

The Power of Peer Support

We spoke to Lorretta, a peer support worker at CAPITAL Project Trust, about why peer support is such a powerful thing and what it brings to her and those she supports.

How would you describe your role?

As peer supporters at CAPITAL, we use our training, lived experience and our own mental health journey to support people who have been hospitalised because of their mental health. We provide support, empathy and encouragement to help people move forward on their journey.

As a peer, I'm on the same level as the people I support on the ward. I'm independent of NHS staff and, because of my own experience, I know where they have been and the kinds of things they may be struggling with, and so I can support them in the way that they need.

Talking to a peer is very different to talking to a clinical professional. People tend to open up more to us, because we have a personal connection with their predicament. Over time, you build a rapport with people and they start to open up, and you build trust.

I typically support someone from when they come into hospital to when they are ready to leave and go back out into the community. Some people may stay in hospital for a few days; others for a whole year. I talk to people. We do colouring, artwork and knitting. I brush their hair. I paint their nails if they ask for that. And as we do something together, we talk and, crucially, we build trust.

I work in two wards at Langley Green Hospital in Crawley twice a week and have been supporting people for the last year and nine months.

What brought you to CAPITAL and to becoming a peer?

I've been grappling with my mental health from a young age. I left school with no qualifications, I was bullied at school and I didn't have a great home environment. I struggled with an eating disorder, self-image and depression, and I had alcohol and addiction issues. After getting married and living and working in Bognor for a few years, I moved back to my home town of Crawley and that's when things started spiralling for me. I began self-harming. I was hospitalised, because I was considered a risk to myself,

and I spent the next four years in different hospitals. I had a good few years after my second son was born, but then ended up in Langley Green Hospital in Crawley when I started spiralling again.

While I was there, I met a peer from CAPITAL. She explained what CAPITAL was, and she asked me if I wanted to become a member. I did CAPITAL's members training and joined this amazing community. I felt like I had a family for the first time – a family that didn't judge or comment on what I did and really believed in me.

There was an opportunity to train as a peer supporter. So I did the 12-week course, combined with 90 hours of home learning. It's a Level 4 course and the equivalent of completing the first year at University. It's the first thing I have ever passed in my whole life and I felt incredibly proud. I had to complete a practical assessment at the hospital, before I was able to practise on the ward, but I passed that with flying colours and began my work as a peer supporter.

In terms of my own health and wellbeing, being a peer supporter gives me everything. It gives me self-belief, purpose and a reason to get up and put a smile on my face every day. I know that if I can walk into the hospital and help just one person, then I have done a good job. To be able to see people and the progression they make gives me the self-belief and empowerment I need to know that I can move forward with my own mental health. Being a peer means everything to me.

Why is peer support so important in mental health?

The understanding and empathy that peer supporters have with a person who is struggling with their mental health can't be under-estimated. Professionals have in-depth education and training to help them care for people with mental health needs and prescribe and administer medication if appropriate. But peers can give clients answers that a clinical member of staff wouldn't be able to give.

Clinicians develop through their education and training, but not necessarily through lived experience of mental health like peers do. That's why CAPITAL's motto is "clients and professionals in training and learning". We have a culture of continuous learning for peers with lots of opportunities for training and self-development. And we work with medical professionals



to help them understand about mental health from a more personal perspective – and to hopefully increase their understanding and empathy for people who are struggling.

Peer support is also really important, because it gives people hope for their own recovery. They see us helping others through our work and that gives them hope for the future. We help them to understand that a journey is never-ending and that you move forward one step at a time. I am still on my journey, but now I believe that I can have a happy life. If you have a mental health condition, you can still have the life you want.

For more info about the work of peer support workers at CAPITAL Project Trust, visit www.capitalproject.org/peer-support-workers.