

## **WomenatthecentrE Present**

WE Webinar: Embedding Peer Support into our Futures:

Lived Experiences as Expertise and the Power of Peer Support

Tuesday November 9, 2021

11:00- 12:30pm EST

Welcome to WomenatthecentrE's WE Webinar Series where today we will be discussing the importance of lived experience as expertise and the power of peer support! This WE Webinar will feature five wonderful panelists which include;

**Donna Forget:** Program Manager with Nipissing First Nation since founding the True Self / Debwewendizwin Program in 2006. <https://nfn.ca/true-self/>

**Elizabeth Tremblay:** Founder of Mentor/Mentee Canada, is a peer support employment and Leadership trainer, peer researcher, and outreach and housing peer supporter. <https://mentormenteeCanada.com/>

**Krystal Snyder:** Has worked in the non-for-profit business for over 10 years supporting survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence. She is also the recipient of the Niagara 40 under 40 award. <https://collaborativecommunitysolutions.ca/>

**Rifaa Carter:** A Peer Counselor and a Co-chair of the Kingston Anti-Violence Advisory Council (KAVAC), the Kingston chapter of WomenatthecentrE.

**Susana Meza:** Venezuelan artist and facilitator for the Workman Arts Art-Cart Program at CAMH, a Newcomer Artist Ambassador for MABELLEarts, a member of the board of directors of the North York Women's Centre and is completing a fellowship at Yale University.

### **Facilitator:**

**Nneka MacGregor:** Co-Founder and Executive Director, WomenatthecentrE

**Co-Hosts: Sheryl and Katie:** WomenatthecentrE Placement Students

WomenatthecentrE has over 4,000 members worldwide who are all engaging in work to improve the lives of women-identified survivors of gender-based violence. If you are interested in becoming a member or want to learn more about what it means to be a member please see: <https://www.womenatthecentre.com/forms/1>

## **WELCOME!**

### **Sheryl**

Hello everyone and welcome to our WE Webinar! My name is Sheryl and I'm joined today by Katie. We are placement students at WomenatthecentrE and we will be your hosts for the morning. Thank you all so much for joining us on this beautiful Tuesday morning. We are so excited to be sharing this space with all of you. Today's webinar is about the importance of lived experience as expertise and the power of peer support featuring our lovely panelists, Donna Forget, Elizabeth Tremblay, Riffa Carter, Krystal Snyder and Susana Meza.

Before we get started, we would like to do a land acknowledgement. WomenatthecentrE asks you all to take a moment to think about your own relationship with this land, whether settler or arrivant, and your responsibilities to honor this land and Indigenous Peoples.

WomenatthecentrE acknowledges that the land on which we operate is the territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Anishnaabe Nation, the Haudensaunee Confederacy, Métis, Inuit, and the Mississaugas of the Credit, and was taken without consent. Today, this land is still home to many First Nations and Indigenous Peoples from across Turtle Island. We recognize the inherent connections between ongoing colonialism and all forms of violence, including racism, sexism and over-policing that disproportionately impact Indigenous communities, particularly Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people. WomenatthecentrE actively works to break this pattern of ongoing violence because it is crucial to our work of dismantling the embedded impacts of colonialism.

As an overview of the content that we will be exploring today with Nneka and our panelists, today we present the WE Webinar: The Importance of Lived Experiences as Expertise and the Power of Peer Support. As our Executive Director, Nneka MacGregor, states, "counselling requires empathy, not certification." Reframing the 'counsellor-client' relationship can be a radical agent of change to support and take back power with a survivor in a way that traditional counselling settings do not. This webinar will explore the importance of support that centres lived experiences. Our panelists' peer support expertise includes addressing gaps and barriers for immigrant and refugee survivors, supporting survivors of human trafficking, holistic healing from an Indigenous worldview, peer support in the mental health & addiction sector & with arts-based practices.

WomenatthecentrE is a survivor-led organization and we work to ensure survivors' voices are the at the centre of research, education, and policy reform. Please follow along on our socials, using the #WEWebinarSeries on facebook, twitter and instagram @WomenatthecentrE .

The chat option will be available for comments & to connect with panelists/staff as needed. Please take a moment in the chat to let us know where you are joining us today!

We also ask that you please complete the survey found at the end of the webinar.

Just as a quick trigger activation warning for our viewers, due to the nature of the content discussed, we are offering an activation warning as this presentation involves discussions from discussions around gender based violence. Please only listen if you're able to do so if you feel that you need support while listening. Please reach out to your local support networks. And now I will be passing it over to Katie who will be introducing our panelists.

## **INTRODUCTION AND BIOS**

### **Katie**

Thank you so much, Sheryl.

So we'll get started with **Donna Forget**, who has been a Program Manager with Nipissing First Nation since founding the True Self / Debwewendizwin Program in 2006. She was instrumental in the design and delivery of a program that would meet the needs of women that had experienced trauma, to help them on their healing journey and to achieve economic independence. As a survivor of trauma from domestic and sexual violence, Donna's insight merging an Indigenous world view, Healing Centered Engagement and Peer Support Values has led to the success of the program. Some of the oldest methodologies that equate to Peer Support come from our Indigenous people in the form of talking circles and sweat lodges. True Self Debwewendizwin incorporates that understanding of holistic healing and the power of peer support, while recognizing the importance of individual differences and meeting participants where they are at and making the program fit their needs rather than trying to make them fit a preset program criteria. We'd like to welcome Donna!

Next we have **Elizabeth Tremblay**, who is the founder of Mentor/Mentee Canada, is a Peer Support Employment and Leadership Trainer, Peer Researcher, and Outreach and Housing Peer Supporter. Elizabeth is a contract employee at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, is an Elizabeth Fry Toronto Peer Support Trainer and the proud recipient of the Dr. Paul Garfinkel Entrepreneur of the Year Resilience Award for her cross-sectoral work in Peer Support. Welcome, Elizabeth!

Next we have **Rifaa Carter**, who is a Peer Counselor and a Co-chair of the Kingston Anti-Violence Advisory Council (KAVAC), the Kingston chapter of WomenatthencentrE. She is currently studying Indigenous Social Work at Laurentian University. Rifaa has been supporting and advocating for survivors of gendered violence for over a decade. Using her own lived experience, as well as those of the women she supports, her advocacy and education efforts are focused on addressing gaps and barriers for immigrant and refugee survivors, as well as changing community attitudes and responses to gendered violence. She does this in the hope

of creating responsive, compassionate communities where those who are experiencing abuse can feel safe to speak out -- where survivors are supported, not silenced. Welcome, Rifaa!

Next we have **Krystal Snyder**, who has worked in the non-profit sector for over 10 years supporting survivors of human trafficking and gender based violence. She is a survivor of Human Trafficking and was able to lead the mobilization of the Niagara Regions' Human Trafficking Emergency Response Protocol. She has been able to speak about ending human trafficking across Canada and in 2019 in Johannesburg. She is a recipient of the Niagara 40 under 40 award. Krystal is passionate about peer led programming which mobilizes systemic change. Welcome, Krystal!

