

TOPSIDE

Training Opportunities for Peer Supporters
with Intellectual Disabilities in Europe



Advice and guidelines for the peer supporter mentor



www.peer-training.eu

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MENTORING IS A PRIVILEGED POSITION!

The mentor is an important element of peer support and individuals offering that support will benefit we believe from the following advice and guidelines.

People offering this mentoring must be fully aware of the principles and training which underpin **TOPSIDE** and the peer support training programme.

Of particular importance is an understanding of and an empathy with the aims of the project, namely that adults with an intellectual disability can and will benefit from support from other adults with an intellectual disability.

The mentors should be skilled and experienced individuals who are able to emulate as far as possible the facets of support that the peer supporter themselves should be offering other adults with intellectual disabilities.

This is not to suggest that these people should necessarily be ‘professionals’; it is entirely reasonable to assume that volunteers with the right skills and attitudes can assume the role.

The peer supporter will have undergone a period of training and support to enable them to begin to be more able to offer peer support to other people with an intellectual disability. This will have been fully supported and facilitated by a training curriculum and trainers guidelines.

The peer supporter will be trained and encouraged when offering peer support not to offer direct advice or instruction to the person they are supporting but to enable that person to consider all the options open to them without undue influence on the part of the peer supporter.

The peer supporter is responsible for using their own experience to help the person seeking support. They should use that experience to support their peer to begin to understand the consequences of any possible course of action they may be considering and help the person make their own informed choice.

Like all of us the peer supporter may encounter problems or dilemmas they hadn’t considered or met before when they begin to offer peer support to someone.

When that happens, it will be important as they embark on that process that they are able to turn to a mentor for facilitative support should they require this or should they feel the need simply to have their learning endorsed by someone they trust and respect.

It is obviously important that the peer supporter is comfortable with the person who is offering support in this way. It may be that they already have a mutually trusting and friendly relationship but if not every effort should be made to create this as a precursor to any mentoring.

Based on our collective experience, we don’t believe that trainers should also become mentors as this can be confusing for both individuals were this to be the case and could conceivably negatively affect the anticipated relationship between mentor and peer supporter. Ideally the mentor would be a different person with a clear sense of their role and responsibilities and how these differ from those of the trainer.

When we talk above about 'emulating peer support' we mean by this that it is important that mentoring is a facilitative process. The peer supporter who is seeking support themselves should be encouraged through a set of processes in line with peer support training to arrive at decisions or solutions of their own choosing.

The peer supporter can be prompted by the mentor to recall either their own experiences or the experience of others to allow them to better support their peer. The mentor can draw on their own experience also to advise and mentor the peer supporter. They can also help the peer supporter should they express concerns about the support they are offering someone else. This is best done by emulating the peer support process of considering all the consequences of any decision being made by their peer.

Mentors are asked not to give direct opinion but to support the peer supporters to find their own way with their guidance through the issues.

The peer supporter will be expected to offer the benefit of their own experience and ability when helping the person they are supporting to make informed choices in relation to the options open to them. So too should the mentor reflect this process and principle when offering their support to the peer supporter.

It is therefore important not to be regarded as an 'expert' who will simply offer instruction. The mentor should encourage the peer supporter to reflect on their own learning and personal development and should facilitate a process where the peer supporter can resolve their own way forward.

There may be occasions however when the peer supporter feels unable to resolve their next step through this process. It may then be necessary to support them to consider where they might seek further guidance or mentoring from another source.

Here again, this is exactly akin to the peer support process where people seeking support would be supported to consider a variety of options or 'next steps' as they attempt to resolve whatever issues they may have.

The only important exception to these matching processes is when it is clear that an individual is disclosing to a peer supporter a harm or abuse situation. At that point the mentor may have to assume a responsibility to assist directly by reviewing the situation and where necessary relaying this information to appropriate individuals or authorities. The peer supporter has no formal role but would enjoy volunteer status. That said it is important to understand and to be clear that the requirement to report harm or abuse situations to the appropriate authority will override all other considerations and it is important that the peer supporter is reminded of this requirement and the need to protect others from harm or abuse. The peer supporter will be aware of their responsibilities here but should they encounter this in any form they will require even more sensitive coaching or mentoring at this point. The mentor would on such an occasion assume the responsibility for any necessary steps that would have to be taken and would seek themselves such advice or direction as required.

