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.