And last, but certainly not least, we have **Susana Meza**, who's a Venezuelan artist and facilitator. Susana teaches visual arts as part of the Workman Arts Art-Cart Program at CAMH. Susana provides peer support and is an active listener for fellow Workman Arts members. They are also a Newcomer Artist Ambassador for MABELLEarts. As of this Summer, Susana became a member of the board of directors of the North York Women Centre and is completing a fellowship at Yale University. They live in Toronto where their daily art practice is developing. Welcome, Susana!

And finally, I will introduce our lovely facilitator for the for the morning, our very own **Nneka MacGregor**. She is the co-founder and executive director of WomenathethecentrE. As Sheryl mentioned earlier we are a unique non-profit created by and for women and trans survivors of gender-based violence globally. Nneka is an Expert Advisory Panel Member of the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability and sits on several Advisory Boards and Committees, including the Family Law Committee of the Board of Legal Aid Ontario. She is a member of the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee. She was a recipient of the 2019 PINK Concussions Awards and is also the recipient of the YWCA Women of Distinction 2020 award for Social Justice. So now we'll be passing it on to Nneka and our lovely panelists for today's discussion, thank you so much, and enjoy!

## **THE PANEL DISCUSSION!**

### **Nneka**

Well, that was interesting. Thank you very, very much. I'm actually going to start by expressing my own gratitude, first of all, to my incredible, incredible team, to Katie and Sheryl, who are placement students, to our phenomenal, equally brilliant and bold project coordinators, Michelle Rolfe and Kelsy Dundas and Alison Morrison who are all part of getting this this event

together. Very grateful for my team. I'm very, very grateful to the spectacular panelists that you've just heard a little bit about them, because these bios don't really do justice, I know, to the extent of the scope of work that these women have been putting out into the community for decades. And then finally, I'd like to express gratitude to all of you who have shown up today to share space and time with us, as we talk about the importance of lived experiences as expertise and the power of peer support. I'm a huge believer in peer support. And the work of the organization is about, by, and for peers. So to open it up, open it up to the panelists, I would like to start off by asking how do you each define what, you know, how do you define peer support? I could invite somebody in, or if you want to jump in, feel free. Okay, I'm gonna invite somebody, oh, Donna, Donna is jumping in. Go for it. How do you define peer support?

### **Donna**

From my perspective, peer support is support of someone walking alongside someone with a similar life path, supporting them on their journey, not being behind them, pushing them or in front of them demanding or pulling them but actually walking beside them, and helping them to find their own path.

### **Nneka**

Beautiful, absolutely spot on. Who else wants to go next?

### **Susana**

Hi, this is Susana, and thank you so much for the invitation, very humbled to be here with all of you. And for me, peer support is simply taking care of each other using the best of our individual abilities. And whether these offerings are somebody to talk to, a warm plate of food, or whatever reassurance, it all intends to ignite hope from our lived experience. And I do believe and feel and have experienced the fact that we are able to uplift one another and let that hope shine. And I love peer support because it does take open and non judgmental communication and empathy and intentional listening to a higher level. It enhances the human experience.

### **Nneka**

Thank you. I love that. Ignite hope, that is powerful. Absolutely Powerful. Elizabeth, you're going to jump in.

## **Elizabeth**

Number one, oh, I'm going to go on a whole different stream though Nneka, thank you, oh, I am going to say that we're leaders and that we're a critical service and an essential service. And there's an organization called The Craftsmen Centre, who defines peer support as a right, and a choice for accelerating recovery of individuals and systems. And one of our, you know, we are facilitators of change, so that peer supporters are seen by those onboarding us now in organizations like the Toronto Shelter Network, Women's College Hospital, and we're seen as change makers. And we're certainly educators and advocates. One of my favourite definitions of peer support is that we're engagement specialists, we conduct our peer to positive relationships and community. And we really accelerate independence. And we're allies or allies on that nonlinear journey of recovery. That's a great definition. And we're preventative for that reason, because we're there as coaches and guides, and we maybe can help our peers avoid going back to perpetrators six times as we did, and as many others have. My favourite formal definition of peer support is the International Association of Peer Supporters, and that's that we've made a personal commitment to our own recovery. We've maintained our recovery over a period of time, and we've taken special training, to work with others to do the same. And we share what we learned in an inspirational way so that we're that candle that spreads the light of hope, like you said, to the peers that we work with to overcome fear and insecurity. And that will end, you know, into powerful independence, that does happen.

## **Nneka**

Well, I think our job here is done. I mean, that is a mic drop of a definition. Absolutely. Absolutely. So expensive. Brilliantly said.

## **Elizabeth**

I can go on and on.

## **Nneka**

Well, good. This is a great start. This is an absolutely brilliant start. Thank you, Elizabeth, for that. Riffa, or Krystal?

## **Rifaa**

I can go. So, first, I just really want to recognize that peer support is something that many folks with lived experience, have always done informally, to some extent. And it's one of the most healing acts of resistance that survivors, not just of gender based violence, but of many other adverse experiences engage in. The two things that come up for me, when I think of peer support is that relief that comes across a survivor when they're sharing some part of their experience. And they feel really understood for the first time. And I think that can only come from connecting with someone with shared lived experience. And then the other thing that I think about is peer support for the peer supporters. I think that especially given that many of us have been doing this work informally for many years before taking on more formal roles. We don't really recognize the need for that support for ourselves, the debriefing support, the mentorship, the training, and I think it's wonderful that these, you know, this work is finally beginning to become more formally recognized, because, you know, people are getting compensated for the work that they do, the very necessary work that they do, the gaps that they fill, and they're also receiving, you know, the training and the support that they need to be able to do this work in a sustainable and fair way.

## **Nneka**

So important, absolutely, absolutely. Brilliantly said, and I love that part about the compensation because you're right, we've been doing it ad hoc, and informally, but now people are recognizing that it is actually valuable skills and expertise. Brilliantly said. Krystal, how do you define it?

## **Krystal**

It's such a, I mean, for me, it's such an interesting question, because I think Rifaa spoke to it a bit and Donna spoke to it in her bio, but peer support is how movements started. Like before we made capitalism and profit from the nonprofit world, that's how this work all got started, gender based violence work was peer support. And so I think for me when I think about like, how do I, how do I define it? Something about a feeling comes up for me like, it's a heart-centered reciprocal space holding relationship, I guess is kind of the best way that I can connect to that it. It feels very different to connect with somebody who has similar experiences than somebody who doesn't. It also, I think does a lot for the power dynamic that can exist in traditional non-profit structures. And Rifaa was talking about, you know, peer support for peer supporters, which is so important. And I also like to talk about training for nonprofits, like if

you're going to have peer supporters, you need to know what your management power might bring in terms of that dynamic and relationships. So, so who's also supporting you know, I want to say, leaders or nonprofit leaders to support peer workers? If that's not their lived experience, how do they know how they're providing ethical and safe support?

