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# Recommendations for a standardised training profile for peer support workers



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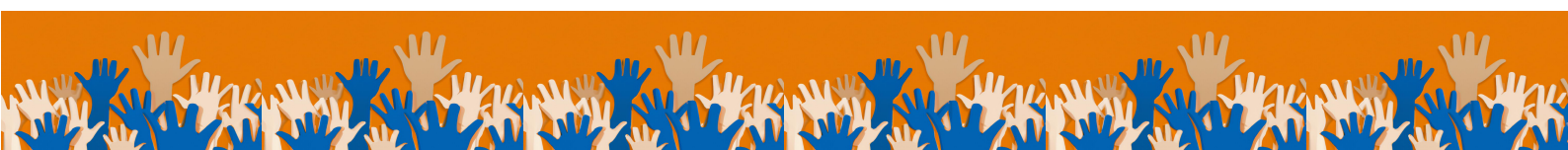
## Introduction

Peer support workers (PSWs) play a crucial role in mental health services, fostering recovery, reducing stigma, and strengthening communities. Their lived experiences and ability to connect with others make them uniquely positioned to provide meaningful support. However, to prepare for this role, PSWs require comprehensive training that equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Training programmes for PSWs vary greatly across regions, differing in content, structure, and duration. This lack of consistency can lead to gaps in preparation and uneven service quality. Recognising this challenge, the Tuto3-PAT project set out to develop a standardised profile for peer support training. To achieve this, over 60 training programmes were reviewed and compared to identify common core elements. International experts then helped prioritise these elements using the Delphi method, distinguishing between those essential for basic training and those relevant for advanced stages or specialised contexts. This process resulted in a set of prioritised core training components, along with recommendations for effective peer support training. This document provides recommendations for designing successful peer support training programmes. Drawing on research, best practices, and the lived experiences of PSWs and other mental health professionals, it offers practical strategies for creating impactful training programmes.

The recommendations are divided into several sections:

- **Basic Training Elements:** Foundational skills that all PSWs need for a successful start of their journey.
- **Advanced Training Elements:** Specialised training for professional growth and adapting to specific contexts.
- **Core Competencies:** A clear framework outlining the skills and attributes expected of PSWs.
- **Additional Training Considerations:** Guidance on session duration, accreditation processes, scientific evidence, trainer qualifications, and admission criteria.



These sections together form a holistic approach to developing effective, adaptable, and sustainable peer support training programmes.

Designed specifically for organisations, trainers, and policymakers, this document offers a comprehensive pathway to improve the quality of peer-led mental health support.

