

Peer Fitness Leaders, Peer Counseling Training, Support Groups

Peer Fitness Leaders

Now widely established in the disability community, peer counseling, peer mentoring, and peer advocacy are proven, effective methods for teaching and learning about independent living and rehabilitation. This empowering approach addresses fundamental needs for community connection and challenges discrimination. That's why they are a central aspect of the NEW DOOR project.

Countering Social Isolation

Numerous studies have explored the impact of social isolation on the disability experience. Social isolation includes segregation and physical exclusion, which in some cases is because an individual lives in a segregating institution. For disabled people living outside institutions, social isolation can occur due to things like:

- family structures that relegate individuals to “back bedrooms” with insufficient personal assistance;
- architectural barriers, such as stairs or lack of elevators;
- limited transportation for access to participation in the community;
- lack of necessary accommodations for people with sensory or communication impairments, such as alternative media, language interpretation, or auditory information; and
- attitudinal barriers, such as myths about and stereotypes about people with disabilities and their exclusion from social circles, family functions, friendships, romantic and sexual relationships, and educational and employment opportunities.

The growth of self-help groups in the 1960s and the emergence of peer helpers in educational and therapeutic settings offered new views of disabled people as potential resource people to others with disabilities. Peer groups, modeled on consciousness-raising groups in the women's movement, emerged in the disability community. As funding levels dropped for human services programs during the 1980s, peer-counseling served as a cost-effective alternative to traditional professional counseling services.

The disability movement seized on these trends, and Independent Living Centers and other disability support and advocacy groups developed peer counseling programs. Today, peer leaders and advocates continue to be on the front lines to confront transportation, employment and health disparity-related challenges. Now, NEW DOOR is bringing this approach to the areas of fitness and nutrition.

Peer Fitness Leaders Program

Here's how a 39-year-old woman with dystonia re-evaluated her feelings about herself and her body:

I realized from the women's disability support group that I had bought into the idea that my body was weird and I shouldn't move or even be seen in public. These disabled women helped me understand --that's the discrimination! Then I joined the mixed [disabled and non-disabled] dance class and am having the time of my life. We even went to a night club and we went out on the dance floor. I got some looks, but who cares? I'm having fun. And I'm moving my body.

NEW DOOR is designed to provide exactly this sort of support, so that peers can provide the support that others need. The first step was to train a group of *Peer Fitness Leaders*. These peer fitness leaders

were trained and supervised by experienced peer counseling trainers. Major components of the training program included:

1. Effective outreach and screening of applicants to assess readiness for the program.
2. A simple, workable counseling approach, easily acquired by beginners, with expansion of skills for experienced peer counselors.
3. A cross-disability, fully inclusive training curriculum with a focus on both personal growth and community contribution.
4. Fun, built-in incentives, including certificates, peer recognition at events, donated gift cards, and acquisition of marketable skills.

Peer Counseling Training Techniques for Nutrition and Well-Being

Listening, Appreciation, Brainstorming, Goal Setting

These are the basic assumptions of this training:

- Everyone deserves attention, support and encouragement.
- Everyone is doing the best they can.
- Peers with disabilities can often be the best support.

Every person needs:

- to be listened to, in order to share feelings and improve clear thinking,
- to be appreciated,
- to get support to think and plan beyond limits, and
- to set goals and get support to take positive action.

Listening Skills

Good listening is the most important skill of a peer support person. Good listening enables important sharing of information, building trust, and expressing feelings and thoughts. Good listening skills reassure people they are cared about.

In our society, we enjoy talking and sharing our thoughts and feelings, but we are not taught to listen particularly well to others. In the typical conversation, one person talks about him or herself, and the next person waits for an opening to do the same. Each person's attention is often partially on what they want to say next. This works pretty well to convey information and sharing. But people rarely get a chance to say what's on their mind with another person's full attention.