## **Nneka**

Well, what really has moved me, just with this introductory opening question, is that all of you have touched on the mission and the vision of this organization. Right? And I think this is our *raison d'être*. This is the reason why we exist, is to bring about this way of being and way of knowing and way of being respected. And so I think this is a really critical way to start off the conversation so that people understand what peer support really is. And it is expensive, as you've seen from the definitions. I'm curious as to how did you each get into the work? How did you get into this field of providing peer support? I'm going to Oh, Liz, you're unmuted, do you want to go? Go for it.

## **Elizabeth**

Well, actually, I started researching peer support, because I was developed by the organizations that were my service organization. So I came to peer support, like many of us do. I was a product of the development of some of my organizations. Fred Victor, and they were offering employment, education and training and in shelters and I really wanted to become well financially to gain back my independence. And so I stayed in a non VAW shelter, even though I was, I was being re-traumatized there. So many of us come to peer support work, because we've both been hurt by the system that is a broken system, and we've been helped by the system as well. Elizabeth Fry, was my organization and became my employer CAMH was my recovery organization and became my employer. And those development organizations for me, allowed me to be with my peers in a way that was empowering like at WomenatthecentrE. And I would listen to my peers, even around the dining room table of the emergency shelter, and we had, our my peers had brilliant things to say, and yet no one was listening to us, and no one was asking us about what we thought the solutions were. And so Mentor/Mentee Canada was born from that on my transition house bed. It was from a place of wanting to bring lived experience or lived expertise or first voice experience into a more leadership role, and to be more included and involved in our system so that, you know, we can empower ourselves as well as make our systems better. So that's why I came to peer support.

It was also through that research for Mentor/Mentee Canada because then not only did I discover mentoring in the UK in the US, but I discovered peer support here in Canada that's been ongoing for more than 30 years in the mental health sector. It's very robustly defined as far as best practices, values and principles go and I went to peer support training. It was the best thing for my recovery that I've come across since and I went to a conference, a peer support conference, where I was surrounded by 300 peer supporters. Like you said, Krystal, I've never felt more embraced, more supported and more secure and safe. So the Ontario Peer Development Initiative conference, I recommend it for everyone, as well as the training for everyone. It truly is foundational for all of us to have healthy relationships and healthy communication and healthy lives.

### **Nneka**

Beautiful. Love it. Love it. Donna, what about you? How did you come into this?

### **Donna**

I have a really long story.

### **Nneka**

We've got time, we've got time, go for it!

### **Donna**

Um, how did I come into it? Well, I'll start by saying that I attempted suicide in 2006. And that was after leaving a 13 year abusive relationship. I was one of the fortunate women, that my sister was actually an OPP officer. And so she quickly had me relocated, which was wonderful in one sense. But in another, it really opened my eyes to some of the ongoing challenges, because I had two young boys at the time, and I had a cat. And as we all know back then you didn't go to the shelter if you had an animal, and I was not leaving my cat behind. So I ended up moving into an apartment and pretty much isolated and on my own, my only support connection was my sister. And then I stumbled, by accident actually, across the local peer initiative that was here at the time PAP, and walked in their door, really had no idea what they did, what the services were they offered, I started getting peer support there, I engaged with some of their services. And seeing the power of it, I spent probably the next 10 years on their board of directors. From there, I went to OPDIs board of directors, and I was there for 7 years.

And in 2006, it was actually Nipissing First Nation that approached me and asked me with my lived experience, if I would be interested in helping them write a proposal to look at a program that would address the gaps for women that were survivors of violence, and what was missing in the community. So of course, for me, one of the first things that come up was the fact that shelters are absolutely wonderful, which really is a peer base, always has been. And they're great for the women that go there. But there's a whole lot of other women in our community that never go into a shelter. And if they don't go into a shelter, then they're not made aware of some of the other supports and services that they can get in their community. So that was the way I originally wrote the proposal, was looking at us being like a catalyst to offer those support services. At the time I actually worked in the employment and training sector already. That's where I was. So we designed a program that would bring the two together, looking at peer support, and looking at the employment and training. And happy to say that even back then it wasn't all that well known but I did have the support of management here to actually look at hiring. All of my staff have mental health, addiction, or history of trauma and violence. Some of us are lucky enough to have them all. And so we can offer support to whoever walks in the door. That non judgmental, comfort piece is there from the get go. So that was it was my healing that actually led me into working in peer support, because that was the tool that really worked well for me.

## **Nneka**

Beautiful. Absolutely spot on. Susana, what about you?

## **Susana**

Um, thanks for the question. And my story does have a very specific time and date. Three years ago, I was in active addiction. My brain started failing. I began seizing and decided to go on a recovery journey. Through that, I was in a recovery program, in which I met a peer support worker and she gave me so much hope you know, there was a lot of my life in which I thought it was going to be over. And that hope that she gave me I've carried it on since. And it's been in my heart and it's been growing and spreading.

So in 2020, and because of somebody I had met through that recovery program I was in, and inspired by this super rocking peer support worker who was going to concerts and dancing reggae in the streets at a time in which I thought I was never going to be able to have fun anymore without my drug. I was so inspired by her and one of the participants in the program

told me about the transition to post secondary education program at George Brown. It is a program that is tuition free for people who have gone through mental health and addiction issues and want to go back to academia and it kind of helps you gives you a lot of support in order to do that, and during the pandemic, 2020, they were asking for peer support online, and I said, hey, I've never done this, but I'm gonna go for it. So I did and I ran a weekly art drop-in for two semesters, and that's open the door for me to be able to know that I can be of help, I can be of use, I don't have to be in a cubicle for the rest of my life, I can actually be out there and teaching people to make art and even if it's even if it's bad art, we are all good artists. And that's the message that I want to keep on spreading. And since then, I've been working in the intersection of peer support and art, and trying to spread the message and also being there for people who sometimes are not, um, confident. We lose a lot of confidence, trauma takes a lot from our, from ourselves. And, sometimes, all we need or sometimes all you need to have is an embrace, to just keep going. Um, and I think that art is such a beautiful way of embracing each other. And that's, that's my starting peer support. And, again, it's a very recent story. So this is just the start. And I'm very excited to be sharing this journey with all of you. Thank you.

## **Nneka**

Love it. Love it. I don't believe there's any such thing as bad art. I think Picasso has proven that. But anyway, that's another story. Love that Susana. And love the fact that what we're seeing here is this sort of continuum, right? There are some people who've been on the journey a lot longer. For some people, the peer support journey is more recent, but it's a similar dynamic that we're all sharing. Rifaa, what about you? How do you get involved in peer support work?

