



Peer support a vital part of recovery

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

When you face a personal dilemma, who do you turn to for advice? It may be a parent, teacher, pastor or coach. Or you may seek the advice of a trusted friend. Of course, there may be different people you ask for advice depending on the problem – but certainly, someone who has dealt with the same challenge you are facing is who you’d want to talk to first. Someone who has “been there, done that” is not only better able to understand your problems but is also more likely to offer practical insights for solving it.

The idea that wisdom gained through “lived experience” can be valuable in helping others is the foundation of the peer movement in mental health and addiction treatment. Peer counselors are increasingly recognized as a critical part of the recovery process. Not only does someone with mental illness or addiction who is living in recovery have high credibility with individuals dealing with the same challenges, they can offer practical advice on coping strategies and life skills.

Most important, by showing others it is possible to live in recovery – by being an example to others – peers give others hope. And it is very difficult, some would say impossible, to recover from mental illness or addiction without hope.

Because peer support is so important to the recovery process, Highland Rivers Health is working to expand the number of peer counselors it employs and the programs in which peers work. We currently offer peer-led mental health recovery groups at five locations (Cartersville, Cedartown, Dalton, Ellijay and Rome) that are open to individuals living anywhere in our 12-county service area. We also use peer specialists in our Assertive Community Treatment and other community-based programs.

Highland Rivers is far from the only agency to employ peer specialists. Today, peer specialists are responsible for delivering peer services in a variety of programs and settings. In addition to leading peer support groups, peer specialists might work in partnership with treatment teams, nurses, social workers, legal advocates and other service providers. Peer specialists may also work in hospital emergency rooms, crisis centers, homeless shelters, community clinics, residential programs and other settings that serve individuals with mental health conditions and/or addictive disease.

In fact, peers are now recognized to be so important in so many settings, that they are considered professionals and can be certified as peer specialists (and it’s important to note that most

agencies, including Highland Rivers, only hire certified peers). Depending on an individual's personal experience and interests, he or she can be certified as peer specialist in mental health, families, youth, legal advocacy, substance use and addiction, and vocational rehabilitation, among others.

To become certified as a peer specialist, generally you must have at least a high school diploma or GED, have good communication skills and be well-grounded in your recovery – at least a year between your diagnosis and application for training (or at least two years of sobriety). But most important, you must be willing to identify as an individual with a mental health or addictive disease diagnosis, and willing to use your recovery experience to help others in their recovery journeys.

If you are interested in learning more about becoming a mental health peer specialist, you can visit the Georgia Certified Peer Specialist Project website at www.gacps.org. For information about becoming peer specialists focused on substance use, visit the Georgia Council on Substance Abuse at <http://gasubstanceabuse.org>. You can also contact Highland Rivers Health's peer services program manager Allyson Pinto at allysonpinto@highlandrivers.org.