## Acknowledgements

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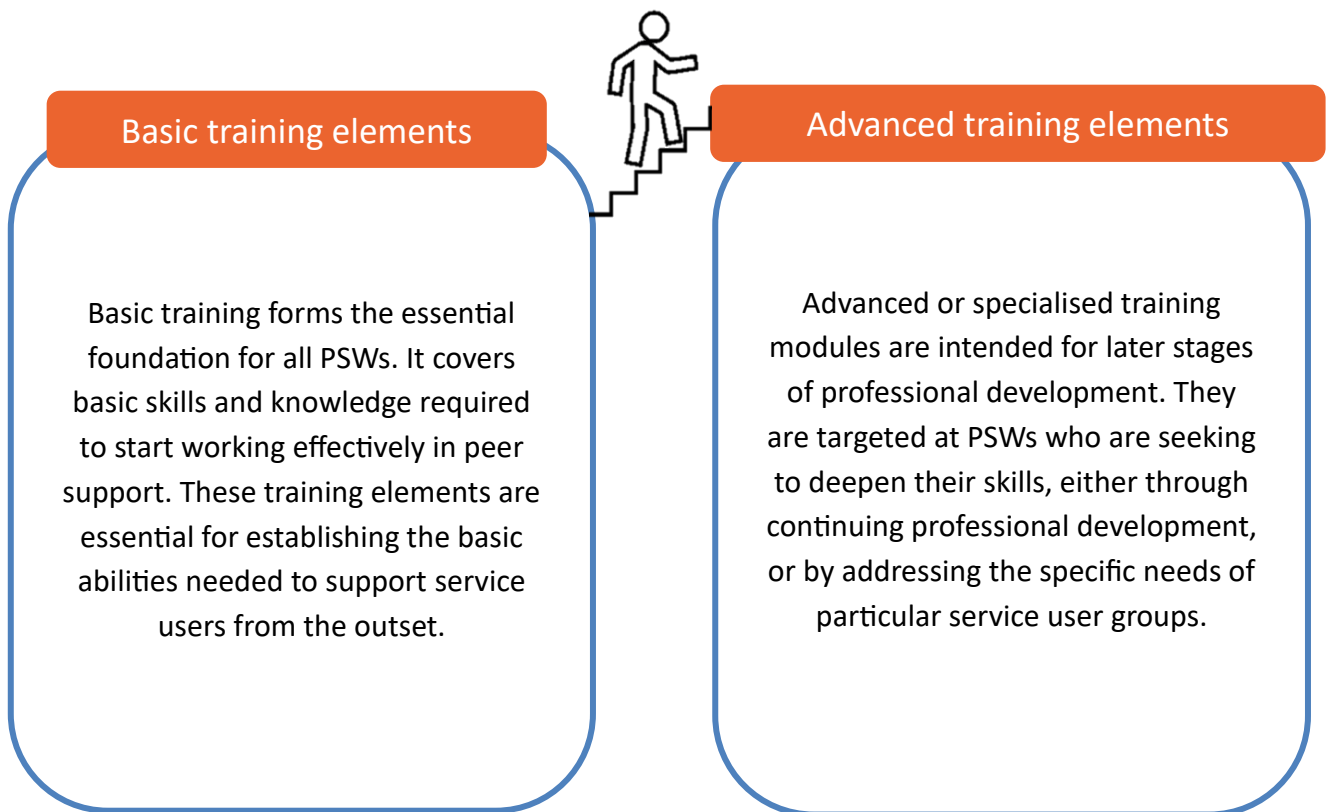
- Belgium: Centre Neuro Psychatrique Saint-Martin; Peers and Team Support, ASBL; Haute Ecole de la Province de Namur
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We thank all PAT colleagues and stakeholders for their valuable contributions. By implementing these recommendations, we aim to create a future where PSWs are empowered to make a lasting impact in mental health services.



## Training elements

We recommend that PSWs start their professional journey by focusing on basic training elements. This ensures that they can actively acquire essential skills and knowledge needed to begin their roles confidently, without becoming overwhelmed or overly professionalised. Based on our recommendations, as PSWs gain experience, they should engage in advanced or specialised training. This approach allows them to take ownership of their professional growth, develop additional expertise, and tailor their skills to the specific needs of their workplaces.



## Basic training elements

In the following pages, we outline the key elements of peer support training that are essential across all contexts and service user groups. We recommend covering all these topics to ensure that PSWs gain the fundamental skills and knowledge needed to begin their professional journey in peer support. We encourage organisations and trainers to consider these basic elements as a minimum standard when designing their peer support training programmes. Building on this foundation, additional specialised elements can be introduced as needed.

It is important to note:

- a) Admission criteria should be considered before the training begins (see page 18).
- b) Trainees should be introduced to the basic concepts of recovery and peer support before starting the training. This helps them understand the role and the content of the training, reducing the risk of misunderstandings or dropouts.

### Peer Support and use of experience



All PSWs should receive an introduction to the basic theories and concepts of peer support, including the dynamics of peer relationships and effective ways of using their own experiences to support others. Training should encourage the sharing of personal experiences in a safe and supportive environment that fosters trust and openness. This practical aspect should be supported by education about the basic principles of peer support, to ensure that workers not only understand the value of sharing experiences, but also how to apply them professionally.