## **Rifaa**

How did I get involved? Well, I don't think there was ever an official start date. When I was 17, I escaped a very violent and unsafe situation at home. I was torture survivor, I'd experienced sexual violence. And I spent many years on the run, and just navigating systems trying to figure things out trying to stay safe. Oftentimes, many of the services that I accessed, you know, just didn't understand what I was saying. You know, as someone who is a Muslim woman at the time, I wore a hijab, you know, if I tried to and I, you know, obviously, some of the, the, the abuse that I experienced, you know, as we all know, abusers will use, you know, any tool at their disposal, so cultural abuse and, and spiritual abuse were really not understood. So if I ever tried to talk about what I was experiencing, or what I was struggling with, you know, I would always end up hearing Islamophobic remarks and racist remarks. You know, from counselors from service providers, it made it really unsafe for me to access support, and not feel like I was doing my community a disservice, as well.

So I'd say for the longest time I really struggled to find the right, right support for myself. And I think because of that, I've always been very open about my experiences and talking about my experiences, especially with women in my community. And I find that allows space for other women to feel safe to open up and to speak about what they're experiencing. So I've been supporting women for as long as I can remember, you know, in, in many capacities, I think, when I first, the first time that I got more formally involved in doing this work, is, is when a few years ago, I just became really frustrated with a lot of things and you know, there was so many things that I felt could be different or could be changed or so much information that could be shared. And I didn't realize and I think that's around when I met you Nneka when I, I was, you know, I was constantly thinking, why isn't anyone doing this? Why isn't anyone doing this? Until I realized that I had the capacity and I had the expertise to do it myself. And I think that is when I started doing, you know, getting more formally involved in in peer support work and advocacy work. But I would say that I've been doing it, you know, from day one. Yeah.

### **Nneka**

Yeah, that's such a critical point you were making around the importance of seeing people that look like you, and people who have experienced and have an understanding culturally, right? To yours, and how important it is in the peer support. So, so important. Thanks for raising that. Riffa. Krystal, what are your thoughts? How did you get involved?

### **Krystal**

How did I get involved? What comes up for me kind of immediately is my grandma and my mother. I think that inter-generationally, the women in my family have led peer support with each other through incidences of gender based violence, and with community, and so I think it's a bit in my veins. My father started the needle exchange in Niagara in the 90s, as a peer worker. So although my upbringing was messy, and not without violence, that peer aspect really existed inter-generationally, for me. And I think intuitively, peer support happened for me. And when you look at trafficking, and many of the dynamics of you know who you're around while you're being trafficked, that that peer support that women and girls give each other is necessary for survival in terms of human trafficking.

So I think again, it's just been intuitively and then in 2007, I started at the Niagara Sexual Assault Centre. I had started there just to do some volunteer work because I was going to school to be a police officer, which I usually don't tell people until way after they've known me.

\*laughter\*

## **Nneka**

Oh, that's why I'm finding out now!

## **Krystal**

And it was through kind of that really grassroots work that was done in Niagara with the local Sexual Assault Centre that I just developed such a passion for, for supporting folks. And I think, again, it was it was not formalized, it was intuitive. And it was very much on the social work side for a lot of years. But I always felt a bit different than many of my peers that I worked with formally, in terms of how how I would do the work and how I would connect with people. And so, I guess I didn't see that work is as peer support until I started my business a year ago. And that came out of, nobody is listening about peer support. So I, I really felt when I was working in non-profit, that I could be one or the other. I wasn't allowed to be both. And that's why I started my business, was to say I can be both and kind of step more authentically into who I am and how I can be of service to others.

## **Nneka**

That is such a fantastic, fantastic point. And a beautiful segue, I think into the next question of the how, right? How do you do peer support? How does one do it? So why don't you each take time and share with the audience sort of your top tips on the how. I'm going to start this time with Susana, how do you do it?

## **Susana**

I knock on every single door that I have. And people give me their keys. And then I use the keys that they give me to open other doors and so on. And so I have this big, big key-chain with tons of different keys that opens so many doors.

So I'm just to talk about briefly about the things that I'm currently doing. I am a member of Workman Arts. So I provide peer support two hours a week in an open line. People can call me if they're having a bad day, if they want to talk about burlesque, if they want to talk about the weather, anything, they can call me and I provide that service. I also serve as an active listener, also for Workman Arts classes and events. So participants can reach out to me in case they are triggered during the during the session or if they're just having a bad day or have something that they need help with. It can be anything. I also am a newcomer artist ambassador for MABELLEarts. And that way I have the opportunity of working with youth who like me have experienced being unhoused and who have experienced being displaced from

their country and all the things that come from being an immigrant. I have learned a lot about the many ways in which we can provide peer support through my work. I also, as I was telling you all earlier, before the webinar, I am teaching seniors visual art classes twice a week. And these are seniors for inpatients of CAMH. And I consider these big anti-sanism work. Because I go there, as the crazy person that I am, I don't, I don't change anything about it, I dress the way I am, I go there the way I am. And I tell them, you know, if you don't like the food, go complain about the food, you have this right. And it is really an enriching experience for me. And last but not least, the other thing that I'm doing to encourage equity and individuality is I teach creative writing workshops for survivors that I actually designed for WomenatthecentrE. And I gave the workshop to the Centre and I am going to keep on facilitating that workshop now for the North York Women's Centre this December.

One more thing that I'm doing is I am doing is a university fellowship right now called LET(s)Lead, and it's for people who have lived experience and the project I'm planning to develop, that I am presenting to Yale University next week, is a non-profit, that will be an art lounge, where people would lived experiments can come in, and we don't need to take your name, we don't need to ask you, what's your declaration. You just come in, grab an art kid, sit down, ask us for a coffee and just hang out and be yourself without the pressure of a system that has been oppressing us for way too long. Thank you.

## **Nneka**

I love all of that. All of that, here for all of that, beautiful. Thank you for that Susana. Who wants to jump in? The question is, how do you do it? How do you engage in peer support, Krystal.

## **Krystal**

Um, I don't know if- I see there's a few people here from Niagara, but I am relentless, like relentless in having these conversations and talking to the people that I need to talk to. So, that's the only way I can describe it, like relentless. I just don't, I won't stop until you really acknowledge what I'm saying. And then there's been kind of action. So I guess that's the how I would engage and how engage now. Again, a little bit more to feed in now that you know, now that I've opened my own business. But my passion is really about helping other folks develop that front line peer to peer work. I think, I'm grateful for 15 years experience in non-profit and, and also doing front line work, but but I'm super, super passionate about supporting other peer workers now. And and how can I be of use and also teach them not even teach them because

they probably already know, but give them permission to be relentless as well, because I think that that's been most effective for me.

## **Nneka**

And it's so important. It's so important. So, relentless, and the metaphorical bunch of keys that open additional doors, from Susana, love it. Donna, what about oh, Elizabeth? No, Donna, you, you? I thought you unmuted, what are you, what are your thoughts about, share with us how you do peer support.

