

# Employment as a Path to Recovery

(from Peer Employment Training Workbook, copyright META Services, 2004)

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Meade

## Introduction

### Employment as a path to Recovery

We have watched hundreds of people complete the Peer Specialist training, and without exception, each class looks much different at graduation than they did on the first day of class. They are much further along the path of recovery after



attending the five weeks of class. An even bigger leap in recovery appears to happen once the graduates begin working. This validated our belief that employment, and even volunteer work, has a profoundly positive impact on the recovery process for most people. This profound impact is not just the result of having

some structure in one's life, or earning enough money to afford better living conditions. While these two outcomes are very helpful, the most important aspect of working in a recovery environment is related to something far more powerful – an

... an  
opportunity  
to give back

opportunity to give back. Being able to “give back” is extremely validating, especially when the “giving” results in someone else getting a glimpse of how they too can recover. The following stories were written by Peers and reflect their feelings and insights about what happened, and about the transforming aspects a meaningful work opportunity has on the recovery process:

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**Ellen** speaks from her experience as a Peer Specialist, and also as a Peer Instructor in the Recovery Education Center where she sees people move closer to recovery on a regular basis. She talks about being able to “give back” as a rite-of-passage into her own healing:

*Working as a Peer Supporter is part of my own recovery. It indicates a stage of growth which allows me to shift my identity from "consumer" (one who takes) to "producer" (one who gives). Focusing on giving back is a rite of passage for us and completes a whole experience. We look forward to helping others proudly, as if to say, "I have mastered some of the challenges of my life, and I am bursting with excitement to share what I've learned". I believe supporting others recovering from psychiatric symptoms is ultimately empowering for the person I serve, for myself, and for my community. **It is extremely important to come full circle and to assume the responsibility of leadership because I once felt powerless.** I view this new kind of leadership as tender balance between the encouragement of others to find their own way, and the willingness to openly share the experiences of my own journey. As opposed to helping relationships in the traditional method, “this is a natural process of personal evolution” for all of us.*

Here's a note from **Bonnie**. She explains how she went through the recovery process herself, and then went to work in a job that allowed her to "give back" and caused her to feel wanted and needed and a part of life again:

*I ran into an old friend of mine in the spring of 2002 and "She had fire". I asked her what she did to make such a change in her life. She said she had taken Peer Support Specialist training and was now teaching a WRAP class. She invited me to attend. It was all Greek to me, but I wanted what she had so I went. I took the Peer Support Specialist training and teach WELL classes at META. Even though I can't work as many hours as I'd like now due to lupus, I love being a WELL facilitator. It does me as much good to get out and share recovery principles and ideas as it does for the people in class. My world and life have changed and opened up. My life changed, and it's hard to describe. I am more alive. I have met a lot of wonderful people through META who have helped me. I hope I have helped others as well. It's so wonderful to feel wanted and needed and a part of life again.*

**Susi** explains how this whole process helped her remember who she really is and what she has to give back:

*PST was a very special time for me. I made friends, I studied, I learned more on recovery, I made changes in my life, and I became the person I am today. **This month it'll be two years since I've been in crisis!** Shortly after graduating, I got a job, and today, I am **Susi**. I have a job, I have friends, I socialize, I play with my children, and I am a wonderful woman who has survived life so that I can help others believe that recovery is possible. So God bless you! Enjoy yourself, work your WRAP, and know that you are the "you" the world needs.*

**Sal** talks about how "giving back" feels good, and he also hints at it being a two-way process that allows others to contribute as well:

*Finally I got my job with META in the WELL program and have been doing that job almost a year and nine months. **It felt so good to give back to the community** my experience and to hear theirs as well.*

**Judi's** experience of "giving back" included an opportunity to provide hope to the team that worked with her before she began the recovery journey. This was a wonderful experience for the team, and also very empowering for Judi:

*After graduation I was hired into the WELL program and even got a chance to do a site presentation at the site that provides my services. It was a site-wide meeting. There were probably 60 people there. I got up to speak. **I saw many jaws drop and eyes get wide as the case managers and nurses that knew me then got a glimpse of the new me.** While I credit my recovery to the constant love and acceptance and support of my children and the fear of losing them, the role META and Peer Support Training played was absolutely a close second. Today I am a team leader in the WELL/WRAP program*

*and make a concentrated effort to introduce others to the wonderful world of recovery just like META did for me two years ago.*

There are many reasons why working in a job that fits you can bring out the best in you, and we'll discuss many of them in this chapter. First, let's focus on the predominate theme that weaves its way through all of the above stories – an opportunity to give back and make your own unique contribution. Being employed as a Peer Support Specialist will give you many opportunities to give back. All the survival skills you've acquired along the road to recovery will be helpful information to those traveling with you. You know the path, the pitfalls and the secret passages and you can share this very important knowledge with others who are just beginning the recovery journey.

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### ***How to Be a Great Employee.***

Good intentions and a lot of enthusiasm are important aspects of any job, particularly Peer Support. So if you have these two characteristics in place, you're well on your way. There are some other very important aspects of being a great employee too, so let's take a look at some of the specific issues you'll need to know to be successful in your employment.

**Take Care of Yourself.** Taking care of yourself is something we want you to take very seriously. We want you to enjoy your job and to be able to do it well and this will require that you follow a plan of good self-care. This can be as simple as following the plan you made in WRAP class, or it can be a plan you develop specifically for work. The key here is to use it. Many times when peers come to us with problems and we ask, "Have you been using your WRAP?" they say "It's around here some place, but I haven't seen it for awhile." We know that they haven't been working their WRAP or paying attention to what they need to do to stay healthy, so we help them get back on track with their wellness plans.



Another part of staying healthy is to keep a positive focus on the work you do. If you focus on the problems that the people you are working with are having, it can become very depressing and you can begin to feel hopeless and helpless about your work with them. If, on the other hand, you stay focused on the person, plus the solutions and possibilities they have for moving past their problems, you can avoid sinking into a state of despair and continue to offer them support. Related to this issue is your responsibility for learning how to say "no" when you need to. If you don't feel comfortable saying "Yes" to requests you get from others, just say "no", and say it in a respectful and caring way. Remember that you don't necessarily have to offer a reason, other than "I'm just not comfortable saying "Yes" to that right now. Remember that your position doesn't have to make sense to anyone but you. You can agree with all the reasons why someone thinks you should do something, and still not want

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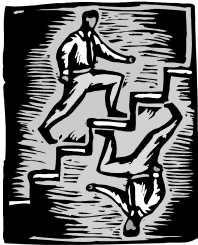
to do it. Once you've been clear about what your limits are, you don't need to keep explaining. Move on to other conversations. Remember, if you said "Yes" to everything, you'd be so worn out you won't be able to do anything very well. So save yourself for the places where you can make the most difference.

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Finally, remember not to do things for people that they can do for themselves. When you do things for others you just may be robbing them of a "recovery moment" where they could gain satisfaction and mastery over something that's been blocking them. Focus your energy instead on supporting and inspiring them to take personal responsibility for the things they can do for themselves.

**Role Shifting.** When a person transitions out of the role of the person-being-helped into the role of the person-delivering-the-help, issues of changing roles can sometimes cause temporary confusion. Most people make this shift smoothly, since they automatically know how to be with people in ways that inspire recovery because they have personally experienced the other side. However, there will be times when new Peer Support Specialists experience the "whip lash" of role shifting. When we see someone going through a clumsy transition, we don't worry about it. We've learned some ways to offer assistance that can easily get them back on track.

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One of the most common signs of a difficult role shift is when a person clings to the primary identity of being a "mental patient". This is a familiar identity and there may be some fear in giving it up. So, people who hold on to this role often continue to relate to symptoms and other issues from the perspective of being somewhat helpless and hopeless. Even if they are working, they are a "mental patient" who is

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working rather than a person who manages struggles and works. If you find yourself in this situation, try to keep refocusing on yourself as a well person who can manage symptoms and problems.

