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How Peer Specialists Can Enhance a Library's Services

by Sine Rofofsky

Abstract

Peer Specialists work with others with lived experiences similar to themselves. Drawing on experiences in academic, public, school, and special libraries, this article explores how skills and training of a peer specialist can enhance the services offered by a library and the work of any library staff member.

Keywords

Library and information science, psychiatric health, mental health

Biography

Sine Rofofsky earned his PhD, Education Specialist degree, a Master of Education, a Master of Library Science, and a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies in public history. He is a provisionally certified peer specialist in New York, a public librarian and a K-12 school media specialist. He is currently employed at SUNY Schenectady Community College.

Introduction

While earning my New York Certified Peer Specialist – Provisional (NYCPS-P) certificate from the Academy of Peer Services (APS) in 2022, I realized how much of the knowledge I was gaining would have helped me when working in libraries beginning in 1997. Whether in an academic, public, school, or special library, working a service desk, one-on-one, in single session or multi-session events, what I learned from the APS would have benefited me so much. I also noticed that some of my library training and experience helped me to grasp more quickly some of the concepts necessary to become an NYCPS-P. While there are several libraries that offer peer specialist services, it is limited and seeing a growth in this would only benefit libraries, library staff, and the patrons served.

Libraries have become so much more than just buildings with books and other items available to borrow, both in physical and digital formats. There are so many more supports being offered in libraries such as social workers and other community support people. Giesler (2021) noted that since 1990 when the American Library Association published Policy 61, “the link between library patrons and social services has taken a variety of forms, all designed to address the ALA’s recommendations to remove barriers to accessing services ... and to train staff about the needs of vulnerable individuals with whom they come into contact” (p. 402). Based on this and other research and experiences shared, why not a peer

specialist who can help on an equal level rather than a professional level, to help those coming for all types of needs?

Public libraries, for example, have begun integrating social workers into their offerings of services. Academic libraries have begun integrating with tutoring services, academic computer support services, learning centers, and more. Why not add a peer specialist who is also available, whether identified as one, or just available to help those in need, if necessary, through a warm hand-off? School librarians can refer students to a school-based team, if necessary; librarians encounter patrons who come with questions or needs or are in situations that raise stress. Having someone available who is trained to work with these situations and to know when other services are needed is so important and helpful to treating all who come to the library.

Peer specialists are trained to help mental health consumers at their level of need in so many different areas and skills, why not use this to the advantage of the library to serve all information needs? Peer specialists can reach many who come, both those with identified or acknowledged diagnoses, and those who might not be diagnosed or might not want to admit that they need specialized help. The peer specialist does not always self-identify, but they are able to work with others on their level, with empathy, to guide and support them, and to refer them to others as necessary with a warm hand-off, not a cold send-off, such as to a librarian for a reference question once it has been identified and a relationship has been established so that trust can be transferred over.

Since becoming a provisionally certified peer specialist, I have recognized in myself a change in how I deal with patrons who are stressed or are labelled 'problem patrons.' This change has been an eye-opener for me, and I notice colleagues warm-passing me problem patrons as well, and also these patrons seeking me over others when I'm in the library. This led me to want to explore this overlap and figure out why this is happening, and if it can be replicated more widely than places such as the DC Public Library, San Francisco Public Library, Denver Public Library, Kalamazoo Public Library (Badalamenti, 2019) and King County Library System (Rosenblum, 2022).

Holding two degrees in Library Science from Queens College (CUNY) as well as permanent certification from New York State as a School Media Specialist (Library) and Public Librarian, I was drawn to find these parallels and further explore the intersections for both support / clerical staff and professional librarians (referred to collectively as library staff). This analysis will also draw on personal experiences and knowledge, as well as current and past discussions with library staff colleagues and peers.

Peer Specialist Background

According to Mental Health America (2023):

In behavioral health, **a peer is usually used to refer to someone with a psychiatric disorder and/or addiction.** In that narrow context two people living with those conditions are peers, but in reality most people are far more specific about whom they would rely on for **peer support. Trust and compatibility are extremely important factors.**

Peer support is the “process of giving and receiving encouragement and assistance to achieve long-term recovery.” Peer supports “offer emotional support, share knowledge, teach skills, provide practical assistance, connect people with resources, opportunities, communities of support and other people” (Mead, 2003; Solomon, 2004). In behavioral health, peers offer their unique lived experience with mental health conditions to provide support focused on advocacy, education, mentoring, and motivation.