When a person is upset or has a difficulty or challenge, he or she naturally wants to talk to someone about it. She may turn to a friend hoping for attention to share and explore feelings. To take a simple example,

Jan accidentally lost her wallet. She was upset about it all day and when she finally saw a friend she took the opportunity to talk about it. She started to talk about how expensive and time consuming it would be to replace her identification, how much money she lost, and so forth. She hoped her friend

would listen and draw her out, allow her to vent her feelings until she felt better and maybe share some ideas on what to do.

But what happened instead? What is a typical response of her friend?

Her friend proceeded to interrupt her with her own story, "The same thing happened to me a few months ago!" Her friend also had a story she hadn't yet gotten a chance to tell. She took the attention away from Jan. In their conversation about lost wallets, neither one ended up getting a chance to tell the whole story or express the feelings fully. Neither really listened to what the other was saying.

Other typical responses include such things as:

Too much sympathy "Oh dear, you poor thing! If that happened to me I'd just die!"

But this has the effect of putting attention on the speaker, even if it is disguised as caring.

Advice: "Here's what you should do, bla, bla, bla." This may seem helpful, and sometimes friends have good ideas, but it distracts the upset person from simply expressing some emotion and get the story off her chest. The upset person mainly needs to be listened to, so that she can then think and decide what to do for herself.

Scolding: Even worse than the above is when the person we turn to scolds us for our difficulty. "You should be more careful with your wallet!" This adds insult to injury and certainly isn't likely to help the person with their problem.

Good listening gives each person **a turn** to receive someone's full attention. Even five minutes of good listening can help someone to release pent up emotions and experience a shift in perspective, and assist someone to think more clearly about what to do.

Training Exercise

Have group members meet in listening pairs. One person takes a turn for five minutes as speaker, to talk about a "minor upset." (like a lost wallet. Tell participants not to start the exercise with a big, heavy difficulty!) The other person, the listener, listens attentively. Tell the group that people in the listener role may ask appropriate questions to keep the speaker talking and sharing, if the speaker needs encouragement. But the listener's attention must stay on what the speaker is saying. The goal of the listener is to allow the speaker to feel comfortable really talking about how they feel or what they think for a whole turn.

Then they switch rolls and repeat the exercise. After the allotted time everyone returns to the group for discussion.

Ask the group to share and discuss:

How did it feel to be listened to?

Did anyone like to be the listener? Did anyone find listening difficult?

What, if anything, made it difficult to pay full attention?

Did anyone like being the speaker? Was there anything difficult about speaking with the others full attention?

Often, after this exercise, people will report that in the listener role, they felt an urge to give advice or suggestions, or jump in with their own story similar to that of the speaker's. This is natural since this is how we're used to relating in conversation. It takes a lot of practice to become comfortable with listening and without being distracted by the urge to interrupt to give advice, comment or overly sympathize.

Self-appreciation

We need to be reminded that we can choose the point of view about our lives. A positive, hopeful point of view can actually change how we feel about our lives and make us more effective. Appreciating ourselves allows us to change our point of view about our own lives. When we use self-appreciation we offer ourselves and each other a positive point of view. This can dramatically increase our enjoyment of our lives. For example, eating a nutritious diet is a great way to appreciate ourselves and become more motivated.

Most people struggle with feeling bad about themselves. We tend to focus on what we've done wrong and how we've failed. Our society (and our teachers, parents, brothers and sisters and others) often focused on what we did wrong, thinking that pointing out our faults would motivate us to do better. But this didn't work very well. This kind of thinking rarely helps anyone make changes for the better. Instead it tended to make us feel bad about ourselves. These bad feelings make all our other problems much more difficult. Focusing on what we have done wrong can cause us to have low self-esteem and be self-destructive. Self-destructive behavior can mean not caring about our health, and not eating healthier. It can also lead to a negative body image and eating disorders.

Self appreciation helps to balance negative feelings about ourselves with an awareness of our strengths and possibilities. This feels good and is energizing. It actually helps us think better about what needs to happen. Self-appreciation and focusing on the positive helps us love ourselves and want to work to be healthy.

