

Peers Are Professionals Too: The Truth About Our Work, Our Worth, and Why the System Needs to Catch Up

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Chapter 10 - The Co-Opting of Peer Support : When Systems Take Our Work and Strip the Soul From It From Grassroots to Gatekeeping

Peer support did not begin in a training manual or a classroom. It started in the streets, the trap houses, the clinics, the jail cells, and the living rooms where someone said, “I got you” and meant it. It started when people who had been through it reached back to help the next person make it out. No pay. No title. Just care rooted in survival and solidarity. We created this work when nobody else was coming. When systems gave up on us, we showed up for each other. That is what peer support was in its purest form. Community led, culturally grounded, and fueled by lived wisdom. Not institutional approval.

But now that peer support has gained attention, it is being pulled into systems that were never built to hold it with care. Suddenly, what was once too unprofessional is being rebranded and repackaged to fit clinical settings, billing codes, and board meetings. And in that shift, something sacred is getting lost. Institutions started noticing peer work not because they evolved, but because funding bodies began to demand lived experience on teams. Contracts began requiring peer involvement. Agencies saw an opportunity. Not to change their values, but to polish their image. So they brought us in. But only if we were willing to shrink ourselves to fit into structures that were not created for us. This is where the gatekeeping starts. You can come in, but not if you challenge the hierarchy. You can be here, but only if your story fits the mold. You can speak, but only when it is convenient. And just like that, peer support gets redefined by people who never lived it. We are asked to professionalize without being truly empowered. Asked to make our trauma digestible, our truth polite, and our healing process palatable to people who want the results but not the roots. Peer work starts looking more like case management light than radical connection. In some spaces, if you are too raw, you are labeled a risk. If you are too real, you are told to dial it back. You are asked to

show up with authenticity, but only if it fits into the agency's brand. The deeper truth is, many agencies want the presence of peers but not the practice of peer values. They want the story without the challenge. The lived experience without the lived resistance. This is how our work gets stripped of its soul. This is how peer support, a model built on trust and truth, becomes just another box on a service delivery checklist. When that happens, we risk losing the very thing that made this movement matter. The answer is not to reject structure, but to reclaim it. To re-ground peer support in its original purpose. To remind these systems that we are not guests in their house. We built our own house. They are the ones who need to learn how to enter it with respect.

Tokenism vs. Transformation

Let's tell the truth. Just because a peer is on staff does not mean the work has been transformed. Hiring one or two people with lived experience and calling it inclusion is not enough. That is not progress. That is performance. A lot of places bring peers in to fulfill a quota or because a grant requires it. They want to say they are peer inclusive. They want to check the diversity box. But once the peer is hired, the support stops there. We are used in marketing materials, called on for feel-good stories, and paraded in front of funders. But we are not invited into spaces where real decisions are made. We are not shaping the policies or guiding the mission. And we definitely are not given equal power in the room. This is what tokenism looks like. It is surface level inclusion. It is when peers are added to a team without changing how that team thinks or operates. It is when the leadership is still uncomfortable with truth and only wants to hear the polished version of our stories. It is when we are celebrated for surviving but silenced when we start organizing. Tokenism is dangerous because it makes it look like something has changed when nothing really has. It creates the illusion of progress while the core of the system stays the same. And the worst part is, it puts peers in a position where

we are visible but powerless. We are in the room, but not at the table. We are invited to share, but not to lead. Transformation is something entirely different. True transformation means peers are not only present, we are guiding the direction of the work. It means our values are embedded into the program from the ground up. The values of mutuality, self determination, harm reduction, and community accountability are not just talked about, they are lived out in every part of the organization.

Transformation means peer input is not optional. It is required. It means peers are part of hiring committees, policy creation, and service design. It means we help train staff, evaluate practices, and mentor new hires. Our lived experience becomes a lens that shapes the entire culture, not just a story that gets used at events. It also means creating infrastructure for peer leadership. That includes fair pay, mentorship, career ladders, and decision-making power. If peers are always the ones doing engagement but never the ones leading strategy, then the system is still broken. If we are always the face of the work but never the voice behind the scenes, then we are being used, not respected. Transformation means seeing peers not as helpers, but as builders. When an agency is serious about transformation, you feel it. The team language changes. The policies shift. The culture makes space for real conversations about harm, power, and equity. Leadership looks more like the community. And people are not just talking about change, they are living it.

Tokenism is fragile. It shatters under pressure. But transformation is rooted. It grows even in the hardest conditions. It honors the legacy of peer work instead of watering it down. If you want to know which one you are dealing with, ask this: do peers have real power to change the program, or are they just being used to protect it? Because this work deserves more than visibility. It deserves voice, vision, and value. When Our Story Becomes a Script There is power in our stories, but that power can be stolen. What starts as truth-telling can quickly turn

into performance if we are not careful, especially when systems begin to treat our pain as content. Peers are often invited to speak, but only if what we say fits neatly into the narrative that others want to hear. It has to be hopeful, it has to be digestible, and it cannot make people uncomfortable. That is not empowerment. That is control. Too many peers are being asked to put their trauma on display like a commercial. We are encouraged to relive some of the darkest moments of our lives for the benefit of programs, agencies, and funders who want to “show impact.” But what they are really doing is turning our stories into marketing tools. We are told to humanize the system without being allowed to criticize the system. We are asked to inspire, but not disrupt. To speak, but not challenge.