Synonyms for the term peer supporter include peer specialist, community support, consumer, client, and more. For the purposes of this analysis, the terms will be used interchangeably.

There are several types of peer specialists, and this analysis focuses specifically on those working in the mental health field and certified by an organization such as the New York Academy of Peer Specialists. In New York State, to become a Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) one can complete coursework and other requirements through the New York Academy of Peer Specialists. At least 40 other states have similar licensing requirements, and there is a push for national standards (Balogun-Mwangi, Rogers, Maru, & Magee, 2019; National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare, n.d.).

According to the Copeland Center for Wellness and Recovery (2020):

A peer specialist:

1. Engages peers in collaborative and caring relationship
2. Provides support: validating experiences and feelings; explores meaningful community roles and conveys hope of recovery
3. Shares the lived experience of wellness and recovery in a connecting and relatable way
4. Personalizes peer support recognizing multiple paths to wellness, respecting each other's unique strengths, interests and culture perspectives

5. Supports recovery planning proposing strategies, offering support, information and resources for an individual to achieve their own desired tasks and goals
6. Links to resources, services and supports when desired by an individual
7. Provides information about skills related to health, wellness and recovery based on an individual's interest and goals
8. Supports people define, identify and manage crises
9. Values respectful, person-centered and mutually supportive communication
10. Supports collaboration and teamwork
11. Promotes leadership and advocacy
12. Promotes one's own growth and development by seeking continued education, mentoring and supportive supervision.

Library Staff Background

According to the American Library Association (2023):

Librarians work in a variety of settings including museums, hospitals, businesses, public libraries, colleges, universities, and schools. ... Librarians work with people of all ages, connecting them to information, learning and the community. ...

... Librarians are no longer the only professionals working in libraries. ... Youth workers, security officers, ... school liaisons, social workers, ... are a few of the unique positions employed in libraries.

Besides addressing librarians and other similar professionals, this analysis will look at all who work in libraries, including paraprofessionals, clerical workers, circulation staff, and others.

Patrons “expect the same level of service for all tasks, even those that may not be directly related to library resources and services” (Hein, 2006, 39). Indeed [patrons] often do not see the divisions or boundaries between technical questions and library resources and services as a reference librarian might.” Complicating matters is the fact that many library users, including students, do not differentiate between or even concern themselves with the educational background of the people staffing library service desks. As a consequence, “library users tend to call anyone who works in a library ‘a librarian’” (American Library Association, 2006, 1).

A recent study conducted at the University of Rochester reinforces this idea. According to Foster and Gibbons (2007), “students rarely make distinctions between the types of staff needed in the library” (25); ... To students, we are all librarians. (Sult & Evangeliste, 2009, pp. 249-250).

While “[T]here is a common misconception that any person who works in a library is a librarian There are very distinct roles, qualifications and career paths” (Bramler-Moore, 2012, p. 22). As a library worker, I recognize this difference. However, for the purpose of this analysis all workers in libraries, whether librarians, paraprofessionals, clerical staff or other, will be considered.

The American Library Association’s (2006) Library Bill of Rights refers to libraries rather than specific persons employed in such institutions:

The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and the following basic policies should guide their services.

- I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
- II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
- III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
- IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgement of free expression and free access to ideas.
- V. A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.
- VI. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve shall make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.
- VII. All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Libraries shall advocate for, educate about, and protect people’s privacy, safeguarding all library use data, including personally identifiable information.

