



VERBAND FÜR LESBISCHE, SCHWULE, BISEXUELLE, TRANS*,
INTERSEXUELLE UND QUEERE MENSCHEN IN DER PSYCHOLOGIE

Why is peer support important?

Author: Jochen Kramer

Provided as part of the project "anders.angekommen",
funded by Aktion Mensch.



Stuttgart, Germany, March 2022

What is peer support?

People who have experienced similar things as you have can be a great help. In English, the term peer is used for these people. Peers can, for example, give practical help in everyday matters, interpret, advise or support professionals in their work (e.g. as language or cultural mediators).

What are the opportunities of peer support?

Peers can be a great help for those seeking advice because they are role models who are there "in real life". The greater the similarity, e.g. with regard to age, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, migration experience, etc., the more vividly one's own life could look. Non-peers talk about others (In your place ...), peers can talk about themselves (It was like this for me ...). They can give an introspection about their experiences. They are often easier to reach and closer to one's own life than professionals who do not share the same experiences. Peers thus provide important support for lgbtqi* people that is not available through professional services.

Peers themselves can use their own experiences to help others. This can give strength and self-confidence and even painful, difficult experiences can be "good for something" in this sense.

LGBTQI* communities offer peers and those seeking advice the opportunity to spend leisure time together and to seek and find like-minded people, friends, partners and safety networks. One person can have different roles: peer supporter and advice seeker. The communities encourage experimentation and help to discover new possibilities for oneself and to find oneself. They also offer an exchange of experiences in a more protected space than it is often possible in everyday life (family, school, job, etc.). The communities offer more or less confidential or public situations for this purpose.

What are the risks of peer support?

In order to take advantage of these opportunities, it is important to pay attention to the risks of peer support:

- Experiences and life situations are never exactly the same, but only similar. Therefore, the peer's experiences do not automatically fit 1:1 for the person seeking advice.
- The support is provided on a voluntary basis, is non-binding and often not as clearly regulated as professional counselling. Peer support is based on a relationship (often friendly), often without a programme, without a clear goal and without consideration of "side effects".
- A great closeness can develop between peers and those seeking counselling, which can lead to dependencies and excessive demands.
- Breaches of confidentiality can happen more easily than in professional relationships, as the framework conditions are often unclear (when am I allowed to talk to whom, about what and about whom?).
- For peers, the desire to help other people can lead to their own breaking point and beyond. Since the experiences and life worlds of those seeking advice are very similar to their own, the stories about them can act as triggers: i.e. they can evoke memories of their own stressful experiences.

How can these risks be minimised?

Peer supporters and those seeking advice should think about the following questions:

- What are the similarities between peer and advice seeker, and what are the differences? (Same/similar sexual orientation? Same/similar migration experience? etc.).
- What services are available from professionals who can be consulted if necessary? (For example, social workers, professionally trained counsellors or therapists)?
- Does the peer supporter have the social skills to support others (e.g. acquired through participation in a support group)?
- Has the peer supporter gained experiences that can be an inspiration for others or is she herself at the beginning of dealing with queerness etc.?
- Does the peer supporter have the resources (e.g. time) and the psychological stability to support others? Whom are they not able to support well because they have had stressful, traumatic experiences themselves and it is stressful for them to hear similar stories?
- Do the peer supporter respect themselves and their boundaries? Can they say "no" and point out the boundaries? Are they clear about what support they offer and what support they do not offer?
- How do we separate the roles of peer supporter and advice seeker from other roles, e.g. the role of a friend?
- What do the peer supporter get for their commitment? For example, is it fun, some variety, a sense of purpose, better self-worth or something else? It is important to pay attention to: what do I give and what do I get? Does the peer supporter enjoy being involved or are they stressed or burdened? It is important to notice early on when it is no longer suitable, otherwise, the peer supporter can feel used, burn out or the person seeking advice can feel dependent. It is therefore important to talk openly about what the costs and gains are for both: the peer and the person seeking advice. It is important that it is a good fit for both.

We recommend that people who want to be involved as peers for others attend a peer support training. And of course, it is also a possibility to become professionally qualified in counselling or therapy for lgbtqi* people through study and further training.

Professionals should incorporate peer support: the possibilities and limitations of peer support should be taken into account in therapeutic and counselling settings, professional supervision of peer support should be offered and networking with peer supporters and self-help groups should be maintained.