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My Role: Receiving and Giving Peer Support

1 message

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My Role: Receiving and Giving Peer Support

by HOWARD DIAMOND

My story here begins in 1983, about two years after my first diagnosis of many, I met someone involved in peer support, named DH. During this time DH is a professor at a local university, plus his roles at a county multi-faceted Mental Health Agency. Although, he was not a Peer, DH was an advocate for the Peer Movement, so I took his card and thanked him for his encouragement and time.

From 1982 through the present year which included my working at the bank 1986 to 1990, my anxiety spiraled up and down, like a yo-yo. I am diagnosed with social and general anxiety, plus OCD. In addition, I had feelings of extreme hopelessness, helplessness, and a major degree of worthlessness. Most importantly, I never thought of suicide.

In 1986, I began working for a bank as a Loan Processor Trainee. Within a year or so, I was promoted and the "Trainee" was removed from my title. Early in 1987, I was introduced by my supervisor to JG, who had an important position with the bank. Privately, we talked about various mental issues and he said he knew a mental health agency that was in need of volunteers and part time employees. Over the next few years we saw each other periodically.

Later in 1987, JG told me about a friend of his that worked for the agency we discussed several months previously. In addition to his job at the bank, he informed me that he was a board member of that agency. Then, he gave me his friend's phone number and recommended that I call him. So I called him and his secretary made an interview time that the two of us could meet.

Ironically, he was DH, the man I met back in 1983 and we had seen each other at a conference a year prior. A few weeks later, DH hired me to a volunteer position two nights a week in the agency's mental health evening clubhouse program. Also, he informed me that there are groups that are being led by people who have "lived experience" with mental health issues, like myself.

For two and a half years, I continued to volunteer there. Over time, I was given additional responsibilities, was eventually given a third night. In addition, I ran (now called facilitated) two groups (which I named it client-to-client talk). My hard work was noticed by my

supervisor and DH and in 1988, I was unofficially promoted by DH to Highest Non-paid Volunteer. Of course, this was a made up title.

Doing these groups gave me the opportunity to assist others and to do the same for myself (mutuality?) what later became peer support. However, there was no money in the budget to pay me except for a small stipend, once in a great while. What I did receive was invaluable lessons about running a clubhouse program and supervising people. Of course, I was doing peer specialist work.

Unfortunately for me, I had a relapse in June 1990. During that time, I was told by several people, I had "too much on my plate" Maybe, I had a case of burnout or something else. Spending forty hours at the bank, three nights at the clubhouse, and during that month, my step-father died. Little by little, these issues were getting me more overwhelmed and it was becoming too much for me to handle. My anxieties and my OCDs were elevated almost every day.

Initially, at the suggestion of DH, I took some personal time from both of my positions. He felt and I agreed that giving me some time to recover, reflect on my current situation and figure out what to do next would be in my best interest. After three months, I was not getting any better and was not able to return. Then, I was put on short term disability and about six months later, I was eventually placed on SSDI and SSI.

Furthermore, during the breaks of not working, I became actively involved in a whole slew of Mental Health programs such as day treatment, DBT, CBT, anxiety reduction and stress management. Plus, I continued to regularly see my therapist weekly and my psychiatrist monthly and more if needed. However, my anxieties remained. In addition, I wrote about my recovery and different topics of mental health.

During the time from 1990 until 1992, I did not want to meet others who were doing well and living their life of prosperity. Naturally, I only met others like me and I tried taking everything day by day attempting to prevail while existing through my misery.

Somehow, I survived by attending groups led by mostly competent workers that were always telling me what to do, what is best for me and what I should do to make myself feel better. It seemed like, although not led by a Peer Specialist, members tried to help each other with their own life and experiences. Support groups, possibly here...?

These groups were helping some, or I was more receptive to what they were suggesting. One day, I remembered what someone mentioned during one of my group therapy meetings, that being here is my choice and finally it was my decision to make. In some fashion, I muddled through those days, not that I plowed through my ordeal without a series of groups run by many professionals telling me things I did not want to hear, accept or what I wanted.

By mid 1993, with the help of my psychiatrist and therapist, I was

slowly progressing both physically and mentally. Now, I wanted more for myself, than what I did previously at the bank. On the other hand, assisting others seemed rewarding and maybe I could pursue this for myself. Questions went through my head, but I did not have the answers and where I developed answers, I found it hard to formulate proper questions. Having OCD was very beneficial for me, as I was dogmatic about exploring what employment was out there in the Human Services Field. For months, I did not give up or give in to my possibilities to lead a better life.

Early the following year, I bumped into and talked with DH again. DH informed me that the Department of Mental Health (DMH), were looking for several candidates to fill positions in some of their departments.

In October of the year 1994, I was hired and became an Assistant Case Manager in the local area office. Within a few months, I found out that an affiliate agency had Peer Specialists working with them. They came to every Case Management office to facilitate a few groups every month on topics requested. One day, I felt it was time to ask around and get some information.

Peer Support changed my life. In the October of 1994, I was working only ten hours weekly, I attended a couple of their peer groups and found new meaning through Peer Support and what a Peer Specialist does. For the first time I was a participant in a group facilitated by someone who had "been there and done that." In 1996, my hours were increased to 15 and I was responsible for two groups a month, both during work hours.

Good news, in 1997, I was promoted to Assistant Case Manager II, working between 17 and 22 hours weekly. Many times when I met with the consumers, it felt like I was aiding them in their recovery. Perhaps, early Peer Specialist thinking. By February 1998, I was offered and I accepted a full time position as an Assistant Case Manager III complete with salary and benefits.

Over the next several years, I had several "on goings" where I saw my consumer weekly or as needed and assisted them in attaining their goals. Although, I had goals of my own, my work focus was to assist the consumers in each of the goals. Furthermore, I submitted several articles for my department's Newsletter, where I wrote mostly about HOPE using a variety of song lyrics. Ever since, I have been writing on mental health concerns from a peer perspective. Hmm, my role sounds like Peer Support and what Peer Specialists actually do.

Yeah, it did! At least, I thought so.

At the turn of the 21st Century, I was learning more and more about Peer Support and what it is to be an effective Peer Specialist. In 2002, I assisted in the merger process between the Assistant Case Management Program and the existing Peer Specialist Program. Using my talents, I advised Assistant Case Managers and Peer Specialists how to get along with each other, despite the differences in salaries and everyone's training. Simply put, wages were dependent on where the funding stream was coming from.

Over time, I was put on different committees to further the growth of

Mental Health. A couple of examples are, I was Nassau County, Co-Chair for two years for the "Walk for Mental Health" from 2003 to 2006. Also, I was a Peer Representative in my county's Single Point of Access, where we figured out where consumers were to be placed in different Mental Health Housing. More responsibilities were added to me and sometime in 2010, I was promoted to Senior Peer Specialist.

In March of 2014, I stopped working for that mental health agency and helped my significant other to be comfortable in the last fifteen months of her life. After my grieving process, I worked for a second agency from 2016 to 2019 as a Peer Specialist, but I had to leave for various physical health concerns. During 2017, I studied hard and became a New York State Certified Peer Specialist. Since then, I continue to be involved as a Peer Support Specialist because it became my career and my life's work. And as we can tell, I am still writing.

See you in the NewsBlogs and Newsletters.

Howard Diamond is a Certified Peer Specialist from Long Island.