## **Donna**

I tend to approach it from a little bit different, because of the fact that I am the manager. But I think Krystal will really relate to this, because I view it and I'm pushing more and more now when we talk about doing peer support across sectors. I think our sector is peer support. We need to be our own sector. And especially since COVID has started we've really seen some changes within our programming. Even though I'm the manager I do still do front line work because we're small, grassroots organization. So I do still do some and since COVID I'm doing a lot more because one of the ways that we've been delivering it is something that was mentioned earlier and that's, we've been doing a lot of peer support for the peer supporters in the community. Being there for them to have someone that they can come and talk to.

We do things a lot different here. Normally, we do healing circles and we're still doing some of those online, it's not quite the same when you're not sitting in person and that that energy, and that's the teaching of the elders. When you're sitting in that circle, everyone's equal, and the energy flows between everyone, and everyone gets their chance to speak, and the others learn to listen, which has worked really well for me, because I will say a lot of my staff here are women that have come through our program, and then went back to school, and then come back and did student placements and then ended up hired. So they know the whole piece of the program and how it works. Since COVID, some of what's changed, one of the things that we were seeing here in North Bay is a real increase with the opioid crisis and the homelessness. And so we started having issues with a lot of women that were staying in risky situations, because they didn't want to end up on the street. So we started, really enhanced our Outreach Program, and started going out and meeting the women, even if it was just on the sidewalk in front of their house. So that they had that continuous contact.

We also started going out to the encampments. And looking at at the safety of the individuals within those encampments. So that has really led us to doing some training, around offering peer support within the realm of homelessness, and having staff that have been there that understand it. And that can support that and help them with their plans into recovery. We also work with the criminal justice system. So we go into the jails, we help with discharge planning, things like that, making sure that peer gets the chance to make that connection, prior to actually leaving the institution.

We also have a partnership with probation and parole. And so they, they do referrals over to us so that we can support the individuals being released around getting connected with other services in the community. With find, helping them fix, finding housing, getting food, whatever those challenges are. So and I think it was Susana that had said earlier that peer support is really anything, whatever people need, you do whatever it is that they need you to do. That's, my definition of how we deliver peer support, is it depends on the individual that we're working with, because whatever it is they need, that's what we're there to do for them.

### **Nneka**

Okay. Love it. Love it. Love it. Love it. That's being centered, survivor-centered. Really, really. Riffa, share with us how you engage in it?

### **Riffa**

Yeah, okay. Well, first I, I, I want to grab that word that Krystal said, relentless. I really love that. I actually was going to use that word. And I was like, I think I think if anyone that has worked with me, in the past hears this, they're gonna be like, oh, yeah, that pest. Because, you know, I, I'm, you know, the way that I support a woman who needs supporting is I ensure that she gets what she needs, I don't care what has to happen. I don't care how many times I have to bother you. She's going to get the thing that she needs. You know, and so, yeah. The other thing is, oh, sorry, my mic still here. Okay. Yeah.

### **Nneka**

We can hear you.

## **Rifaa**

Okay, great. One of the things that I love most about doing peer support, at least as I had done it informally, is that I'm able to support a survivor in the way that they decide is most helpful to them. So I find it helpful not to go in with a preset idea of what it is that I do, within certain limits of course. I'm there for what the survivor needs. And often I'm supporting survivors who have language barriers, among other things, which means that there's just so many things that there isn't even a service that covers for example, searching for information and resources, placing a pizza order after a hard day navigating her situation, you know, emotional practical support in court, documenting the abuse, navigating a system that's not easy to do even when you speak English. You know, sometimes complete case management support, connecting with you know the survivor with other women in the community who can be supportive peers, because most agencies have very specific mandates and programs and are restricted by funding so it leaves so many unfilled gaps for survivors, especially the ones who face many barriers because of their intersecting identities. So even though peer support can be for everyone, it's especially needed for survivors from marginalized communities who face added barriers and challenges in accessing mainstream services. Just as an example, like psychotherapy is not, is not just not appealing to many communities, even when they try it, it's often done without their community's needs in mind. And so representation matters so much, because when people who are struggling can make sense of what they're experiencing, and they can see themselves and others who've survived and thrive, they can begin to see how it is that they can survive too. And sorry, I'm just gonna make a last point about this. And it's, I think, like, I want to be clear that it's not an us versus them thing when you know, in terms of like mainstream service providers, we frequently refer to, or help connect survivors to mainstream services. Sometimes this requires advocacy and breaking down some barriers. And service providers also refer survivors for peer support when they feel that this would be supportive to them, even alongside the services that, you know, they're already accessing.

## **Nneka**

I'm so glad you said that, I'm so glad about the 'it's not us versus them', because we're all in this sector, the GB, gender based violence sector, trying to put an end to gender based violence. So the siloing of the work, the siloing of the support makes no sense for anybody, especially the individuals or women that we're trying to support. So I really appreciate you raising that point Rifaa. Elizabeth, what about you? How do you engage?

## **Elizabeth**

I'm with all of you, you know, I really think that collaboration solves major problems that we have. And so I model, you know, the peer model is very collaborative. And for me, when we are in that advocacy role in our organizations, when I've worked in supportive housing, for example, it's been really important to work as that collective collaborative team with that flow of communication going between us because we are very flexible as peer supporters. And we have our values and principles that we adhere to, and then the same, you know, policies and procedures, that, and ethics and boundaries and confidentiality that other workers have. But really we focus on, you know, that peer voice advocacy, the involvement and inclusion and belonging of people so that organizations can really live their mission statements, and they can become development organizations through important things like what Susana does, and it's, it's those group peer programs, that means so much because that's where, you know, our peers are co-designing, they're co-developing, they're co-leading these wonderful social, educational, peer support groups, and the social aspect is so important for us, and our own empowerment, to rediscover, to rebuild, to, you know, to really feel to re-empower ourselves, and, and to grow in, you know, all the recovery pathways because we share a lot in those groups. And they're about everything, about budgeting, about dialectical behaviour therapy, about, you know, harm reduction, you know, spirituality, nutrition, you name it, we we really get into these in any housing environment.

So my experience has been in supportive housing, which is a complex sector. So I'm from complex sectors, I'm a victim of violence, I'm out of law involvement, I'm, I have two mental health diagnosis, I have experienced lengthy homelessness. And so, you know, for me, I like to come at it cross sectorally, and really bringing in, in all of my peer support work, you know, sharing all of these resources. And I don't have to be in a silo as a peer supporter, I can share information freely, among the best of the best so I can navigate services for my peers, you know, those who are in the encampments, like you said Krystal, with complex trauma. They don't know about Womenatthecentre and the membership and all of the benefits that that brings, and yet they are horribly victimized and there's real I try to bring in a real cross sectoral need of introductions because we don't want to leave anyone behind. And we want to offer everyone our best services and resources. And so I like to be knowledgeable and work in each sector.