Literature Review

Examining the Copeland Center for Wellness and Recovery's (2020) definition of a peer specialist, one can transition these points to library staff:

1. Library staff engages patrons in collaborative and caring relationships, working together to find information and knowledge to answer questions of all types. Specifically, as Douglas Zweizig (1976) notes, the effective library staff takes the user's perspective by "looking at how our services fit into the life of the user" (Sheldrick Rose et al. 2019, p. 68). For reference interactions in particular, but useful in most situations, the patron has "an information need that arises in the context of the user's day-to-day-life" often requiring "a structured conversation that links the user's world to our information systems in a way that makes sense to the user" (Sheldrick Rose et al., p. 265).
2. Library staff provides support, including when possible validating experiences and feelings, exploring resources for knowledge and information, and conveys hope of finding the desired answer or outcome.
3. Library staff shares, when possible, the lived experience of seeking, finding, and using knowledge and information in a connecting and relatable way.
4. Library staff personalizes each interaction with each patron, recognizing multiple paths to knowledge and information acquisition, respecting each patron's unique strengths, interests and culture perspectives. As Sheldrick Rose et al. (2019) noted, "The situations in which people need information are diverse and numerous ... In each situation, the gaps in the user's understanding – that is, what the person wants to know – differ from one individual to the next and can't be predicted from the situation alone" (p. 265).
5. Library staff supports knowledge acquisition through proposing strategies, offering support, and proposing information and resources for an individual to achieve their own desired level of knowledge and information. Through effective questioning, active listening, and following up, library staff is best able to achieve this goal (Sheldrick Rose et al., 2019).

6. Library staff links the patron to resources, services, and/or supports as indicated by the patron to answer their specific information or knowledge need.
7. Library staff provides information about skills related to knowledge and/or information acquisition based on the patron's interests and goals.
8. Library staff supports patrons in defining, identifying, and managing information or knowledge needs and resources to fill these needs.
9. Library staff values respectful, person-centered and mutually supportive communication.
10. Library staff supports collaboration and teamwork with the patron when possible, and with fellow library staff both in the institution and beyond.
11. Library staff promotes advocacy, both by the patron and for the patron in the moment and beyond, such as equal access to materials and resources. Library staff advocate through "influenc[ing] decision makers and other community members and promot[ing] significant initiatives and ideas" (Benjes-Small & Miller, 2017).
12. Library staff promotes their own growth and development by seeking continuing education, both formal and informal, offering mentoring and when appropriate supportive supervision. As discussed by Massis (2004), "A comprehensive training program for library staff should directly address priorities to employ inventive methods to achieve an integrated program of education and training, to train librarians to improve customer's capability of using information successfully" (p. 19). Massis went on to note that "Successfully serving library customers requires a program of lifelong learning to acquire and maintain a wide range of skills. These skills must support librarians in successfully assisting library users and other library staff in a coherent and knowledgeable manner" (p. 20). Both peer specialists and librarians strive to continue their education to stay abreast of new techniques and practices, while also expanding their own personal toolbox to assist others.

Examining the American Library Association's (2016) Library Bill of Rights' definition of library user rights, one can draw direct parallels to the role of a peer specialist as well.

- I. Peer specialists offer information and support for the interest, information and enlightenment of all their peers, not censoring information or support because of the origin, background, views, or other factors of those contributing to their creation, unless deemed detrimental, harmful or triggering to the peer or consumer.

- II. Peer specialists provide information, material, and support presenting all points of view on an issue to a peer; again only withholding that which is deemed detrimental, harmful, triggering or misinforming to the peer.
- III. Peer specialists challenge censorship and promote advocacy for and by the peers they serve, particularly in relation to providing information and support.
- IV. Peer specialists should cooperate with all peers they serve and groups concerned with resisting abridgement of the peers' free access to information, advocating for peers' free (not necessarily monetarily) access to information and support as needed.
- V. A person's right to access a peer specialist should not be denied or abridged, unless it is a hardship for the peer specialist as identified in the National Association of Peer Supporter's (NAPS) *National Practice Guidelines for Peer Specialists and Supervisors* (2019).
- VI. Peer specialists, unless otherwise indicated in the NAPS guidelines, should make their services available to the peers they serve on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of the peer.
- VII. Peer specialists should respect the right to privacy and confidentiality in the use of a peer specialist for assistance. Peer specialists should advocate for, educate about, and protect a peer's privacy, safeguarding all use including personally identifiable information.