In addition, guidance on self-disclosure should be an essential component of peer support training. Integrating self-disclosure techniques into the basic training programme equips PSWs with the skills to use their experiences effectively and responsibly, enhancing their ability to build rapport and support service users authentically while maintaining professional boundaries.

### Recovery



Recovery is the basic conceptual framework of peer support, making this basic training element of special importance. It is essential that all PSWs are introduced to the concept of personal recovery, the diversity of recovery experiences and the principles of recovery-focused support. This basic understanding provides a framework for effectively guiding and empowering others on their unique recovery journeys.



To bring these concepts to life, training should include real-life recovery stories that provide PSWs with first-hand insight into the diverse pathways and experiences of recovery. In addition, the training should emphasise strategies for fostering a recovery-oriented mindset, encouraging PSWs to view recovery as a personal process that focuses on an individual's strengths, autonomy and potential for growth. Self-reflection and self-awareness are important skills facilitating the development of a recovery-oriented mindset.

### Relationship and Roles



A comprehensive role description for PSWs should be a core component of basic training, outlining key responsibilities, expectations and guidelines through a clear set of Do's and Don'ts. This role description helps to establish professional standards and clarifies the unique position of PSWs, highlighting their role as facilitators of empowerment rather than traditional clinicians. A focus on role modelling is also essential, as PSWs serve as powerful examples of recovery. Practical exercises that explore the dynamics of relationships and the impact of role modelling can enrich the training experience, allowing participants to reflect on and understand the impact they have on their service users' lives.

### Communication



Training programmes should include a basic module on communication skills, covering essential principles such as active listening, reflective communication, empathy, conflict resolution, constructive feedback, probing techniques and motivational interviewing. This module is designed to equip PSWs with the tools they need to engage effectively, build trust and encourage open dialogue with service users. Active and reflective communication skills help PSWs to validate service users' experiences and demonstrate genuine understanding and empathy. Meanwhile, conflict resolution techniques enable them to handle challenging situations professionally, ensuring a safe and supportive environment. Probing skills allow workers to explore underlying issues with sensitivity, while motivational interviewing techniques enable them to support service users to identify and achieve personal goals. To reinforce these skills, the module should include role-plays and interactive exercises that allow participants to practice and refine their communication techniques in realistic peer support scenarios.



## Stigma



Basic training modules on stigma and self-stigma are essential for any peer support programme as they help PSWs to recognise, understand and actively work against stigma in the context of mental health and recovery. A key element of this module should be to encourage participants to share personal experiences of social and internalised stigma in a safe and respectful environment to promote mutual understanding and deepen awareness of the real-life impact of stigma. In addition, stigma reduction strategies, which may include promoting inclusivity and developing empathetic approaches, should be learned.

## Principles and values



Basic training modules should include a comprehensive exploration of the core principles and values that underpin effective peer support, including mutuality, reciprocity, non-directiveness, strengths-based approaches, progressiveness, inclusiveness, diversity, validation, acceptance, hope, world view, confidentiality, empathy, empowerment, safety and (self-)advocacy. Together, these values form the ethical and professional foundation that guides PSWs in fostering supportive, respectful and empowering relationships with service users. To deepen participants' understanding, training should include facilitated discussions about potential ethical dilemmas in peer support work. In addition, encouraging participants to work together to develop a shared code of conduct for peer support interactions promotes accountability and consistency in upholding these values.

## Inclusion and support from family and community



A basic training module focusing on building strong support systems within families and communities is essential to promote the long-term integration and stability of people in recovery. This module emphasises the importance of fostering connections, developing supportive networks and encouraging dialogue between individuals with lived experiences, their relatives, mental health professionals, and the wider community (trialogues<sup>1</sup>). Therefore, training should include workshops on effective communication techniques with families, addressing the unique challenges and dynamics that often arise in family interactions related to mental health and recovery. In addition, community engagement strategies should be explored, equipping participants with skills to advocate for opportunities for people in recovery.