The mentor should encourage and support a gradual reduction on the need of the peer supporter to seek their facilitative support. The relationship between the mentor and the peer supporter is not intended to be a permanent 'partnership' but a relationship to be utilised only until the peer supporter considers themselves to no longer require this support.

This will vary from individual to individual but the role of the mentor should be to encourage through the quality of their contribution greater autonomy on the part of the peer supporter and less need to liaise with the mentor. Mentors must remain aware of this and not unconsciously allow the peer support to rely on their guidance to such an extent that their own development as a peer supporter is affected negatively.

The mentor must be a skilled and self-aware individual able to incorporate all of the above advice into their relationship with the peer supporter. They must be fully conversant with relevant elements of the **TOPSIDE** training programme which relate to the relationship between the peer supporter and the person they are supporting.

In particular they should note the advice that the peer supporter is not a surrogate support worker but a contemporary offering peer support based on a similar and empathic context. This unique perspective should not be undermined by the relationship between the mentor and the peer supporter.

To reiterate, the mentor must be fully aware and fully supportive of the ambitions of the peer supporter programme and guard against offering their support in any way which negatively affects this.

The relationship between mentor and the peer supporter may be long-term depending on the situation. There may come a time when the mentor is no longer required in that role. Both of these are credible situations in our view based on individual circumstance but the ambition should always be to reduce any undue reliance on the mentor.

The final ambition is that the peer supporter is ultimately in a position to offer peer support independently but this will take time and commitment on both sides. But just imagine when that day comes.....!

Here are our ten top bits of advice and guidance - in short- which we recommend!

A mentor should...

1. Believe in the capacity and ability of people with intellectual abilities to support each other as peer supporters
2. Fully understand and endorse the **TOPSIDE** peer support training programme.
3. Adopt and emulate the processes within peer support when acting as a mentor.
4. Must adopt a facilitative approach when offering their support.
5. Make it clear to the peer supporter that they are not an 'expert' and that they are effectively offering peer support themselves.
6. Should encourage the peer supporter to come to rely less and less on mentoring and more and more on their own ability and experience.
7. Believe and work to ensure that the ultimate ambition should be for the peer supporter to no longer require their mentoring.
8. Be a skilled and self-aware individual with the necessary attitudes and behaviours.
9. Not direct the peer supporter. (*An exception here is when they are disclosing information where an individual is being harmed or abused*).
10. Endorse and facilitate the role of the peer supporter and promote and support the ambitions of the **TOPSIDE** project.

Here are some examples of mentoring in action. Good luck!

Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic I had one meeting with the mentor before she met with our peer supporters. I'd already explained both roles. We met then together within the support groups where the mentor could watch the guys in action! When we felt that a degree of trust and warmth had been built I advised the peer supporters how they might turn to the mentor when they felt they needed that support. At our last meeting together we reminded everyone, peer supporters and mentor how their relationship should work and when the peer supporters might turn to the mentor for advice or mentoring.

Spain

We have restructured the way meetings with peers and peer supporters will be organised after we concluded that some people need more training than others to perform their role properly. They will not take place individually but will be held in small groups with one person whose skills are well developed with a couple of people who may need more training but who might here begin to rehearse the role of peer supporter.

In this first phase the mentor will be very important as they will be able to facilitate the work - *as a mentor not as a trainer!* - the peers are doing and the support strategies developed to support each situation. The mentor will also be present at meetings later between users and peer supporters to observe and to later facilitate reflection on how the peer supporter has undertaken their role.

Scotland

We are fortunate in Scotland in that we have been able to recruit six new facilitators for our network of advisory groups across the country, making seven in total. These facilitators have undergone induction training where we introduced the **TOPSIDE** programme - with the lively participation and support of peer supporters themselves - and discussed with them the role of mentor to our current band of supporters. The role of peer supporter mentor had been supported by the previous workers but this was an opportunity to put in place a coherent structure for the mentoring role. Early indications are that these new workers are seeking an even deeper induction into the **TOPSIDE** programme and we have organised that for next month. Our peer supporters will again be invited to attend. This will allow us to collectively discuss and refine the role of mentor and to reflect together on the experiences so far of the joint roles of mentor and peer supporter.



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