Just as librarians “connect people to information, learning and the community” (ALA, 2006), and “emphasise the need for good communication and customer service skills” (Bramley-Moore, 2012, p. 23), so, too, do peer specialists “share knowledge, teach skills, provide practical assistance, connect people with resources, opportunities, community of support, and other people” (MHA, 2023). This overlap of the very essence of both roles – to connect people to resources through effective communication – is the focus of this analysis. While the resources may differ, and the types of connections may differ, the true essence of the positions is the same.

Analysis

Using the National Association of Peer Supporter's (2019) core values of a peer specialist as a guide, along with personal experience and knowledge, literature, and formal and informal discussions with fellow practitioners in both fields, parallels will be drawn and expanded upon between the roles of peer specialist and library staff.

Just as peer support is voluntary to access and use, so, too, are library services. It is a choice to ask for help and then to accept and use the help that is offered, whether as a mental health consumer (peer) or a library patron. It is not mandatory in either the peer support or the library setting for the peer or patron to follow the guidance provided or to use the knowledge shared. A peer specialist may draw more on personal experience, and a library staff may draw more on knowledge gained through exposure to resources, yet they both share their knowledge with those seeking assistance. As Stefancic et al (2019) reported in their study of the concept of 'shared experience' with peer specialists, "Peer specialists rarely reported explicitly sharing experiences related to mental health with clients, but described how it was nevertheless ever-present through the unique ways it shaped features of their practice (e.g., empathy, patience, consistency, listening, unstructured time, and a client-centered approach)" (p. 907).

Neither a peer specialist nor library staff force or coerce others to use a service or resource, whether in offering such or offering a referral to such. It is the individual's own decision as to whether or not the service or resource will be utilized. Offering options and assisting in making informed decisions is to be encouraged of both peers and patrons. If a resource or service is turned down, it is important to try to offer options, and if possible, to gain an understanding of why the option was turned down in order to better offer other suggestions.

Those seeking help or assistance, whether from a peer specialist or a library staff, have the right to refuse to interact at any point. While this theoretically should be reciprocal in all situations, solo library staff or those working alone in a library may be limited on when they can refuse or leave an interaction. If needing to leave, whether peer specialist or library staff, it is best to refer the individual to others to provide assistance. While a peer specialist has "the right to choose not to work with individuals with a particular background if the peer supporter's personal issues or lack of expertise could interfere with the ability to provide effective support to these individuals," (NAPS 2019), for a librarian this can be more difficult as "a person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views" (ALA, 2006). If there are other colleagues available for the library staff to make a referral, it is easier to handle such situations. For a solo library staff member this can be more difficult, and brainstorming ways to handle such situations, as well as any transfer situation, is something that should be done. Identifying resources to use in such situations, ahead of time, whether working alone or with colleagues, as a peer specialist or library staff, can make it easier to deal in the moment when such situations arise.

Working to help others in search of assistance in any setting requires one to be hopeful that the issue(s) leading to this request can be addressed successfully. There are different levels of hopefulness to share, and for library staff this varies much more than for the peer specialist, based on the individual situation and the setting and other factors. While library staff rarely get so involved as to share

stories and personal experiences, it can be helpful for a peer or patron to hear how this is hard for the peer specialist or library staff as well. Empathetic language can help build a bond and let the peer or patron know they are not alone in their struggles and suffering. Showing one is human and can make mistakes also helps in this – acknowledging mistakes and fixing them – and sharing experience rather than trying to hide it – can help build a bond for both a peer specialist and a library staff member.

Just as peer specialists “model recovery behaviors at work and act as ambassadors of recovery in all aspects of their work,” (NAPS, 2019), so too do library staff model library skills, library etiquette, and other behaviors. Library staff, too, work to advocate for library use and information literacy integration as appropriate in all aspects of their work. Encouraging others to use services offered, whether as a peer specialist or a library staff, is of utmost importance as it is to those who work in the field who have the most to share about the usefulness of their services. Whether actively promoting, or doing one’s regular work, a peer specialist and library staff by their regular actions are ambassadors of their profession.

A peer specialist and library staff are both open-minded. Several parts of the Library Bill of Rights tie directly to this concept. Both peer specialists and library staff do not exclude information or resources “because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation” (ALA, 2006). The Library Bill of Rights also indicates “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.” Library staff are expected to accept and embrace diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) and right to knowledge without judgment, just as peer specialists “do not evaluate or assess others” (NAPS, 2019).