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<sup>1</sup> A mental health triologue is a collaborative dialogue or discussion involving three key groups: individuals with lived experiences, relatives, and mental health professionals.





## Health and wellbeing



Basic training should include a comprehensive module on stress management, self-care, relapse prevention and healthy lifestyles. This module is crucial in preparing PSWs to maintain their wellbeing. Key topics should include stress management techniques such as mindfulness, time management and relaxation exercises that enable PSWs to cope with the demands of their work. In addition, training on self-care practices emphasises the importance of setting boundaries, recognising early signs of burnout and prioritising personal health. Relapse prevention strategies are essential for those in recovery, providing insight into how to proactively identify and respond to triggers of ill-health. Also training about healthy lifestyle practices should be provided, including balanced nutrition, physical activity, adequate sleep and relaxation, as these are important for both physical and mental wellbeing. Finally, conducting wellness workshops that focus on holistic health encourage PSWs to adopt these practices and promote a balanced approach to life that they can model for their service users.

## Advocacy and Rights



Training in advocacy strategies is essential to enable PSWs to be active advocates for service user rights and to promote systemic change. Emphasis should be placed on understanding service user rights so that PSWs can recognise and address situations where rights may be violated. This knowledge enables them to act as allies, providing support and guidance to people navigating complex health and social care systems.

## Planning



Training programmes for PSWs should include basic planning modules that address different aspects of support, such as advanced planning, crisis planning, activity organisation, coordination of health care visits, and facilitating meaningful daily activities. Key planning techniques, such as the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), should be introduced as powerful tools for creating individualised, actionable recovery plans. Incorporating practical exercises for goal setting and crisis management will strengthen the PSWs' planning skills.



## Skills



Basic training for PSWs should include a wide range of skills to enable them to provide effective support. Essential skills include problem-solving and coping strategies that allow PSWs to deal with different challenges and support service users in overcoming difficulties. In addition, technological capabilities such as telephone and computer skills are important as digital tools become increasingly integral to support services. Report-writing and presentation skills are also valuable, as PSWs may need to communicate effectively with a range of stakeholders, for example service users' families and healthcare providers.

In addition, developing organisational and leadership skills enable PSWs to manage their responsibilities efficiently and take initiative in team settings. Crisis intervention skills are essential for responding to emergencies, while cultural competence training ensures that PSWs can provide services that respect and understand different cultural backgrounds and issues. Hands-on workshops should be provided to reinforce these skills through practical application. Real-life scenarios, role-plays and interactive exercises allow participants to gain first-hand experience and build confidence.

## Group settings



Basic training for PSWs should include a module on the design and delivery of group sessions, covering essential aspects such as group dynamics, facilitation techniques and effective management of group discussions. This basic knowledge is crucial for PSWs, who often work in group settings to promote shared learning, mutual support and growth.

To develop practical skills, training should include practical exercises that allow participants to practice leading and managing group interactions. Role-playing exercises, for example, can simulate different group scenarios and enable participants to apply facilitation techniques, encourage balanced participation and promote open communication. In addition, group structuring exercises help PSWs to develop agendas or set clear objectives.



## Knowledge about social determinations of health



Peer support programmes should include basic training modules that focus on understanding the social determinants of health. These modules provide essential knowledge about how factors such as socio-economic status, education, employment, housing, access to health care and social support affect an individual's health and well-being. By understanding these influences, PSWs gain insight into the external challenges their service users may face, enabling them to approach support from a more holistic perspective. This training element is closely linked to the training element "Inclusion and support from family and community".

## Advice regarding self-disclosure



Instructions on self-disclosure should be a key component of basic training programmes for PSWs. Self-disclosure, the intentional sharing of one's own experiences, can be a powerful tool for building trust, fostering connection and validating the service user's feelings.

Training on self-disclosure should cover when and how to disclose personal experiences in an effective and professional manner. Role-playing can be particularly helpful in this module, allowing participants to practice self-disclosure in a way that builds rapport and provides comfort. This training module is linked to the training module "Peer support and use of experience".