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Another common sign of a difficult role shift is getting stuck in a pattern of letting triggers stop you in your tracks instead of developing a sense of mastery over them. With practice, you can recognize a trigger and be challenged to stretch out of your comfort zone into new areas of growth and resilience. Take actions that will cause you to gain mastery by doing the things that help you feel better. Being aware of the shift in roles can help you be on the lookout for you getting in your own way while you are making the shift to a working person.

## ***Ethical Requirements.***



Most companies have a statement of ethics that spells out the ground rules of employee behavior. Peer Support Specialists are required to abide by the same ethical considerations that govern the practices of all other employees. Following is the statement of Ethical Standards used at META Services. Every mental health agency has one. It is important that you become familiar with it and understand it.

### **General Conduct of Employees.**

All employees of META Services shall be friendly, courteous, respectful, and honest. Employees shall conduct themselves at all times and in such a manner as to create a healing environment that maximizes the recovery process and the growth of persons we serve. All activities shall create mutually empowered relationships that serve the person's needs and preferences.

All employees shall strive to promote teamwork and resolve conflicts by being personally responsible to address conflicts and issues at the most mutual level.

### **Statement of Ethics.**

- A. Work towards establishing mutually empowered relationships that serve the persons needs and preferences.
- B. Employees will consciously reduce the effects of stigma and discrimination, i.e., race, creed, age, sexual preference, handicap, physical/mental functioning, or history of prior treatment.
- C. Employees will not do harm to any person, either physically or psychologically and will not verbally assault, ridicule, or use harsh, rude or provocative language that would insult or demean people served or anyone else.
- D. Employees will support the recovery process for the persons served, allowing the person to direct their own process. Employees will not force any values or beliefs into that person's process.
- E. Employees will not exploit people, for example; in business, financial, or sexual relationships.
- F. Employees will always respect the privacy and confidentiality of the persons served by the agency as well as coworkers.
- G. Employees will defend the rights of individuals being served as well as other employees.
- H. Employees will remain aware of their skills and limitations and not provide services or represent themselves as expert in areas for which they do not have sufficient knowledge or expertise. Employees will accept responsibility for continuing education and professional development as part of their commitment to provide quality services.

Once you become an employee of our company, we expect you to abide by our ethical standards as stated above. We will cover each point in class in order to make sure each point is clear and easy to apply in your work setting.

**Boundaries and Mutuality:** Peer Support is an unconditional service. By this we mean that we give it without the expectation of getting anything back, even though we do get a lot back. But the great



part is that it is a service based on mutuality and the exchange of friendship, which is usually a two-way process.

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The concept of mutuality is probably the fundamental defining aspect of peer support. The definition of mutual is “reciprocity based on common ground or experience” (Webster). However, when you are in a Peer Support job, mutuality is subject to the boundaries and expectations of role modeling. So while you will be expected to relate to others on a level of mutuality (not higher or lower, but straight across) we expect you to be a responsible role model and a living example of recovery.

Respecting the boundaries of others includes pointing out options and choices without imposing our priorities or preferences on the people we work with. Because Peer Support Specialists are a natural role model, they are often seen as special, or powerful by those they are “partnering” with, whether they like it or not. So the challenge is to be very careful not to abuse the power that has been entrusted to us by others, or by your employers and team members.

... you are role-modeling recovery, and are helping them find hope and

This may sound easy enough, but there are times when this can become quite challenging. In particular, there may be times when the person you are working with as a peer partner develops a “crush” on you. This is easy to understand, since you are role-modeling recovery, and are helping them find hope and empowerment. Since you are further along in your recovery, you are in a position of

influence. Your focus must be on helping the person grow in their recovery and not be distracted by developing an intimate relationship. So we have a rule that **you must not get involved in a dating or intimate relationship with anyone you are providing peer support to.** You will need to explain this to the people who show an interest in becoming intimate with you so they will know what to expect. We also strongly suggest you tell your supervisor about the situation and ask for support in maintaining your peer role. Other things that will help you avoid this problem is to develop friendships of your own outside of work. This way you’ll have plenty of other relationships and won’t be as tempted to develop relationships that violate this very important aspect of Peer Support.