A peer specialist and library staff strive to serve all equally and equitably, whether differing by learning style, gender, age, ability, nationality, or any other trait. Just as peer specialists “embrace differences of those they support as potential learning opportunities” (NAPS, 2019), so, too, should library staff. Both peer specialists and library staff can and should strive to learn from each interaction with a peer or patron with differences from their own to learn new skills and ideas to help them better serve the current and future people they work with.

Just as peer specialists “respect an individual’s right to choose the pathways to recovery individuals believe will work best for them” (NAPS, 2019), so, too, should library staff respect the patron’s right to choose the resource or information the patron believes will work best for them. Both peer specialists and library staff should offer options, when possible, to enable the peer or patron to make a choice.

Both a peer specialist and library staff “connect with others where and as they are” (NAPS, 2019). Whether physically or otherwise, connecting with a peer or patron

where they are at is of utmost importance. A peer specialist and library staff work with their audiences where they are at physically, mentally, and anywhere else on their path to knowledge or information. Whether going to meet a peer in the community to assist them or using roaming reference or site visits to meet patrons, peer specialists and library staff not only wait for people to come to them. Peer specialists might have a caseload of specific peers to go to on a set schedule. Library staff may have both scheduled site visits and routes and also be able to roam to be visible for those needing ‘moment-of’ help and to spot those in need of help who might not know how to or want to ask for help. In either case, effective peer specialists and library staff do not simply wait for peers or patrons to come to them, they also go out to where the people are, including virtual, phone, and in-person communications.

Going where the person is, whether peer or patron, might also include offering various means of connection – in-person, virtual, voice-based, text-based, video or voice or typing, synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (such as email), differing languages, etc. Offering various methods of contact enables the peer or patron the ability to choose their preferred method and the opportunity to meet them in their preferred setting. Meeting the person where they are also includes where in their road, whether to recovery, knowledge gathering, or life, they are. Paying attention to cues and respecting the stage the peer or patron is at, shows caring and understanding, and helps ensure the information, knowledge, and/or resources presented is at the level the recipient needs at that particular moment. This can be the language used, the terminology or jargon, speed, depth, detail, and more.

Neither peer specialists nor library staff “evaluate or assess others” (NAPS, 2019). When offering services to others, whether peer or patron, the person’s “right to use [a library] should not be denied or abridge because of origin, age, background, or views” (ALA, 2006). Information and resources provided, whether to peer or patron, “should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval” (ALA). Finally, “materials [or knowledge] should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or view of those contributing to their creation” (ALA). For both a peer specialist and library staff, there should be no judging of others, all are equally deserving of services regardless of situation or topic, unless, as discussed previously, it would cause harm to the peer specialist or offer misinformation to either peer or patron. Offering assistance of any type includes offering option, when possible, without judging or filtering beforehand so the peer or patron can choose the right option for themselves.

Empathy is an important trait when building a relationship, whether as a peer specialist or library staff. Empathy, feeling *with* the person and not just *for* the person, as in sympathy, is an important distinction to learn. One of the biggest things I learned to be effective as a librarian, was how to perform an effective reference interview, whether at the reference desk, a service desk, or anywhere I was asked a question of any type. Part of this included “practice[ing] effective

listening skills that are non-judgmental” (NAPS, 2019). As part of my peer specialist training, I also learned to actively listen, not just hear, to be non-judgmental, and to reflect, clarify, summarize, and use appropriate body language. As Hriko et al (2004) noted, “Many facts of reference service [online] go beyond communication skills. Open questioning, paraphrasing, and clarification of questions helps ensure an understanding of the information need and create customer confidence. Good listening skills – the ability to sense underlying concerns, emotional overtones, and other unstated or unclear factors” (p. 12). These skills not only help me to ensure I am understanding what is being said, but also to demonstrate to the peer or patron that I am interested in what they are asking about. As Ahmed et al (2012) found regarding mental health patients and professionals, fostering a truly collaborative relationship “requires a commitment on the part of the mental health provider to listen, to truly listen and attend to the other person’s perspective and expressed needs, not relying solely on personal and past experience but on what the other person is truly saying about their own personal situation. and attend to the patient’s perspective and expressed needs” (p. 30), so, too, does library staff need to do so.