## Skills to build boundaries with service users and to separate work and personal life



Developing strong boundary-setting skills is essential for PSWs to maintain professional relationships with service users and their own well-being. Basic training should include a specific module on setting and maintaining boundaries with service users, as well as techniques for separating work from personal life. These skills not only protect the peer support worker from feeling overwhelmed, but also ensure that interactions with service users remain supportive and professional. This training module is strongly connected to the training module "Relationship and Roles".



## Advanced training elements

The advanced training elements outlined in this section are designed to support the ongoing professional development of PSWs. Unlike basic training elements, these topics are not required for initial training, as PSWs can begin their roles without them. Instead, they serve as additional modules that can be introduced later to enhance skills and knowledge as PSWs gain experience and grow into their roles.

These advanced modules build on foundational training by offering specialised knowledge and skills tailored to the diverse contexts in which PSWs operate. This section also highlights the importance of preparing PSWs for broader responsibilities, including public speaking, gender-sensitive practices, participation in research, career development, and policy advocacy. Together, these elements ensure that PSWs are well-prepared to address the challenges of their roles while continuing to grow personally and professionally.

### Assessment



This advanced training module would equip PSWs with the skills to identify and understand the unique needs and challenges of the individuals they support. This module should include both theoretical and practical sessions, introducing key techniques such as semi structured interviews. For example, PSWs might learn how to facilitate conversations to identify a service user's goals, barriers to recovery, or coping strategies they find effective.

Practical exercises, such as role-playing service user scenarios or using case studies, will enable participants to apply these techniques in a safe and guided environment, building their confidence and competence in conducting assessments. Structured needs assessment templates can be particularly helpful tools, allowing PSWs to systematically gather and document information about their service users' needs, strengths, and preferences.

It is important to note that the focus of assessment in peer support is not clinical diagnosis or formal evaluations, but rather a better understanding the personal perspective of the individual. For instance, assessments might explore the service users' recovery goals, preferred communication styles, or the kind of support they feel would be most beneficial. By improving these skills, PSWs can better tailor their approach and advocate for resources or interventions that align with individual service users' needs.



## Psychoeducation, self-management and knowledge



Training PSWs in psychoeducation and knowledge about mental health challenges has been widely discussed by our peer support experts. A key question in this discussion is whether PSWs need in-depth knowledge of mental health issues, which has led to its categorisation as an advanced training module. To address this, comprehensive, interactive training materials on mental health issues should be developed, tailored to the specific needs of the population served, enabling PSWs to provide more informed support.

However, there is also an alternative approach to psychoeducation that aligns more closely with the recovery model, which emphasises self-management of well-being. A prominent example of this is the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) by Mary Ellen Copeland. Rather than focusing solely on clinical knowledge, this approach encourages individuals to develop their own strategies for managing their mental health, fostering empowerment, and promoting recovery through lived experience and personal choice. Integrating both perspectives – in-depth knowledge of mental health conditions and self-management strategies – will help ensure that PSWs are well-equipped to support individuals in a holistic and person-centered way.

## Workplace training



An advanced training module on workplace training should include simulations and practical exercises that focus on real workplace scenarios. These activities allow PSWs to practice dealing with different service user interactions, administrative tasks and workplace challenges they may encounter. Through hands-on learning, participants build confidence and readiness, enhancing their ability to apply their skills effectively and professionally in real workplace situations.

## Body language and vocal expression skills



Advanced peer support training should equip PSWs with knowledge of body language and vocal expression. Understanding non-verbal cues such as posture, eye contact and facial expressions might help PSWs to better interpret and respond to service users' feelings and reactions. Similarly, mastering vocal expression, namely tone, pitch and pacing, will enable PSWs to communicate empathy, build trust and provide support more effectively.