So at Elizabeth Fry, you know, I was training peer support with the Exit Doors Here program was women trying to exit trying to exit trafficking and/or sex work and, and then really bringing in the idea that we need that employment, that development by each of our organizations. So we want each of our organizations to employ us, to develop us so that we can be independent. I could go on and on about this. But I really, I really think that for me, it's just a lot of advocacy work. And a lot of the fundamental, one of our fundamental pieces of peer support is listening. We listen to our peers, and they discover those core root issues that are really holding back recovery and wellness. And they keep oppression and harmful substance use, mental health, ongoing, that ongoing homelessness even when we're safely housed. So for me, it's all about

yeah, really listening to lived experience people. And and then taking action. Like you all said, it's it's we're very proactive people, we're problem solvers on the fly. And yeah.

## **Nneka**

So well said. So well said, and actually leads into my next question around actually this this question is twofold. One, I'm curious as to the expertise that you feel you've developed as a result of doing this work, whether it's working, supporting survivors of violence, those who've been harmed, or it may be expertise that you developed, that might help you survive individuals who have harmed? What particular expertise have you developed as a result of this peer support work that you've been engaging in? I'm going to start with Elizabeth. Your mute, your muted, or you don't want to go first?

## **Elizabeth**

I don't mind going first. Thanks. So yeah, just so what what expertise do we bring to survivors and aggressors of gender based violence? We fill in the gaps that complement other services. So for me, one of those gaps working in the as a peer researcher and the violence against women, women act team and Marco, it was really to bring in the mental health support, you know, being that ally, where people are waiting for services, or, you know, can we can we show and encourage and accompany, you know, from being in crisis, you know, to victim services and emergency departments, can peer supporters be there to accompany, to not lose our peers along the journey to accessing services? And, yeah, we support, you know, throughout that nonlinear journey of recovery, you know, we're just there every step of the way. For survivors, you know, to stay strong, and, and to maybe advocate for, you know, what, what do you really think the consequences might be if you if you take this step, as opposed to this step, you know, where, where might that path lead, what about this path? And so we listen again, but but we do, we do help our peer, get to that aha moment, where they're going to make decisions that are that are healthy and empowering for them, rather than doing what we know perpetually, which is to, you know, be in behaviours that sometimes are not serving us well. And, you know, peer supporters are supposed to be the future of behavioural health. So, for me, it's like to try to constantly work on behaviours away from victimization toward independence. And there's a lot of advocacy work along the way, and in many areas that it brings me into.

## **Nneka**

Beautiful. Thank you so much for that. Really, really, really impactful. Donna what about you? What expertise do you think you've developed as a result of the work that you've been doing?

**Donna**

I'll start by saying actually, our program this year just received the OPDI Lighthouse award for community builder. And I think that is probably the skill that we've developed, is being recognized in our community as one that that builds the collaborations. When I first started the program, it was, it was really people couldn't understand the advisory committee I brought together because I had representatives from all the women's shelters, from all the employment and training programs, from mental health and from the addictions programs within the community. Because we knew that those were the issues that were all going to come together. And a lot of them at that table had never ever worked together before, and they didn't even see the link between but that was 15 years ago, you would think things have changed, but it really hasn't changed that much. Over the last few years, we've seen a lot more of that happening, where different tables and I've I've actually been invited to tables to look at who else should be here. The mayor asked me about doing a mayor's roundtable. And who else should be at that table. So just trying to get that inclusive look. Because that's what I always speak about at those tables is that as long as we all keep working in silos, we're gonna have people falling through the gaps. If we can all work together, we can have a web so that no one falls through those gaps. From one, if you want to stay in your silo, fine, stay in your silo. But let's put a bridge so that they're not falling in the gap, they can actually walk to your silo, and get your services.

**Nneka**

Oh that is amazing.

**Donna**

One of our biggest things that we've developed over the last 15 years.

**Nneka**

And it's amazing. And again, I love the analogy of bridge building, to connect silos. Profoundly impactful. Susana, share with us some of the expertise that you've developed.

## **Susana**

So I have learned so much, even though my work, it's quite recent, I have learned so much about the world and about myself. And as we know, we are living in a world that people still doubt survivors, often, and for me, providing peer support to gender based violence survivors is essential, as it is well known, the system abandons us and fails us and sometimes makes us shut down in ways that we don't even reach out. And this work has really taught me how to ask for help. And that is something that I have learned that there's no shame in asking for help. At all times, every day, I'm asking for help. I'm always reaching out, like I said before, I'm always asking other people for their keys, so I can use them. And with those keys, I keep on helping others. And it is so important because we have been hush hush about these things for so long. And it's not our, out of our desire we have that silence has been imposed and forced on us, and able to provide the support we do, able to open these channels of communication. Makes, you know, 16 year old me who was raped, feel better that, you know, if it happens, because it keeps happening, those girls have the option of coming to talk to me and to all of you, instead of having to wait 20 years of their life to actually be able to say it out loud. Thank you.

## **Nneka**

Yes, yes. Yes, speaking to our 16 year old selves. Love it. Krystal over to you.

## **Krystal**

In terms of expertise, I think one one real strength that I learned from kind of doing this work and and working as peer is peer workers are really great at not pathologizing survivors. And I think sometimes my experience in in the nonprofit sector was that it was pathologizing. And so I think, you know, the formal, probably social worky term is strength based approach nowadays. But I think that's what it is. And, and I think I learned a lot about that I learned a lot about the resilience of humans, including myself, and that has been really helpful in terms of just, I guess, my expertise in adding a gender lens. So again, if anybody knows me, and I talk to anybody who does work in women's agency, I always say it's their gender lens on that. And an intersectional gender lens because I think you know, there's a lot of conversation surrounding peer work, but we're talking about gender based violence, we're talking about very, very specific type of peer work, and helping folks connect their symptoms, their, you know, their adaptations of their trauma to their oppression and violence as women and gender diverse individuals. And I think that is very, very, very specialized, and needs to be seen as

such. And I think we're just not there yet. And Canada is identifying that need for a gender lens. So I think I've also been able to develop some expertise in that and, and continue to learn, I think the last piece is everybody's talking about collaboration, collaboration is so important. The name of my company is actually collaborative community solutions, because it is like the foundation of what, what needs to work and not working against each other. But but in collaboration together.

## **Nneka**

So important. Yeah, that is so important Krystal. I'm really glad you raised that point around, how do we how do we surface the intersectional, right, the intersecting identities, and then the complexities that are at play because of gender based violence, right. And, and, for me, as you were speaking, what came up was the intersection of gender, and then race, right? Because black woman's experiences are radically different from, you know, white women, indigenous women's experiences are different. So looking at the complexity, and being an expert, at that complexity, means that we should really be paid a lot of money for this work. We're like the brain surgeons. Right? I don't know if brain surgeons earn a lot of money. But if they did. um, Rifaa over to you, what expertise do you think you've developed or enhanced?

## **Rifaa**

Yeah. Thank you Nneka for this question, and sorry, I've had to turn my camera off my internet is -

## **Nneka**

Don't apologize!