Both a peer specialist and library staff strive to “understand that even though others may share similar life experiences, the range of responses may vary considerably” (NAPS, 2019). This includes remembering that no two members of any culture or community are the same, and that one should not prejudge based on experiences with others who share traits. Just because you have encountered one person with a specific trait does not mean everyone else sharing that trait is the same.

A peer specialist and library staff also aim to be respectful. As NAPS (2019) indicates for a peer specialist, so too should library staff use as their goals in being respectful:

- Peer supporters embrace the diversity of culture and thought as a means of personal growth for those they support and themselves.
- Peer supporters encourage others to explore how differences can contribute to their lives and the lives of those around them.
- Peer supporters practice patience, kindness, warmth, and dignity with the people they support.
- Peer supporters treat each person they encounter with dignity and see them as worthy of all basic human rights.
- Peer supporters embrace the full range of cultural experiences, strengths, and approaches to recovery [and information / knowledge seeking] for those they support and themselves.

Just as library staff do not deny services or resources to others, and offer equal access without bias, so do peer specialists. As well, all persons served, whether patron or peer, “regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality” (ALA, 2006). Respecting privacy and confidentiality is an important part of respect and building good working relationships, whether a peer specialist or library staff.

A peer specialist and library staff both facilitate change. Just as library staff “should advocate for, educate about, and protect people’s privacy” (ALA, 2006), “cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgement of free expression and free access to ideas” (ALA), and “challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment” (ALA), striving to ensure equal access and avoid injustices, so should a peer specialist. While the library staff’s facilitation of change is focused more on access to information and knowledge of all types and in all methods, a peer specialist facilitates change to raise equality and equity for the peers they support. In both situations, the peer specialist and library staff:

- ... recognize injustices peers [and patrons] face in all contexts, act as advocates, and facilitate change where appropriate
- ... strive to understand how injustices may affect people
- ... encourage, coach and inspire those they support to challenge and overcome injustices
- ... use language that is supportive, encouraging, inspiring, motivating and respectful
- ... recognize injustices peers [and patrons] face in all contexts and act as advocates and facilitate change where appropriate. (NPS, 2019).

A peer specialist and library staff each identify where injustices can and do occur and strive to facilitate change to remove these injustices, preferably before they happen.

A peer specialist, just like library staff, is honest and direct, while being respectful. Both engage in “candid honest discussion” (NAPS, 2019) while exercising “compassion and caring” (NAPS). Just as a peer specialist “engage[s] when desired by those they support, in candid, honest discussions about stigma, abuse, oppression, crises or safety” (NAPS), so do library staff engage in candid, honest discussions about any topic or question brought to them, while maintaining respect of the other’s opinions on the topic and being nonjudgmental. A peer specialist and library staff “exercise caring and compassion” (NAPS) toward any interaction with a patron or peer, regardless of personal opinions or values. And, just as a peer specialist “strive[s] to build [peer] relationships based on integrity, honesty, respect,

and trust” (NAPS), so do library staff in all interactions strive to interact the same. Stefancic et al (2019) found that “Generally, relationships involving peer support promote a sense of belonging and worthiness among clients and are thought to be more reciprocal, flexible and empowering for clients” (p. 907). This sense of belonging and worthiness comes about, in part, whether for peer or patron, through building trust, rapport, and credibility.

Just as “[P]eer support is mutual and reciprocal” (NAPS, 2019), this is true for library staff as well. Both a peer specialist and library staff “learn from those they support [or serve] and those supported [served] learn from a peer” (NAPS) specialist or library staff. Library staff can learn from each interaction with a patron, whether a quick “what are your hours,” or “where’s the restroom” to a prolonged reference interview, to story time or a multi-session information literacy course. Personally, in any such interaction, whether as library staff or peer specialist, I try to ensure whenever possible that it doesn’t feel fake or forced, to let the person know I learned something too. Both as a peer specialist and as library staff it is important to “encourage peers [and patrons] to fulfill a fundamental human need – to be able to give as well as receive” (NAPS). Personally, I try to ask the other person questions as well as their asking me questions, having them help me as I help them, making it a truly reciprocal interaction. In other words, as both a peer specialist and library staff, I strive to “respect and honor a relationship with peers [and patrons] that evokes power-sharing and mutuality, wherever possible,” (NAPS), offering “power-sharing and mutuality” (NAPS), giving and taking on both sides.

