

**Definitions of Peer Support:**

In its simplest terms peer support means one person offering support to another person with similar experiences. How peer support is understood depends on the context. For example, in educational settings 'peer support' is a way for children to support each other to deal with and counteract bullying.

Within the disabled people's movement, peer support has a very specific meaning because it is the second listed action point or 'need' of Independent Living. This is a list of the 7 key things disabled people have identified that are essential for independence, i.e. to enable disabled people to have access to the same choices in life as non disabled people.

The list was put together by Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People in the early 1980s. Briefly the 7 original needs were:

1. Information
2. Counselling (Peer Support)
3. Housing
4. Technical Aids (Equipment)
5. Personal Assistance
6. Transport
7. Access.

Point 2 is now usually referred to as 'peer support', or 'peer counselling'. There is some debate within the disabled people's movement about the meaning of the word 'counselling'. Some organisations of disabled people provide peer counselling services, for example, see the leaflet about peer counselling offered by Derbyshire Coalition of Inclusive Living at: [www.dcil.org.uk/Papers/pdf/Counselling.pdf](http://www.dcil.org.uk/Papers/pdf/Counselling.pdf). Others reject the word counselling altogether.

As the first action point of independent living is information – the starting point for independence - definitions of peer support often relate to making use of this information. For example, in Breakthrough UK's factsheet on Independent Living, the first 2 definitions are:

**“Information:** Disabled people require information on what is available to assist with independent living.

**Peer Support:** Disabled people need the support of other disabled people to discuss how to make best use of the information obtained and for ongoing support.”

Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People's '**Independent Living Guide**' explains peer support as follows:

"Peer support is getting support from another person. Peers are people who have had similar experiences to us – another disabled person giving us support and information. They don't have to act as an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf), or be your friend, just support you."

Often peer support takes place in a group setting. It can also involve one to one peer support, this is sometimes called 'peer mentoring'. See '**An evaluation of a young disabled people's peer mentoring/support project**' on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website for a discussion on how this worked for the Young Disabled People's Forum at GMCDP:

[www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/813.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/813.asp)

### **More Links on Peer Support:**

Principles of Independent Living (Breakthrough UK's version):

[http://www.breakthrough-uk.co.uk/AboutUs/Principles\\_of\\_Independent\\_Living](http://www.breakthrough-uk.co.uk/AboutUs/Principles_of_Independent_Living)

Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People

[www.gmcdp.com](http://www.gmcdp.com)

Papers on the Disability Archive UK

[www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/)

The importance and availability of peer support for people with learning difficulties accessing direct payments (Joseph Rowntree Foundation):

[www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/D64.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/D64.asp)

### **Providing Peer Support**

Here are some thoughts from our advocacy team on the pros and cons of providing peer support on a one to one basis or in groups. These ideas are based on the work we have done with groups and individuals offering this:

Positives:

- Sharing experiences reduces isolation
- Inside information can help others to succeed
- Power in numbers
- Can highlight common barriers

Possible pitfalls:

- Can set people up to fail if not done in the right way e.g. “I know you’re definitely entitled to x” etc.
- Making assumptions about what a person should do without discussing
- Acting without the person’s consent when you feel strongly that your approach is the correct one.
- Think about motives and whose interest you are acting in.
- Appearing confrontational.

Considerations:

- Everyone’s experience is different.
- Ensure that choice and control remains with the person you are supporting.
- Are you adopting a professional or informal approach.
- What is realistic – e.g. are you working within the boundaries of company policy?
- What are the limitations of confidentiality?

Opportunities:

- Information about barriers - gathered ethically - can act as a catalyst for change.

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