Exercise

In group meetings or in pairs, take about ten minutes to focus on one or two of these questions:

What are your good points? Or, what are your strengths?

What do you like about yourself?

What's going well in your life?

What are some things you've done well in your life?

What are some steps you have already taken to improve (a particular) situation?

Tell the group: when you support someone to appreciate themselves, either as group leader or peer supporter, you must be persistent! Many people feel embarrassed and uncomfortable when first beginning to appreciate themselves. The embarrassed laughter that comes up is understandable. This laughter should be encouraged. Take time to let people laugh in their turn. Don't worry if they don't say much. If they are laughing, that's a good use of the time!

Explain to the group that sometimes some people have great difficulty with self-appreciation questions. For these people, start with focusing attention on things outside of him or herself that are positive:

What is something beautiful or interesting you saw or heard today?

What is something enjoyable you experienced lately?

Ask the person to think of at least one positive thing about herself or her life for the next meeting. Some people will resist this, saying it's silly or waste of time. You can respond by saying you understand why she feels that way, that it's difficult for many people, but you want to encourage him or her to try it anyway and see what happens.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming allows people to “think outside the box” and be more creative with ideas about what to do about difficulties. If someone would like to make a change in his or her life but feels confused, stuck or frustrated, suggest that he or she brainstorm. Explore the following questions with a good listener:

What are your worst fears of what could or could not happen?

What are your wildest dreams or hopes of what could happen?

What are all possible options? List them, even ones that seem silly or wild. For example, possibilities could be eating different types of food, cooking, learning new things, and succeeding. Encourage laughter at the funny ones. This is not a waste of time. This laughter helps loosen up creative thinking, “outside the box.”

What are some options you'd never consider? It's helpful to know what you don't want! The laughter that comes from making fun of the problem helps loosen up creative solutions! Remember, it is not the good listener's role to confirm or disagree with the speaker's ideas or point of view. This exercise is very different from giving advice. The goal is not to tell someone what they should do. The goal is to imagine possibilities and let the person with a difficulty decide what is next. It is the good listener's job to encourage the speaker to be creative and hopeful about new possibilities.

Exercise

Have someone volunteer to describe a problem related to healthy eating. Together as a group, brainstorm imaginative possibilities, especially outrageous ones. This will help set a model of brainstorming. Then meet in pairs and try the brainstorm technique, five minutes each way.

Goal Setting

Goal setting is important for everyone, and is especially useful for disabled people in Independent Living. We can resist the conditioning in our society for disabled people to have low expectations for ourselves and settle for what others decide for us. When we encourage and support each other to set goals we are offering hope that we can take greater and greater control over our lives. We are helping to reinforce each other's expectations that we can achieve these goals. Examples of goal setting are changing diet to eat more fresh foods, believing in ourselves, and doing what works for us.

It is helpful to set both long-range and short-range goals. Short-range goals create the small steps that lead to the long-range achievements. Long-range goals help to motivate us to move forward through the smaller steps.

Most people are often more able to set medium-range goals.

Example: Supplement fresh foods with some frozen foods, or cook part of the time and get take out part of the time.

This is a medium range goal because the ultimate goal is not just eating healthy, it is learning about health, nutrition, and cooking.

Long-range and short-range goals may seem more difficult.

Example of Long Range Goal:

Change to a healthier lifestyle by eating mostly healthy foods, learning to cook, read labels, and buy healthy food.

A short range goal is a small step that brings us closer to the medium and eventually the long range goal. A short-range goal is something you can do today:

Go to a cooking class, try making a simple recipe with a friend, look at a nutrition label, or buy a few food items that are fresh.

In the group, encourage group members first to set long-range goals, perhaps using brainstorm techniques.

Next encourage members to set smaller steps, for example, try reading some nutrition labels or using the food they have in their refrigerator to cook a simple meal. It is useful for participants to write these goals and smaller steps down. Consider having group members write long and short-term goals and have them copied to share with the group.

