body practices support their holistic approach to health.

Taking Care of Relationships Together

People tend to think about strategies and tools for self-care as something that is done on your own and separate from your relationships with others. But, as service animals demonstrate, self-care can be about relationships, too, if both people take responsibility for the relationship. This is different from therapeutic support, where the role of helper and helpee remain relatively fixed. The practice of relational self-care involves important principles of peer support, such as mutuality and reciprocity.

PHYSICAL SELF-CARE TECHNIQUES TO TRY

Cook’s Hookup. If you are experiencing anxiety on a regular basis, practice this exercise twice a day for approximately 2 minutes. Also, do it if you feel as though you are about to be flooded with feelings.

- Sit on a chair.
- Place left ankle behind right ankle.
- Place right hand on left knee.
- Place left hand on right knee.
- Place tip of tongue where teeth and gum meet.
- Holding these positions, do slow deep breathing for 2 minutes.

Slow, Deep Breathing

Practice doing this daily and gradually work up to 15 minutes a day. This exercise, done on a daily basis, will lower levels of excessive adrenaline and cortisol in the body. After a couple of weeks, you will feel more centered, more in control, more in touch with what you need. In addition, this exercise will boost your immune system.

- Sit in a chair with your back straight and supported, your feet flat on the floor or in a traditional meditation position.
- *Begin to breathe slowly and deeply by doing the following:
 - Inhale all the way down to your navel. Your ribs will expand.
 - Hold your breath for a count of 3.
 - Exhale slowly by blowing through your mouth.
 - When you think you’ve exhaled all the air, exhale a little more.

Repeat from *

Anger Release #1

Take bunches of old newspaper and forcefully rip them up!

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Anger Release #2

- Kneel with pillow under knees at bed or couch.
- Fold hands, as if in prayer. Lay them on mattress or couch with arms straight.
- *Inhale. At the same time, raise clasped hands and straighten arms up over your head.
- As you exhale, quickly bring clasped hands down forcefully on the bed. Feel free to make noise as you do this.

Repeat from *

Keep doing this. It will pick up speed and assume a life of its own. Keep deep breathing as you do it. This is very important for your physical safety.

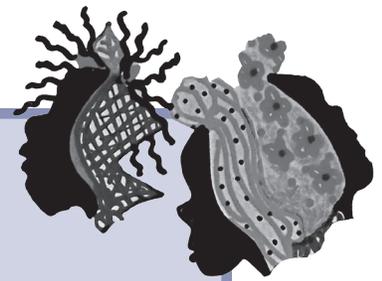
After 3-5 minutes, you will suddenly stop and need to catch your breath.

Notice your feelings. You may still feel angry, you may feel a need to cry, or you may feel incredibly light and relieved. If you still feel angry, repeat the exercise. If you feel like crying, allow your breathing to help you cry and release the pain. If you are feeling better, relax and do something self-nurturing.

Sleep

If you experience difficulty falling asleep, try this simple little exercise: as you are lying in bed, use your finger to repeatedly trace an infinity sign (a figure eight on its side) in the air. After a few minutes, you will notice your eyelids are getting heavy...

Adapted from Davis, H. "Self-help Techniques for Managing PTSD." Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. (undated).



Consider the following example:

Deena, a peer supporter, is very worried and anxious about her relationships with the women she provides support to. She is trying very hard to be there for everyone, but fears she is failing. She tells herself:

- *"I don't think I can handle the pain these women are in. There's just one of me!"*
- *"The more I listen, the more I am aware of my own stuff bubbling up. Who can I go to? I'm supposed to have it all together!"*
- *"I know she needs to get to that appointment. I can't just say no, can I?"*
- *"I wonder what I should do. Felicia just got sober and now she's late coming in! What if she is on her way to a bar?"*

How does Deena see her role? As the "helper" in these relationships, she sees it as her responsibility to be able to handle it all, to deal with her own stuff and make sure the needs of the women she supports are met.

She may also be doing some caretaking, which is a kind of helping that can hurt, as it gets in the way of women taking control over their own lives.

So how do peer supporters create mutual relationships in which everyone's needs are met and people are responsible for their relationships with each other? As Deena begins to focus more on building mutual, two-way relationships in which both people's needs matter, she might engage in conversations with women that sound more like this:

"As we get to know one another, it's likely that our stories will spark some pretty intense feelings in each other. I need you to know that I am still on my own journey of healing. So if something comes up, if I misunderstand you, or it seems like I am reacting to something you said, I hope you will stop me so we can talk about it. What I am learning is that real connection means that both people matter. What do you think?"



“ Hey, I’m sorry you missed that appointment. But I’m curious about why you felt like you couldn’t call to reschedule it yourself. At one time in my life I felt like I didn’t have the right to make those kinds of decisions. I was scared I’d do the wrong thing and I’d get in trouble. Is it like that for you?”