## Self-reflection and self-awareness



Self-reflection and self-awareness are fundamental to peer support training, enabling PSWs to understand their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours. These skills also form the basis of intervision, where open, introspective discussions between peers promote growth and learning.

In advanced training, self-reflection and self-awareness should be further developed through structured exercises and guided sessions. These activities help PSWs to increase their awareness and refine their approach to interactions with service users, ultimately promoting more empathetic, understanding and professional peer support.

## Public speaking skills



Advanced training for PSWs should help developing public speaking skills as part of their specialised training. These skills enable them to communicate confidently and effectively in group settings, lead workshops and represent peer support initiatives in the community. Public speaking training can help them refine their ability to engage audiences and promote mental health awareness.

## Knowledge on transversal issues and professional development



Advanced training programmes for PSWs should include modules on transversal topics such as gender issues, participation in research, and understanding relevant policy contexts. These elements enhance the professional impact of PSWs by broadening their awareness and capacity to provide inclusive and contextually relevant support. For example, knowledge of gender sensitivity helps PSWs understand how gender identity and roles can affect mental health and support needs, enabling them to offer more inclusive and tailored support. Understanding key policy contexts also allows PSWs to advocate for policy changes, secure funding, and ensure access to community resources.

Additionally, advanced training should address career development and research participation. Knowledge in these areas empowers PSWs to advance their professional growth, explore new career opportunities, and contribute to studies that advance the field. By becoming involved in research, PSWs help ensure that peer support practices are evidence-based, ultimately strengthening the field as a whole.



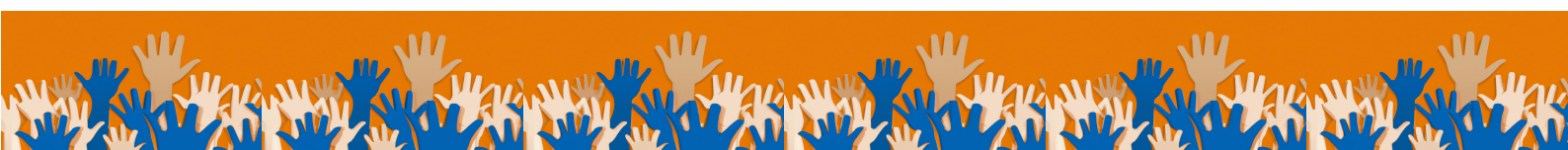
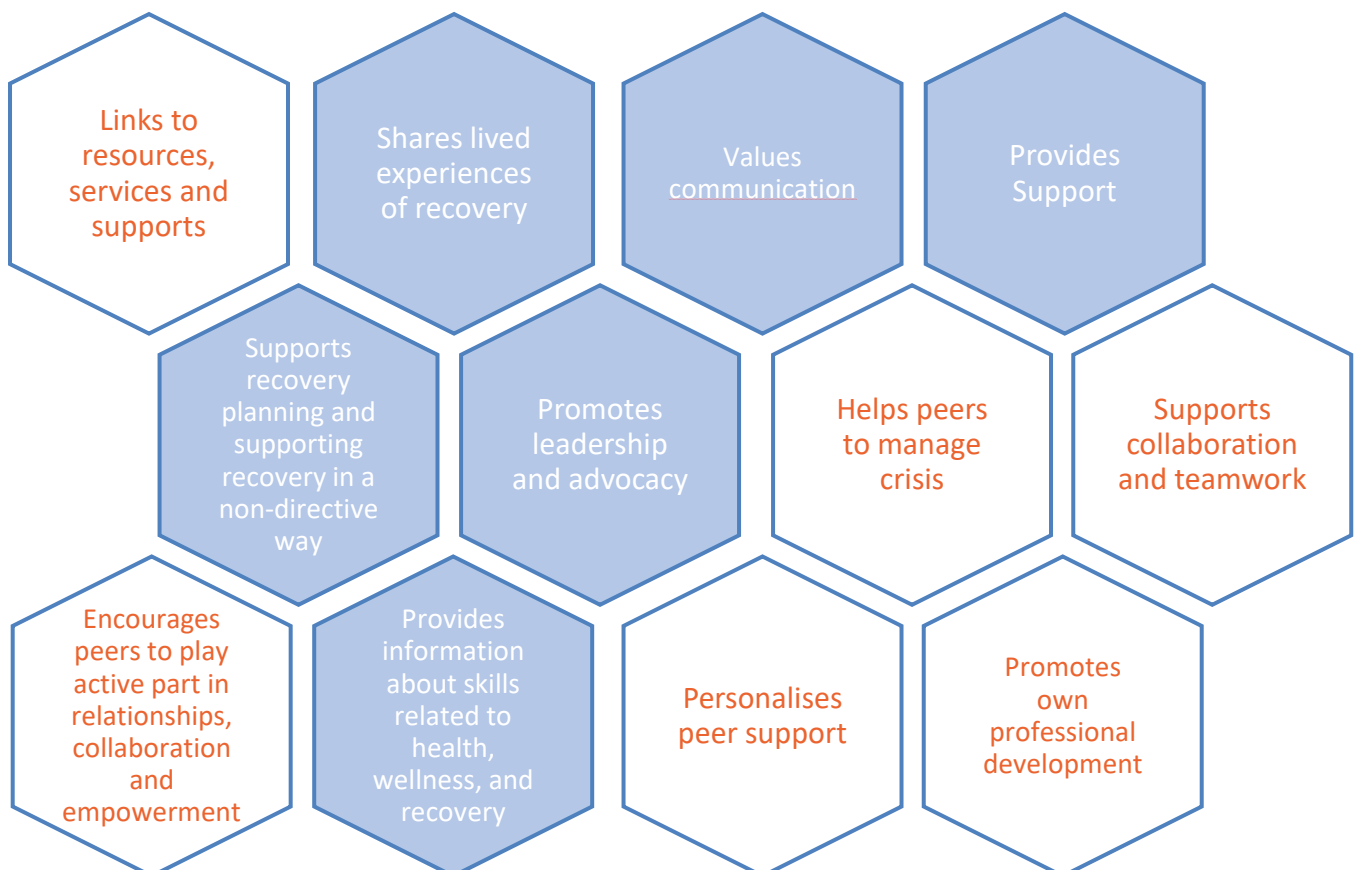
## Core competencies of Peer Support Workers