According to NAPS (2019), “peer support is equally shared power,” and while library staff technically do not offer shared power there are similar aspects. As library staff I sometimes catch myself using library jargon, and I need to remind myself to “use language that reflects a mutual relationship” (NAPS). This includes not only my jargon but also my respect and actions, making it a mutual and equal interaction, whether peer specialist or library staff, not one where one side of the interaction is superior to the other. For a peer specialist it is more likely to be equally shared, while library staff may have times where they offer more than the patron. However, striving for as much equality as possible leads, generally, to more effective interactions and openness to receiving and accepting help of any kind.

Both a peer specialist and library staff are encouraged to be strengths focused. In working with patrons in the library I have found myself encouraging others to identify their strengths and use them in their quest for knowledge to help make the interaction more effective. Both a peer specialist and library staff acknowledge the strengths of those they work with, encouraging them to help with their strengths and knowledge during the interaction, allowing the peer or patron to make “informed choices and decisions” (NAPS, 2019) as part of the process. A peer specialist and library staff both “encourage others to explore dreams and goals meaningful to themselves,” (NAPS), opening doors and encouraging all questions regardless of personal beliefs. While a peer specialist “do[es]n’t fix or do for others

what they can do for themselves, (NAPS) library staff strive to do this when possible but there are times and situations when it is not appropriate to education while helping.

A peer specialist and library staff should be careful to always “clearly explain what can or cannot be expected of the [peer support] relationship (NAPS, 2019) or interaction. Just as a peer specialist is clear on what they can or cannot do, so too should library staff be. This can differ for library staff from library to library, or even situation to situation, and this can be a bit more confusing and have more blurring between the lines. An example that has occurred several times for me as library staff is whether to find a resource or guide the patron in finding a resource themselves, as this truly depends on the setting, the situation, and the patron themselves.

Both a peer specialist and library staff strive to “use language that is clear, understandable and value and judgment free,” (NAPS, 2019), language that is appropriate for the peer or patron being interacted with at the time. This involves being aware of the language used and also of the background and where the peer or patron is at the moment. Regardless of the situation, both a peer specialist and library staff should “provide support in a professional yet humanistic manner” (NAPS), not crossing boundaries but sharing enough to build a bond, emulating language to a point but not necessarily all the way. In some ways, library staff are limited as to what they can and cannot do, such as tutoring, writing help, or offering legal or medical advice or interpretation, just as a peer specialist is limited in what they can and cannot do. Library staff's limitations may vary based on the type of library, the situation itself, or other factors. In either for, for both a peer specialist and a library staff, knowing these boundaries and clearly conveying them to the peer or patron is extremely important to setting realistic expectations.

A peer specialist and library staff both strive to “make only promises they can keep and use accurate statements” (NAPS, 2019). Neither a peer specialist nor library staff wants to share misinformation or make false promises that can negatively impact the relationship being built both with the peer or patron and for the individual with the profession in general.

Just as “peer support is person-driven” (NAPS, 2019) so too is the work of library staff. Both a peer specialist and library staff encourage those they work with to learn how to do for themselves and to make decisions based on what is best for the individual. Whether recommending a resource, a service, or other information, both peer specialist and library staff supports those they are helping to make their own decisions – evaluating the resources, looking at pros and cons – and respecting the individual's decision while also encouraging them to branch out and learn from mistakes. Neither a peer specialist nor a library staff offers judgment, they simply offer support and guidance in finding and effecting using resources, knowledge and information of all types.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the roles of peer specialist and library staff appear very different at first glance, this analysis shows there are overlaps in skills, traits, services, and best practices for both peer specialists and library staff. Cross-training or simply collaborating to teach these overlapping skills would be beneficial to both fields as they can learn from each other.

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