**Attitude.** The most important aspect of almost any employment opportunity is attitude. The quote below says it all:

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*“Today I will raise the spirits of someone I discouraged: I will give my smile, my words, and my expressions of support so that they make a difference to someone who is wrestling with life or whom I may have hurt in some way.”*

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Another way of thinking about attitude is “using instead of loosing your head”. Using your head has to do with managing the things you are responsible for in a way that’s consistent with our

recovery mission. Check yourself out throughout the workday – are you conducting yourself in a way that promotes recovery for yourself and others? If yes, great. Keep up the good work. If you are having trouble maintaining an attitude that promotes recovery, ask for help. We're all subject to "off days" and need help seeing things in a positive light – we're also committed to helping each other – so just ask us for support.

**Keep Your Heart in the Right Place.** If attitude is about "keeping your head", integrity and honor are about "Keeping your heart". Lisa does a great job of explaining the importance of this:

*Several years ago, we recognized that the "secret ingredient" at META Services is love. Keeping a positive attitude at every turn is very important. If we are negative, how can the people we serve begin to identify the traits in us that give them hope? When we carry love in our hearts for the people we are serving, our teammates, ourselves, and the work we are doing, then that love will shine forth in our eyes, in our words and deeds. When we carry a heart that is full of negativity, that is what others will receive from us. None of us needs one more minute of negativity. We have all come from difficult places and we are now turning the page of our lives and moving into a place where all things are possible for us. We can share love and caring and we can accept love and caring.*

**Responsibility and Accountability.** Another way to say this is simply "keep your word!" Many of the managers at META have occasionally been surprised when new peer employees don't keep their word about work assignments. They are counting on the peer to be part of the team and cover their shift, only to be disappointed. We are not running a sheltered workshop. We are running a business with a slim margin for error. We have given our word to our participants and our funding sources and we need every one of our employees to do their part so we can keep our word. So you can see how important it is that we're all accountable for getting our work done in a way that reflects very high quality and accountability. Once again, Lisa has stated the issue in a way that clearly explains our commitments:

*When we tell someone we will be there tomorrow, we need to be there. **We must be the ones who keep our word.** We must be the ones that people depend on to accept them and value them. We demonstrate these goals by being there and being accountable. How can we ever ask someone to believe in recovery when we do not show up when we are needed? How can we ask other to learn to manage their symptoms when we are unable to do so? Being where you are supposed to be... when you are supposed to be there is very important. Remember that the work you do is REAL work. As in any job, you will have certain responsibilities to carry forth. The entire META team is counting on you to carry out the tasks you have been assigned.*

## **Frequently asked questions:**

### **1. What are some of the Employment Services that can help me be successful at my work?**

There are a number of services that can support you in having a successful employment experience. Here are some examples of the vocational services that are available from META Services Vocational Services Department, which is the natural progression of our commitment to creating opportunities and environments that empower people to recover.

- **Individualized Daily Empowerment Activity (IDEA):** In this program, individuals meet with vocational staff and outline their Individualized Vocational Services Plan identifying strengths, needs, barriers, interests, goals, and action steps, then exercise choice and personal responsibility in fulfilling their agreed-upon commitments. Many attend Recovery Education Center classes to pursue an Associate's Degree in Recovery; others "volunteer" to role model and share their experience to assist others to recover; and still others participate in community service activities.
- **Peer Support Training:** While you are in the training, a lot is going on behind the scenes. We collaborate with the individual and the vocational counselor to ensure effective and informed planning that results in employment outcomes. We also invite the employers to participate in both the Peer Support Training Job Fair and the panel interview process for graduates. META's Vocational Services staff have prepared a written declaration of their commitment to ensure those attending Peer Support Training realize a meaningful employment outcome. Our Business Liaison maintains a list of those who've graduated and are seeking employment and then connects them with interested employers. We also work closely with Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Job Developers, and other supports to assist in the hiring process.
- **Work Adjustment Training/Supported Employment:** Some people can benefit and flourish with long-term employment supports. META's Vocational services Department can provide these supports and a network of recovering peers to role model and mentor along with a "home base" of operation where employees can "tune-up" and further their recovery education. For those with difficult or little employment experience we also offer Work Internship opportunities where an experienced peer can use strength-based coaching in addressing challenging work behaviors, while reinforcing positive ones.