The Tuto3-PAT project identified twelve theoretical core principles of peer support training, as illustrated in the figure below. More details can be found here:

[https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs\\_campaigns/brss\\_tacs/core-competencies\\_508\\_12\\_13\\_18.pdf](https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tacs/core-competencies_508_12_13_18.pdf)

These core competencies can be developed either through formal training or through peer-to-peer exchanges, e.g. during intervention or intervision sessions. It is important to note that not all competencies need to be taught in advance; for example, the core competency of ‘promoting one’s own professional development’ is future-oriented by definition and, therefore, difficult to fully convey in initial training sessions.

In the figure below, a blue background (e.g., “shared lived experiences of recovery”) signifies that this core competency can and should be effectively covered by initial training elements. Conversely, a white background (e.g., “helps peers to manage crisis”) indicates that these peer support competencies need to be subject of ongoing professional development, intervision, supervision and other support systems, or will be gained with time through job experience and peer-to-peer networking.



## Other training features

In addition to the content of peer support training, practical and organisational considerations are vital for ensuring a smooth and effective training experience. This section addresses key factors that influence the feasibility and success of training programmes for both participants and organisers.

Topics covered include the recommended duration and structure of training sessions, the importance of accreditation to validate and standardise training, and the role of scientific evidence in designing robust and impactful programmes. Furthermore, we provide guidance on the qualifications and preparation of trainers, emphasising their pivotal role in delivering high-quality training.

