Peer support

Aims

This module explores the role of peer support for women with learning disabilities who have experienced gender-based violence.

Peer support is not a replacement for professional services. Instead, it can play a vital role alongside formal support by helping women feel less isolated, more understood, and more confident to engage with services.

This module aims to improve understanding of:

- What peer support is
- Why it matters
- And what your service can do, even if you do not offer peer support directly.

Learning outcomes

By completing this module, you will be able to:

- Understand what peer support means in the context of learning disability and gender-based violence
- Recognise why peer support can be particularly important for women with learning disabilities
- Identify ways your service can support, promote or signpost to peer support safely and appropriately.

What is peer support?

Activity 1

Purpose: This activity aims to explore your current understanding of peer support.

Activity

Reflect and take notes on:

- What peer support looks like in your everyday life and what does this mean to you?

Need some help?

Think about:

- Times when the support of your peers (for example your friends) was helpful, what they did, and how it was helpful.
- Times when the support, or lack of support, of your peers was not helpful – what they did, or didn't do, and how it was unhelpful.
- How important it is for you to have peer support in your everyday life and what the benefits of this are for you.

Now read the following statement and choose whether you think it is true or false.

For women with learning disabilities, peer support means meeting with other women with learning disabilities.

True and false: Peer support is support between people who share similar life experiences.

In the context of this work, peer support means women with learning disabilities supporting, listening to, and learning from other women with and without learning disabilities – particularly around experiences of relationships, abuse, safety and recovery.

Peer support can take many forms, including:

- Structured peer support groups
- Informal support spaces
- Community-based groups where women feel understood and safe.

What matters most is the shared experience, not the format.

Peer support does not require women to have had identical experiences, but it does rely on shared understanding. For women with learning disabilities who have experienced gender-based violence, this may be shared experiences of disability, parenting, isolation, stigma or navigating services. Gender-based violence may not be the explicit focus of the group.

Different forms of peer support

Peer support can be formal or informal, and both are valuable.

Formal Peer Support is usually:

- Organised by a service or organisation
- Facilitated by trained staff
- Focused explicitly on support, recovery and/or wellbeing, for example, a Women's Aid support group.

Informal peer support happens in everyday community spaces where women build relationships naturally, such as:

- Mother and toddler groups
- Faith or church-hall women's groups
- Community or interest-based groups that create regular connection.

While not all groups will suit all women, these spaces can still offer meaningful support and connection, particularly where formal options are limited.

It's important to note that not every group is peer support. For example, a yoga class or a book club focused specifically on a set topic may not provide the depth or shared experience needed. What matters is whether the space allows for connection, trust and understanding to develop, not simply shared attendance.

Why peer support matters

Many women with learning disabilities who experience gender-based violence grow up being told not to talk about what happens at home, not to cause a scene, not to complain or cause problems. This can make it very hard to speak to professionals, especially if previous experiences of services have been negative.

Peer support can help because:

- Women are often more willing to talk openly with someone who has lived a similar life
- Shared experiences can reduce shame, self-blame and isolation
- Hearing 'this happened to me too' can help women understand that abuse is not normal and not their fault.

Peer support can also help women:

- Build confidence
- Feel less alone
- Feel more able to engage with formal services.

For some women, peer support may be the first place they feel believed.

Peer support and safety

Peer support must always be safe and well thought through.

It is important to recognise that:

- Peer support can involve strong emotions
- Women may be at different stages of safety or recovery
- Boundaries and clear support structures matter.

Peer support works best when it is:

- Voluntary
- Well supported
- Clear about its purpose
- Linked to, not isolated from, professional support.

Peer support does not have to look 'special'

Peer support does not only happen in specialist groups.

Some women experience peer support in everyday spaces, such as

- Mother and toddler groups
- Community groups
- Women's wellbeing activities

For women with learning disabilities who have experienced gender-based violence, these spaces can offer:

- Connection with other women
- A sense of belonging
- Shared understanding, especially when parenting or isolation are part of their experience.

These spaces are not automatically safe or supportive but with awareness and good signposting, they can play a positive role.

In some parts of Scotland, in particular rural and remote areas, women with learning disabilities may have few or no specialist peer support options. Here, a broader and more flexible understanding of peer support is essential. Without it, women may be left isolated even when informal and community spaces exist that could offer connection and support.

Activity 2

Purpose: This activity aims to explore options for supporting victim/survivors with learning disabilities to access peer support.

Activity

Read the following statements and choose whether you think they are true or false.

If my service doesn't offer peer support, this module doesn't apply to me.

False: Many services will not run peer support spaces themselves – you can still help!

Your role may be to:

- Understand the value of peer support
- Know what peer support options exist locally or nationally
- Talk to women about whether peer support feels or would feel helpful to them
- Make warm, informed referrals rather than simply handing out leaflets.

Signposting works best when you:

- Explain clearly what it is and where it is available
- Match a referral to the woman's needs and preferences
- Follow up, wherever possible.

Some organisations are cautious about signposting to informal or unregulated groups, particularly where staff are not disclosure-checked. While this concern is understandable, complete avoidance can unintentionally increase isolation.