“ I have to tell you that I am feeling over-protective of you since you just got sober. I don’t want to get in the way of you taking the risks you need to take, so if you feel like I’m overreacting, I would like to talk about it. Would that be ok with you?”

Peer support is about building community. Keeping this in mind, what would you do if you felt overwhelmed by the story a woman shares with you about her childhood rape? What would you do if you felt helpless in the presence of another woman’s anguish, or if your own fear, rage, and helplessness threaten your ability to stay connected? Hopefully you will remember that you belong to a community of diverse talent and ability. You could say something like, “Would it be ok with you if we talk about involving someone else? Someone you trust or would like to get to know...I know there are many others in our community who will want to help you and me walk this journey.”

Using Your Own Story to Create Hope and Connection

Sharing experiences in peer support is a powerful way to create connection. Stories can communicate to others that they are not alone and can serve as important tools in advocacy and education. Self-disclosure is an important way to dispel myths about what it means to be a trauma survivor, to carry a psychiatric and/or substance abuse diagnosis, or to have experienced incarceration, homelessness, or other difficult experiences.

But sharing your personal story also raises issues about protecting and addressing your own needs. Because of the emphasis on sharing experiences, you may feel like you do not have the right to create boundaries around what you choose to share. Maybe you never realized that you can make decisions about what you are comfortable sharing and what you might want to keep private.

Everyone has unique strengths and vulnerabilities. You are probably aware that there are certain areas of your life that you feel comfortable thinking about, remembering, discussing with others, or drawing from in order to support women in pain. But it is also a good idea to be aware of those areas that you are still unsure of or feel particularly sensitive about. Sometimes you do not know what those areas are until you hit them.

Each person has the right to feel safe. One way to feel safe is by understanding your own personal limits and honoring these. You get to decide how much, to whom, how often, under what circumstances and when you feel comfortable talking about your own experiences. When you begin to feel uncomfortable sharing aspects of your story, feel free to acknowledge your discomfort and pull back. In this way, you will model self-care for the women with whom you are connecting. This may be their first experience with the idea that dignity and self-respect are ways of honoring who you are and where you have been.

PROTECTING MY OWN STORY

Which parts of your story are you comfortable with others knowing?

Which parts of your story are private?

Which parts of your story are only for certain trusted people?

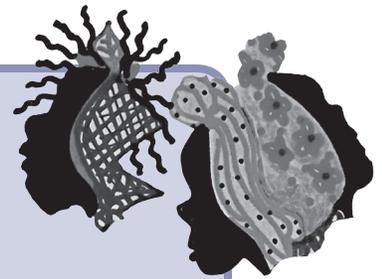
How will you know when you are ready to share certain parts of your story with others?

How do you know when you are not comfortable telling certain parts of your story? Does your body react in particular ways? How does this confusion affect your emotional wellness?

What parts of your own personal experience do you find yourself marveling over? What are you surprised by or proud of? These might be OK for you to share, but it’s up to you!

CHAPTER SUMMARY: KEY POINTS

- Self-awareness builds self-care. Both are essential to personal and relational health.
- Building self-awareness begins with understanding your emotional hot spots as well as what nurtures and soothes you.
- There are four components of self-care, including intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical health.
- Peer support and its focus on mutuality allows both people to pay attention to what the relationship needs in order to stay healthy.



Resources

Adams, M. (1998). *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons. Available at www.InquiryInstitute.com

Capacitar International—*Indigenous Wellness Practices that Lead to Healing*. Free information and techniques for self-help at <http://www.capacitar.org/>

Copeland, M.E. *Wellness Recovery Action Plan*. Dummerston, VT: Peach Press.

Copeland, M.E. (2002). *Dealing with the Effects of Trauma: A Self-Help Guide*. Available at <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA-3717/SMA-3717.pdf>

Kenney, Kristi (2007). *What Sustains Us? What Stops Us? Thoughts on Activism and Mental Health*. Free download available at <http://bloominginspace.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/counterbalance.pdf>

Miller, D. (2003). *Your Surviving Spirit: A Spiritual Workbook for Coping with Trauma*. New Harbinger Publications. Available to order at <http://www.newharbinger.com>

Psychiatric Service Dog Society. A peer-run website for information on psychiatric and emotional support service dogs, <http://www.psychdog.org>

Service Dog Central, <http://www.servicedogcentral.org>

Vermilyea, Elizabeth G. (2000). *Growing Beyond Survival: A Self-help Toolkit for Managing Traumatic Stress*. Baltimore, MD: The Sidran Press. Available at <http://www.sidran.org>

Wilkerson, Jennifer L. (2002). *The Essence of Being Real: Relational Peer Support for Men and Women Who Have Experienced Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: Sidran Press.