

# Evaluating the transformative power of peer support practice

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## 1. Summary of impact

This project lays the foundations for a novel evaluation framework that aims to meaningfully capture the transformational power of peer support work. Peer support workers openly and purposefully bring to their work the knowledge and wisdom gained through lived experience of adversity to establish connection with others and support them in times of crisis or challenge. In this project, through training and skills development workshops and deliberative dialogues, peer work leaders were invited to share their expertise and imagine new opportunities to assess the value of peer support work in ways that both speak to and subvert traditional healthcare system measures.

## 2. The problem

Peer support work is increasingly recognised as a vital aspect of supporting people who are experiencing life challenges, including — but not limited to — mental distress, social and relational adversity, and other traumas. Despite a growing chorus of voices calling for greater recognition and inclusion of peer workers in health, mental health, and community care settings, including in first responder and veteran cohorts, there remains a lack of evaluation measures that can determine the full value and impacts of this type of human-centred work in existing care and support systems.

### **3. Beneficiaries**

This project offers significant benefits to the peer support leaders who received training and skills development in meaningful evaluation frameworks as part of this project, and the broader local and international peer support workforce who stand to benefit from the creation of an evaluation framework that more accurately captures the meaning and impact of what they do. Once developed, these evaluative processes will have the potential to support the peer workforce to articulate the value of their work, thereby promoting the impact of peer work and potentially creating more opportunities for people in distress to seek peer support as part of their care.

### **4. Approach to impact**

The research team invited ten peer work leaders from health and community settings to participate in the project. Participants from diverse social and cultural backgrounds who held paid and unpaid peer work roles attended two Meaningful Evaluation Framework workshops and a Reflective Development Session. Discussions centred on opportunities to capture and communicate the nuances of peer work in ways that align with peer support work principles and practices. Findings from these sessions have now been captured in a report that participants have co-authored.

### **5. What has changed as a result of this work?**

This project lays the foundations for subsequent research in this space, including developing a toolkit and working model for a tailored evaluation framework. It has also fostered stronger relationships between the UTS research team and the peer work leaders whose lived and professional experience will be vital to the future of this research.

### **6. What has helped you accomplish this work?**

A shared belief in the power of peer support work and the need for novel evaluation frameworks to capture the value and meaning of this work underpins the delivery of this project. Strong relationships between the UTS research team, the UTS Centre for

Social Justice, individual peer work leaders, and health and consumer networks and organisations within NSW have been crucial to its success.

## **7. Challenges**

Community-engaged work often requires long lead times, and limited funding can be a persistent barrier. While these challenges aren't unique to this project, they presented ongoing challenges in achieving project milestones within the constraints of the grant funding scheme.