Where appropriate, signposting to informal peer spaces can be a positive option if done transparently. This means being clear with the woman that:

- The service cannot verify or vouch for the group or its members
- Attendance is her choice – she can try it and always has the choice not to go back if she doesn't like it
- Support remains available if concerns arise.

Informed choice, managed risk and honest conversation are safer and more inclusive than leaving women with learning disabilities without any peer connection at all.

Mainstream peer support groups are not suitable for women with learning disabilities.

False: Some small, practical changes can make existing groups more accessible for women with learning disabilities. Here are some suggestions:

- Use clear, respectful language and avoiding jargon, like workplace acronyms
- Give information in advance about what will happen, the structure of the groups (especially if it changes often) and how long sessions last
- Allow extra time for conversation and decision-making
- Make sure the woman isn't consistently interrupted or talked over
- Check understanding without being patronising
- Be explicit with boundaries, confidentiality and group expectations.

These adjustments may benefit many people, not only women with learning disabilities, and can often be made without additional funding.

Putting peer support into practice

Activity 3

Purpose: The purpose of these activities is to think about what poor practice looks like in the context of peer support and how to prevent it.

Activity

First watch this short animation of an example of poor practice in peer support.

The animation contains the voices of women with learning disabilities and is based on their lived experiences of seeking support and justice for gender-based violence.

Watch our video on Peer support - poor practice *(https://vimeo.com/1165979915)*

Now take some time to reflect and take notes on:

- How you would feel and what you might do if you were treated this way
- How this approach could increase isolation or discourage the woman from seeking support
- At what points in the interaction might the woman have felt dismissed, judged or put off from exploring peer support?

Now listen to what members of People First (Scotland)'s Equally Safe Group advise about supporting victim/survivors with learning disabilities to make decisions in this video.

Watch our Equally Safe Group video: peer support *(https://vimeo.com/1165980092)*

Activity 4

Purpose: The purpose of these activities is to think about what good practice looks like in the context of peer support and how to promote good practice in your organisation.

Activity

First watch this short animation of an example of good practice in peer support.

Watch our video on Peer support - good practice *(https://vimeo.com/1165979954)*

Now take some time to reflect and take notes on:

- What the worker did to help build trust and reduce the woman's fear of being judged or treated differently
- How peer support was explained in a way that respected the woman's autonomy and allowed her to decide what felt right to her
- What parts of this interaction you could realistically use in your own role or service.

Need some help?

Think about:

- What practitioners can do to promote peer support
- What organisations can do to reinforce peer support.

The peer recovery hub

For further guidance and advice about how to put peer support into practice, click here *(https://scottishrecovery.net/peer-support/)*

Recommendations for practitioners

1. Talk about peer support early and positively – introduce peer support as an option in a respectful, non-pressured way, recognising that it may feel safer to explore once trust has started to build.

2. Explain options clearly and honestly – be open about what different peer support spaces are, what they offer and any limits to what you can verify or guarantee.

3. Support informed choice, not avoidance of risk – help women weigh up what feels right for them rather than avoiding peer support because it feels unfamiliar or uncertain.

4. Check in, don't assume – follow up after signposting to see how it felt and whether further support is needed.

5. Reflect on your own comfort levels – notice when personal anxiety, time pressure or organisational culture influences how you talk about peer support and seek support or supervision.

Recommendations for organisations

1. Recognise peer support as part of a support 'package' – embed peer support into service thinking, even if it's not 'what you do'.

2. Develop clear guidance on signposting – support staff to signpost safely and transparently to both formal and informal peer support, including how to explain boundaries and limits clearly.

3. Map local and national peer support options – maintain up to date knowledge of community, online and specialist peer support options, including those outside traditional service settings.

4. Make existing groups more accessible – review communication, structure and facilitation of current groups to ensure they're welcoming and inclusive for women with learning disabilities.

5. Value lived-experience in service development – involve women with learning disabilities in shaping how peer support is discussed, signposted and evaluated.

6. Create space for reflection and learning – encourage reflective practice through supervision, team discussions and training, recognising that improving peer support is ongoing work.

Quiz

You can now test your understanding of peer support by completing this short true or false quiz

1. Peer support is mainly about socialising and is not essential to recovery after gender-based violence.

> **False:** For many women, peer support is where they first feel believed, understood and less alone – which can be a key part of healing and rebuilding confidence.

2. Peer support could probably replace professional support because women with learning disabilities understand each other better than services do.

> **False:** Peer support works best alongside professional services. It can strengthen engagement and trust but does not replace specialist support or safeguarding responsibilities.

3. Services should actively provide or signpost to peer support opportunities rather than hoping they happen informally.

> **True:** When services provide (or signpost to) safe spaces with ongoing support, peer support becomes safer, more inclusive, and more sustainable.

Further information and resources

For further information about peer support see the THINK: Peer support section of the Equally Safe and Supported self-assessment toolkit: THINK: Peer support | Toolkit | Equally Safe and Supported *(https://equallysafe.scld.org.uk/toolkit/think-peer-support-7/)*

To access additional resources that can help you support victim/survivors with learning disabilities to access peer support, click here: Inclusive resources and signposting | Toolkit | Equally Safe and Supported *(https://equallysafe.scld.org.uk/toolkit/inclusive-resources-and-signposting-9/#rlslider_3)*