



THE POWER OF PEER SUPPORT

How to effectively and professionally help people with mental health problems? As professionals in the mental health and social work sector, we often ask ourselves this question. We often wonder what specialists we can include in the team to be able to comprehensively support ill or addicted people. The answer to these needs may be **a change of perspective**, i.e. the inclusion of a peer-to-peer model in therapeutic programs.

According to the previous analyses carried out as part of the international HelpEx project, the key may be to develop a sense of belonging and motivation to change by building relationships with people with whom we share a common history. There is indeed another type of expertise - **experience expertise**.

„This project was a learning experience for me since I got to meet different people, from different countries, even with different ideas but with the same aim. I had the opportunity to discuss how settings work and even learn through this. Participants came from two different backgrounds, there were those that are peers and those that have studied. It was also fruitful for me being a peer to discuss my work with those that have a different background. The overall aim of this project is one that should have great results since it incorporates the ideas of different people“.

Testimonial by Ms Christine Sacco who is a peer in the project from Caritas Malta

PEER – CLIENT INTERACTION

The relationship between a peer and a client is a completely different relationship than that between a professional and a patient, where a professional is an "expert" and "suggests" what is good for the client/patient. Peer support is based on reciprocity and a shared journey of discovery, where people help and support each other while being equal, share their personal stories, learn and grow together. This unique relationship enables both parties to discover themselves, find purpose in life, and develop their own potential.

Working with people with mental illnesses or addicts based on a peer-to-peer model can minimize feelings of rejection, stigmatization or disapproval from the society, it can also be helpful in communication due to frequent cognitive and social impairments among patients, or due to increased instability and discomfort, social isolation or fear of judgment caused by mental illness. The search for support and social bonds is therefore an important factor to be taken into account in the treatment process of people with mental disorders, and the decision on what form of therapy to choose can be a priority for a successful recovery and well-being.

It is thanks to peer-to-peer interactions that people with serious mental illness can share their life experience with others and talk openly about their illness, while "peers" can share positive stories of recovery and offer support, also in the fight against stigmatization and debunking myths and misconceptions about living with mental illness.

CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PEER TO PEER MODEL IN DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONS

The implementation of the peer-to-peer model may involve many organizational, educational, financial or content challenges. According to the experience gained during the internal training carried out by our French partner - CEID - Addictions - this process raises doubts and provokes questions, mainly regarding the relationship between professionals and "peers": "How can we welcome and address the concerns of some professionals about the admission of new colleagues – ex - patients to the team?" "Should we consider them more 'gentle', or should we behave among them, as we do with our colleagues?" "What training should be provided for peers?", "What are the strategies for preparing for professional /peer cooperation?", "What answer should be given to peers who want to get involved but are not ready or able to participate in the educational process at university level?" **HelpEx** – a project based on the exchange of experience and knowledge between organizations operating in the mental health sector, can also be treated as a model of peer-to-peer cooperation. This project gives us the opportunity to analyze the above dilemmas and take into account different perspectives, at the same time it makes us aware of how complex the process of implementing solutions developed by all partners in individual organizations is.

“The challenge of the HelpEx project is central to the development of the peer help approach within our organization and especially for its acceptance by "professional" teams”, highlighted Dr. Delile, the general manager of CEID-Addictions