Support from Peers for Goals

It is important to think about creating peer support to achieve these goals. When someone is trying something new or something that didn't work out before, it is not enough just to "set goals." First the individual needs to talk about the feelings of fear or failure or frustration, using the peer listening techniques. Encourage her to discuss and share her feelings, express her frustration, and appreciate herself for things she has done well.

Next discuss the goals. Encourage her to set a long-range goal beyond her usual limits for herself. This could be something like start cooking, cook more, buy healthier food, achieve good health, or be healthier in other areas, like get more exercise or participate in recreational activities.

For example, if someone sets a goal to stop smoking, suggest an even longer-range goal like, "to achieve good health." This will help her focus past the difficulties of stopping smoking to the long range benefits. Then set shorter-range, specific goals that will support the long-range goal. For example, to call a friend, go for a walk, etc. instead of taking a cigarette. Or to be healthier, some short-term goals could be go grocery shopping with a friend, cook with a friend, and share recipes and accessible cooking strategies with a friend. The question that will help her set support for her short-range goals is, "What kind of help do you need to achieve this goal?"

Be careful to remind peers not to dissuade someone from pursuing a long range goal because "it seems unrealistic." *This* is up to each individual to decide.

The Power of Support Groups

Support groups are among the best and most popular approaches to empowering and connecting people. Leading a support group can be a rewarding and growth-enhancing activity. However, it can also be very challenging. This section discusses ideas and approaches to facilitating an effective support group on nutrition.

Planning in Advance

- Goals of the Group
- Group Members Contact outside the Group
- Qualifications for Support-Group Leaders
- Prerequisites for Leading Support Groups
- Shared Leading
- Regular Planning
- Finite or Open Duration, Closed or Open Membership
- Logistics
- Outreach

Leading Skills and Activities

- Ground Rules
 - a. Confidentiality
 - b. Positive Regard
 - c. Good Listening
- Styles or Modes of Leading
 - a. Conversational Discussion Style
 - b. Taking Turns
 - c. Following a Script or Prescribed Agenda

d. Listening Pairs or Threes

- Openings and Closings
- Shared Responsibility
- Group Members Leaving
- Keeping an Eye on the Time
- Creativity
- Humor and Fun
- Bringing Objects and Photos

Including Participants with Communication Impairments

- Focusing on Inclusiveness
- Resources

Group Dynamic Challenges

- Deeper Sharing
- Disclosure of Painful or Unexpected Information
- Dominating Members
- Conflict between Members
- Why Conflict Arises
- Tips on Handling Conflict
- Dealing with Troublemakers
- Apology is Powerful
- Brief Listening to Upset Members
- If the Meeting Must End Early
- If the Leader Gets Hooked
- Check-in After an Upset

- Asking Someone to Leave
- Difficulties Can Be Useful

For more helpful information, visit the [MAP to Access Training and Peer Support page](#).

Evaluation

Leaders can evaluate the group's successes and challenges in order to learn from the experience and plan for the next group. Evaluation can be done by leaders alone or with input from group members. Evaluations can be solicited on anonymous feedback questionnaires or informally in discussion. If feedback is requested, leaders can ask participants to frame their answers as constructive suggestions rather than as disappointments. Possible questions for constructive feedback might include the following:

- What went well in this group?
- What were the benefits for you?
- What were your favorite parts?
- What might be done differently the next time?
- What suggestions do you have for future groups?

Rewards of Leading Support Groups

Support groups have changed millions of people's lives for the better. Participants can open up, realize they are not alone, heal old hurts, set new goals, learn new skills, take charge of their lives, and become leaders themselves. For many people, a support group is the best arena for these kinds of changes. Support-group leaders can feel great pride and satisfaction in facilitating these opportunities for participants. The rewards are worth the challenges. With experience, leaders can become more effective and powerful in facilitating positive changes in participants' lives.