### Duration and amount of sessions

Training sessions should be limited to a maximum of four hours to ensure participant engagement and effectiveness. However, there is still no consensus on the optimal number of sessions required. The majority of peer support training programmes consist of either five full-day sessions or approximately ten 4-hour sessions. We recommend planning the training structure with flexibility, allowing the number of sessions to be adjusted based on factors such as room availability, trainer schedules, and the needs of the participants.



### Trainers

There was a clear consensus among experts consulted in the development of these recommendations that these peer support training programmes should be facilitated by a combination of peers with lived experience and health care professionals. This co-facilitation model combines the practical insights of peers with the knowledge and structured guidance of professionals, creating a balanced and comprehensive training experience.





## Importance and type of accreditation

The importance of official accreditation is strongly recommended by experts and PSWs to provide credibility, quality assurance and professional recognition. Educational institutions, such as universities, may be preferred for accreditation as they provide validated curricula, qualified teachers and mitigate high costs. Universities also offer credit points that can contribute to continuous education, such as EU-recognised micro-credentials.

However, it is important to consider country-specific factors when determining the most effective accrediting organisation. While university accreditation can increase the accessibility and quality of training programmes, it can sometimes be associated with access restrictions. Careful planning is needed to avoid potential barriers and the risk of stigmatisation to ensure that peer support training remains inclusive and accessible.



## Importance and type of scientific evidence

We recommend using peer support training programmes that have been developed based on scientific evidence and / or have been scientifically evaluated.

Apart from effectiveness trials it is recommended to consult literature on qualitative studies, as they provide in-depth insights into the experiences of PSWs.



## Admission criteria

### Lived experience

Our consultations with experts and PSWs have led to a consensus on the essential experiences required for participation in peer support training programmes. It is recommended that peers have experience with both a mental health crisis and recovery from one. However, experiences as a caregiver to individuals with mental health challenges or previous experience as a peer support volunteer is not considered essential or sufficient for participation in a peer support training programme. There is no consensus on whether experience of peer support as a service user and experience of psychiatric structures should be necessary for participation in training. Further research is needed to clarify whether these factors should be prerequisites for eligibility for training programmes.



### Psychological characteristics

There was a clear consensus among the experts on the essential psychological characteristic for PSWs, with empathy identified as a crucial characteristic. Empathy enables PSWs to make a meaningful connection with service users, fostering trust and understanding.

However, there was no agreement on the need for other characteristics such as a willingness to learn, being communicative, reliable, a good listener, self-confident and seeing peer support as a mission rather than just a job. While these characteristics are potentially beneficial, further research is needed to determine their importance and impact on the effectiveness of peer support work.



## Building a Future for Empowered Peer Support

As we move forward, the role of PSWs in mental health services will only continue to grow in importance. By following the recommendations outlined in this document, we can help ensure that PSWs are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to provide meaningful support to those facing mental health challenges.

Effective training, however, is only one part of a larger process. Beyond the training itself, it is crucial to consider the overall implementation of peer support interventions. This includes integrating PSWs into teams, creating supportive work environments, and fostering a culture that values lived experience. Additionally, it is essential to ensure that the unique identity and value of the peer support role is maintained throughout the training and ongoing development of PSWs. This includes ensuring that each PSW retains their "specificity" and lived experience, preventing the risk of "acculturating" to the professional profiles of other team members. In this way, peer support remains a distinct and irreplaceable resource within mental health teams. Careful attention to these aspects ensures that the benefits of peer support extend beyond training and translate into meaningful, sustainable change within mental health services.

These recommendations reflect the collective insights and experiences of professionals and peers who are passionate about improving mental health support systems. We believe that with the right training and thoughtful implementation, PSWs can make a profound difference in the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

We call on organisations, trainers, policymakers, and institutions to take these recommendations to heart, adapt them to their local contexts, and work together to build a more inclusive, compassionate, and effective mental health support system.

Together, we can create a future where peer-led mental health support is not only accessible but transformative for all who need it.

Thank you for being a part of this journey toward change.