## **Rifaa**

unpredictable. So I think that peers, as peers with lived experience, we can and do teach professionals and academics in many capacities, a great deal through our knowledge and our expertise. And I think because peer support is a reciprocal process. I think peers come in with a great deal of expertise, both from our own lived experience and the experiences of those we support. Because a lot of what we know, we know because of the amazing people who reached out and trusted and invited us along on their journey. So I've found and connected with resources I would not have known existed. I've sat in courtrooms and witnessed what it's like through a survivor lens and analysis. You know, the women that we support, show us the gap. And they also show us what is possible, because women sometimes want you to advocate for things that you have your own doubts are even possible, and I was talking about

this with my program coordinator with this C6 counselling program just a few days ago. You know, sometimes they're asking for something and because of our knowledge of the system, we're like, oh, I don't know if you're gonna be able to manage to do that, you know, but but you do the thing anyway, and you help reduce some of the barriers and they succeed. And so the way I see it is, if I don't have certain barriers, I can try and do anything I want. Some survivors are way more limited in this way. So I see our role is helping to reduce some of those barriers so that women are able to fight for the things that they want, however impossible, they might seem, you know, like systemically. And I think what one area that we should start seeing peer based support used more is in the area of working with aggressors, having peer mentors, that you can reach out to when you're thinking of being harmful or questioning your behaviour or wanting to change or just need support from someone who was once where you are because most of the programming right now is only funded for aggressors who are court mandated to take them which means that you have to be violent enough and with enough evidence to have been charged and convicted before you can get help to change. So I'm really hoping to see a lot more you know, aggressors who have overcome some of their own challenges, be able to be in positions of peer support to others who are you know, struggling with some of the same things.

### **Nneka**

That is such a beautiful point and it's part of the work that we are doing with our transformative accountability and justice initiative to get, you know, men, predominantly men who have experienced and caused harm, to step up and support and be peer supporters. And not to further the harm, but to unlearn. But just to just to be very clear. I am really, really conscious of the time and I want us to save, leave, leave aside a little bit of time to get questions from our listeners. So my last question is going to.

### **Donna**

Just before you move on can I just leave a little drop of hope here,

### **Nneka**

Please do.

### **Donna**

around what you were just speaking to?

**Nneka**

Absolutely. Please do.

**Donna**

Our True Self/Debwewendizwin program has been running for 15 years, my teachings through the Indigenous culture, say that as women, it's our responsibility to take care of community. So coming into this, I always have that understanding that somebody needs to be supporting the men that are abusing, because it doesn't matter how many women we work with. If no one's working with the men, they're going to go find another woman. Eight years ago, we hired our first male peer support worker, within our program, and we actually started working with the offenders. That was kind of our slogan is something you just said, anything we learn, we can unlearn. And that's how we've used the men to actually help us design the program, and they do the circles and do the work. So we've been doing that now for eight years. And we're definitely seeing a difference. So there is there is hope out there. It's really hard to find funding. I do bet peace funding, because of exactly what Rifaa said, the the main funding that's out there is to work with women. And you can't bring the men in. And so it's finding that getting the ministries to look at how do we fund to start working with men and helping the men heal? Because the other thing we know is that abusers have been abused. So let's let's help them on their healing journey. And I think that's one of the ways that's going to make a big impact on gender violence.

**Nneka**

Absolutely spot on. Absolutely spot on completely on board with that. I think we should get together and do a joint application for a program. So all of us sign on. Um, I have my last question, and it's going to be a quick, quick, quick, quick go round, is really interested in what steps you think need to be taken to embed peer support more in various community agencies. If you could name one or two things that you think we could be doing, organizations could be doing to actually embed peer support in their work, Susana? Start with you,

**Susana**

I can speak from what I'm personally doing. I want to say that I am definitely on Krystal's team relentless. And as Elizabeth said, from the very beginning, we as peer support workers are leaders. So I am on the board of the directors of the North York Womens Centre. I am on the member advisory committee of women arts. And I believe the best way of embedding peer support in community agencies is to help persons like us with lived experience in leadership positions. And that is what I feel and what I am actually witnessing. That is the next evolution in peer support having more organizations that are such as this one, WomenatthecentrE that are run entirely for and by people with lived experience. Because this is what translates in genuine peer support, nothing else. And I strongly believe that and to take from a model of the of the disability community, nothing about us without us. Thank you.

### **Nneka**

Mic drop, beautiful. Rifaa. Steps to take to embed.

### **Rifaa**

Yes, I I really love what Susana just said. I think advocating for the inclusion of voices of those with lived experience and especially from under-served communities, at every table where decisions are going to be made about us and what we need. I think that is really important and advocating for the services that either don't exist or don't exist in a sustainable and fair way. Like for example, you know, peer support is done. You know, many communities or agencies and agencies are recognizing the need for that, you know, and and supporting that but oftentimes it's continued continues to be done and as seen as as volunteer work for example, right, and not properly compensated and recognized and supported and, and trained for and all of those things. So I think, you know, and the other thing is, is advocating for culturally relevant services, as well, because I think that a lot of services do not take into consideration the needs of under served communities and without consultation with those communities as well.

### **Nneka**

Agreed, agreed, agreed. Elizabeth, you're your mute. unmuted. So off you go, your turn.

### **Elizabeth**

I am well, that's all, I'll share some practical steps. At Mentor/Mentee Canada, there's peer support training for peers, it begins again on November 17. All of your clients, all peers are

welcome. It's ongoing. It's, it's great. And there's peer support training for staff so that staff can understand even after 30 years in the mental health sector, what peer support is and why and what the benefits are, and why it works, why we can change what we've been doing for this whole time and have real recovery happen with peer support, onboarding. So I provide peer support, supervision, training, peer support onboarding services, and there's just there's just, it's, those are those are standardized practices that have been developed in the US, in the UK, they're available to share with other organizations and, and just, you know, make sure that there's team buy in to help teams really understand, you know, what we're all doing collectively here, to change system needs. And to drive peer support through that lived experience, voice and governance all the way down, like was said, you know, peer support toolkits, you know, toolkits for organizations, or something that mentor mentee Canada provides. So it's all about, you know, increasing the peer movement, and, and just trying something new and letting us take the lead now, because it's being it's happening in the youth sector, very successfully. Youth are our leaders of the future. And the mental health sector, let's learn from them. And let's, let's go to one another's conferences, because there's so much knowledge to share.

## **Nneka**

Brilliant, brilliant, Elizabeth, thank you, Donna?

## **Donna**

Steps I take to embed. Doing that training with other organizations, we do a lot of that within our community, and presenting the exactly what peer support is, and what the value of it is. The other thing that I often bring up is the fear of peer drift. I don't know if you've ever heard that expression. But peer drift is what happens when peer support workers start working with insight organizations that don't understand what peer support is. And they they try to get them doing things that really isn't peer support. So we do a lot of education around that piece as well. And try very hard to do that with the upper management of the organizations, frontline usually understands it fine. It's the upper management that really needs to raise their awareness around what peer support is, and how to support peer supporters. The other thing that I think is, is really vital, and especially because we're seeing peer support recognized across a lot more sectors, and within a lot of different organisations is ensuring that those peer support workers are connected with their supports. So making sure that they're connected with a peer initiative, where they can keep turning back to those values and the way that they should be delivering service and have that reinforced so one of the I seen someone earlier had put a thing up there for support house. They offer some great tools for that and even tools for organizations, to send out to the HR department around how to post a position you know, how to hold an interview, what the the roles and responsibilities should be. So I think that's another

really important part of educating our community on what peer support is, and the value of it is really getting them to understand that no, it's not you're not hiring somebody just to take them for a walk or to go to the grocery shopping. That's not peer support.