### **2. I'm worried that I might start experiencing symptoms and won't be able to work. Is this a problem?**

Symptoms rarely interfere with one's ability to work.

Symptoms rarely interfere with one's ability to work. If an employee calls in saying they are experiencing symptoms and they're afraid they can't come in, we are likely to say, "Come on in!" We find that once the person comes to work and begins to participate and facilitate, they start feeling much better. This is because their "well part" is being drawn forward, and the symptoms are taking a back seat. It is also because when you come to work in a "recovery environment" the positive energy of the environment itself helps you feel better. So not to worry about symptoms -- they almost never get in the way of someone being able to work.



### 3. If symptoms aren't an issue, what does usually get in the way?

Many of us have parts of our self that didn't get a chance to grow up because we were preoccupied dealing with symptoms or addictions or both. It's those "didn't-get-a-chance-to-grow" parts of us that sometimes get in the way of doing good work. However, work is a great place to grow. So stay open, ask for feedback, and you'll be amazed at how quickly you'll be able to identify areas that need further development and how easy it is to fix them. We'll hang in there with you and give you a safe place to grow.

### 4. What are the most serious problems Peer employees experience?

After four-plus years of experiencing working alongside of peers, we have had very few problems -- no more than we do with any other employees. The issues that do cause problems seem to fall into two categories -- relapse into illicit drug use is one, and inappropriate involvement in intimate relationships is the other.

**Addictions:** Once people complete the Peer Employment Training they often have fewer cravings and problems with addictions because they are busy and involved in the process of living and contributing. They are also focused on and identifying with their "well self" which then becomes their primary identity. When they look in the mirror, they see the well part, not the part that can be so easily re-addicted. However, anyone who has struggled with an addiction cannot afford to get complacent and needs to remember that they can't take any risks in this area. If you have an addiction in your past, stay alert to your own personal warning signs. If you begin to struggle, let us know so we can support you. Take care of yourself and do whatever works for you to stay out of the danger zone. We are bringing this up because this is an area where we lose some of our great Peer employees, and we don't want to lose you.

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**Inappropriate Relationships:** The other area that is high risk is inappropriate intimacy with people you are serving. The work of a Peer Support Specialist is based on developing recovery-oriented relationships. We put a lot of effort into teaching you how to use relationships to support recovery. However, when relationships that are based on mutuality drift into the zone of intimacy, you're in trouble. Your effectiveness as a Peer Support Specialist is rapidly diminished. The quickest way for this to happen is when peers misuse their power as a role model. The most obvious misuse happens when a peer relationship starts to become intimate. We have a very firm requirement about not crossing this boundary.

### 5. How will my benefits be affected if I work?

The answer to this question is different for nearly each person. We suggest you pay close attention in class when the expert on benefits comes in as a guest speaker. Generally, peers start working on a part time basis. This allows them to get used to working without threatening their benefits. Most companies have a minimum number of hours required for qualifications as a full time employee and once you reach that number you qualify for full

company benefits. For example, if you decide to work at least 34 hour per week at META you qualify for company benefits the same as any other employee.

**6. Is the work of a Peer Support Specialist demanding or is it relatively easy?**

Interesting question. Peer employment is definitely challenging, but very rewarding work. We do not operate a sheltered workshop in any sense of the word. The money we earn is on a fee-for-service basis. This means that we only get paid for the services we actually deliver. We need to deliver enough service to cover the cost of our operation. So everyone has to “pull their load”, do their part, in order to balance the budget at the end of the month. Challenging work has not been a problem for Peers, even if they haven’t been employed before, or for a long time. All it takes is a willingness to do your part, keep your word, and do the work you’ve been assigned to do. This holds true if you are doing work on a volunteer basis as well.