## **Nneka**

Good. Excellent Point. Excellent. Krystal, you have the last say on this question.

## **Krystal**

Sure. Um, so I I am a really big fan of policies. And so I really think kind of a top down place, there really should be policies that are reflective of that culture shift to include peer support. I think that agencies need to look at their education requirements and see experts as experts without necessarily formal education. And I think when that doesn't happen throughout the entire agency, and maybe only gets developed through a peer support position, we run the risk of keeping a peer supporter in that role indefinitely, and they can't further develop. And so I think there's just some real kind of top down realignment that could be done to Donna's point around like, it's a culture piece. It isn't simply hiring a peer worker, if there's all kinds of layers that really need to be considered for, for an agency, I think, to be a safe agency, for a survivor to work in long term. And so I think, you know, having survivor consultants, the other piece is not a consultant, as survivors are often tokenized in terms of the lens that they bring in agencies. And so it isn't about having one survivor one token survivor, but again, embedding a culture of supporting peer led, and recognizing it as expertise. So then the other pieces, you, you pay us experts, as experts don't ask people to come to the table for, for not an expert wage, if you're looking for the expertise.

## **Nneka**

Love it love it. I talk about it in terms of don't give us a cup or a pen for speaking. We are experts and should be compensated as such. I am so amazed. And I knew this was going to be a fantastic conversation. I want to thank each and every one of you for what you've brought today. Before we go, I want to open it up to the participants to see if anybody has any specific questions to our panelists or any general questions to the group. So Sheryl, who was monitoring the the q&a was it you?

## **Sheryl**

Yeah, I Katie and I we're here. But I'll ask the first question.

**Nneka**

Excellent.

**Sheryl**

So the first one that we have here was, is it difficult to set boundaries? How do you protect your own mental health as a peer support worker?

**Nneka**

Who wants to take that, Elizabeth?

**Elizabeth**

Again, it comes back to that great training. Mine was through the Ontario Peer Development Initiative. And it's all about us learning self care, self responsibility, self awareness, self supports, right, Donna? It's, it's what we model. And so that takes care of ourselves. Our boundaries are something that are a part of our training to be and best practices that have been developed over time, at support house, by peer supporters themselves, how to protect our boundaries and our peers boundaries, so that they're safe, we're safe, our organizations are safe. So again, it's that solid, formal training. You don't have to pay an arm and a leg for it. It's so tangible.

**Nneka**

Brilliant. Anyone else want to jump in? Or should we go to the next question?

**Donna**

I just wanted to say that every time I hire peers here, it is difficult. I know, that was the first part of the question. Are our boundaries difficult? Yes, they are. And they're difficult, I think for just about anybody that goes into peer work. And one of the things that we do here regularly is we'll

actually get together as a team. And we'll talk about boundaries or any challenges that any of the staff are having with boundaries, or with helping someone they're working with in setting their boundaries. We also deliver workshops, online and in person to the women that come through our program around boundaries and how important they are and how to set them. And we do it many times a year because it is difficult for everyone.

## **Nneka**

Love that love that. Rifaa?

## **Rifaa**

Yeah, actually, I was just going to touch on probably some of the same things that Donna said, and Elizabeth, it absolutely is hard. And I think one of the reasons it's also so challenging is because we eventually become in these like helping relationships but we have not had prior training in these areas. And we don't have adequate support and debriefing support and mentorship in this area. So I think those are things that are absolutely important to protect peer supporters and also to protect, you know, the survivors that we're working with as well. Because what if we're not managing our own self care very well in our own boundaries very well, that that's going to also impact the people that we're working with. So yeah,

## **Nneka**

Excellent.

## **Krystal**

I'll just share, sorry, Nneka, beyond kind of, I think boundaries are super important but I also want to recognise the nervous system. Caring for your nervous system. So we talk about mental health. But when you've experienced violence, your nervous system is rewired. And we can teach a lot about boundaries but it's really hard to connect without kind of navigating those body experiences, too. And so it is that holistic care that I think so many folks were talking about, for ourselves and others that that are super important.

## **Susana**

Honestly, I take I take naps, I take naps, lots of naps, because all of my peer support is very defining time. So I always take like an hour two hour nap before I know, I have to be in the mind space for peer support. And something else that I've been doing, than actually my world famous nap is a lot of training, a lot of training, I go to a lot of organizations that have free psycho-educational training, free facilitation, and I learned how to become a better facilitator, how to be a better peer support. And through that, I meet a lot of other peer support workers and somebody had had mentioned earlier and I wanted to reference it, peer support workers support peer support workers in a way that is so uplifting and so magical. And that's precisely the feeling I want spread all over the world, because we will get out of this hole we're in if we keep on doing this.

### **Nneka**

Powerful hope. I love it. Thank you all. Sheryl. Next question.

### **Sheryl**

Yeah. So just being mindful of the time I see that a lot of the questions are pretty much just everybody being inspired and being and wanting to know, how can they get involved? You know, how, how can we best support other peer supporters? Yeah, just how can they get involved? Where are the first steps to take?

### **Nneka**

I can I can say that the first step is look at the bios of all of these incredible panelists. Because these people are living proof of the work, they are doing the work, which is why we brought them on, WomenatthecentrE is also another space. I think what we can do is work with the team afterwards to send everybody, if the panelists are in agreement, send everybody contact information to your organizations so the folks can can reach out to you directly. And then we're also going to put this on our website, as well as the recording. So part of that recording will have the bios and contact information for all the panelists. So please reach out in that way.

It's 12:30, and I am a stickler for respecting people's time. I think we have had yet another spectacular conversation with some spectacular panelists. And I knew that this was going to be such a beautiful conversation, because we're talking about something that is so near, and so dear to all our hearts, as survivors.

I want to thank everybody I want to thank Donna, Elizabeth, Rifaa, Krystal, and Susana, for showing up today and giving so generously of your knowledge, your experience and your expertise. I want to thank my team. I want to thank Sheryl and Katie our phenomenal placement students who did this session, coordinated this so amazingly, so confidently, nothing to worry about at all. I told you, there wasn't anything. Well done. And I also want to thank the staff, Michelle Rolfe, Alison Morrison and Kelsy Dundas, for bringing all of us together. And to all of you who joined us this afternoon. We're sending you out. We're sending you back out with love and light, and in sisterhood, and hoping that all of you have a wonderful rest of your week. And stay tuned for our next WE webinar that's coming up very, very shortly. Thank you, everyone. Take care.