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- 7. How can I remember all of this so I can do top-notch peer support work?** This is a great question. It’s easier than you might think to slip and slide around in the role of a Peer Support Specialist. This is because it is a new discipline and the expectations are not always clear to those of you who will be working with. The following “Recovery Tune up” is a guide you can use to keep yourself “tuned-up”. Keep it handy and review it when you start to feel like you need reminder of what peer support is all about.

## RECOVERY TUNE UP

**Remember who you are and what you have to offer.** We each have a unique gift, and purpose for being. Our mission is to learn from the experiences we have had, and use what we have learned to promote recovery in others.

- Know yourself, so you can stay out of your own way.
- Share your story of recovery and hope in a way that inspires others to recover.
- Keep asking for feedback from those you trust.

***Remember the principles of Peer Support.*** We have learned ways of promoting recovery in others and we are committed to learning even more ways of brining forward recovery for them.

- Peer Support is having a cup of tea with someone, but it is never about the tea.
- We use language that promotes recovery, avoiding labels, and locking people into the past, and learned helplessness and hopelessness.
- We use active listening skills.
- We remember the principles of “mutuality”. Our position as a Peer is more powerful and effective than any other role.
- We do not abuse our power.
- We identify options and opportunities without telling people what to do.
- We leap at every opportunity to acknowledge a person’s strengths and worth.
- We promote self-esteem and self-efficacy, and share tolls for self-management.
- We provide information of resources and show people how to use them.
- We encourage personal responsibility, constantly giving power back to the person.
- We encourage self-advocacy, reminding people that they are not a “case” to be “managed”...”I am NOT their patient, they are MY team.”
- We see people as “new” each moment, and allow them to grow into all they can be (avoid reinventing the past).
- We gently encourage people to “stretch” and move out of their comfort zone.
- We do not give up on anyone who is trying to recover.

***Remember your commitment to yourself and your peer.*** Once you step into the role of a Peer Support Specialist, you have the challenging task of remaining mutual, yet serving as a role model. This requires a great deal of integrity, courage, and honor.

- We always work within our mission and vision.
- We try not to fall down. If we do, we get back up as soon as we can.
- We keep our word about being on time, and being present.
- We ask for help when we need it.
- We admit when we have made a mistake.

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**8. I have quite a bit of fear around employment and I'm not sure what's causing it. Is this a common response new peers have?**

Well, it's probably not unusual for any of us to have some fears around new jobs. Fears usually fall into two different categories –fears of failure and fears of success. Most of us are

If you flop, try to see it as a learning experience instead of a failure, and try again.

familiar with fears of failure, since we've all had our share.

Common signs of this are reluctance to try new things, putting things off, playing it so safe that you fall asleep from boredom, and never taking any risks. You can move past most of this by just being aware of it and practicing doing things that are new to you. If you flop, try to see it as a

learning experience instead of a failure, and try again. One of

the books we recommend to new peers is "Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway" (need footnote).

Fear of success is a bit different. This fear usually stems from concerns about being given even harder tasks to accomplish. Just remember that you have some say in this and tasks can be negotiated. On a more subtle level, fears of success can stem from the fact that gone

raise your expectations of yourself, and recognize that you are capable of doing much more than you ever suspected.

you've moved beyond your highest expectations, and your self concept hasn't caught up yet with you

accomplishments. Signs of this are self-sabotage – causing you to fail because you have not been able to see yourself performing at this level. This is sometimes referred to as the "Imposter Complex" which is characterized by thoughts like, "If they really knew me, they'd never hire

me for this job". If you find yourself in this situation, raise your expectations of yourself, and recognize that you are capable of doing much more than you ever suspected. You may want to try some visualization and some affirmations to help you with this.

Once you are hired for a job that you've interviewed for, you may want to fold down the pages on this module and re-read it a couple of times. This will help you remember the concepts of peer employment. We are looking forward to working with you and know that you have a wonderful contribution to make to all of us!