That is not storytelling. That is exploitation. The problem is not that peers are telling their stories. Storytelling is sacred. It is at the core of peer work. The issue is when those stories are used without care, without consent, or without context. The issue is when peers are expected to perform recovery rather than live it. When we are asked to make our past pain palatable for people who have never had to sit in it themselves. Some organizations only want the polished version. They want the before and after, not the middle. They want the happy ending, not the truth about how healing is nonlinear. They want the redemption arc, not the messy process of rebuilding. And when a peer starts to speak from a place of raw honesty, the system pulls back. Suddenly it is too real, too emotional, too uncomfortable for the room. That is when our story stops being ours and starts becoming a script. Peers begin to feel pressure to shape their narrative around what others expect. To only share what sounds good. To avoid saying anything that might disrupt the room. We become cautious with our truth, not because we want to be, but because we learn that honesty has consequences. We start editing ourselves for survival.

This kind of pressure does real harm. It retraumatizes us. It isolates us. And it teaches us that our story is only valuable when it makes someone else feel good. That is a dangerous lesson. Because our story is not just for display. It is our life. It is sacred. And it should never be used as a prop. Real peer work honors consent. It understands that storytelling is a tool, not a requirement. Peers should never be forced or expected to share anything they are not ready for, anything that has not been processed, or anything that does not serve the moment. Our story is ours to offer, not theirs to take. There is a difference between sharing to connect and sharing to perform. When we speak from lived experience, it should be for the person sitting across from us. For the person still in the storm. For the one who needs to know they are not alone. Not for a staff training that wants a feel-good opener. Not for a grant report that needs a quote. Not for a board meeting that wants a testimony without a critique. Agencies must understand the ethical weight of asking someone to share their story. They must provide preparation, follow-up care, and real options. No peer should be punished for saying no. No peer should lose a job or opportunity because they chose to keep a part of their life private. And no peer should be praised for vulnerability while being denied power.

We do not exist to make the system look better. We are not here to put a smile on trauma. We are here to tell the truth. And that truth is not always neat. It is not always easy to hear. But it is real. And when it is told on our terms, it is healing. Our story is not a product. It is not a brand.

It is a part of who we are. And it should only be shared with care, purpose, and power. Anything less is not peer work. It is performance under pressure. And we deserve better.

Reclaiming the Role

Peer support was never meant to be co-signed by institutions in order to be valid. It was born outside of systems, created by people who had been cast aside, and fueled by a belief that healing could happen even when everything else failed. But now that the role is being brought into structured spaces, we have to be intentional about how we show up and how we protect the work from being watered down.

We do not need to throw away structure. What we need is to reclaim the space and rebuild the structure around what peer support was always meant to be. That means grounding the work in mutuality, voice, choice, honesty, cultural connection, and real community accountability. Not rules that silence us. Not policies that erase our truth. Not job descriptions that twist us into case managers with trauma on our resume. Reclaiming the role means being clear about what this work is and what it is not. We are not therapists. We are not enforcers. We are not moral cheerleaders. We are not here to make systems feel better about their failures. We are here to walk alongside people in a way that no one else can. To offer something rooted in lived experience and real presence. That is not soft work. That is sacred work. Part of reclaiming this role is writing it ourselves. Agencies should not be defining peer support without peers leading the process. We need to build our own policies, create our own supervision models, and lead our own training. We need internal policies that speak directly to how peer roles function, how we are supported, how our boundaries are respected, and how our voices are integrated into everything from service delivery to staff development. That includes peer-led supervision. Nobody understands the emotional weight of this work like another peer. We do not just need oversight, we need reflection. We need mentorship from people who know what it is like to carry a story, show up raw, and still hold it together for someone else.

Peer supervision creates space for us to be honest about what we are carrying, without fear of judgment or being misunderstood. Reclaiming the role also means knowing when to push back. When we are being treated like mascots, trotted out for events but excluded from decisions. When we are expected to carry the emotional load for teams that are unwilling to confront their own bias. When our work is dismissed as "soft skills" while we are literally keeping people alive. That is when we speak up. Not from ego, but from truth. And it is not just about speaking up. It is about building alternatives. When systems won't create space for us, we create our own. Peer-run organizations, peer-led committees, peer-developed training programs, and peer advocacy councils are how we reclaim space. We do not have to beg to be included when we are capable of building our own tables. To reclaim the role means to step fully into it. To say, this is who we are, this is what we bring, and this is how we do it. With clarity. With courage. With community. We are not here to assimilate. We are here to disrupt and heal at the same time. Building Back Radical Care

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Peer support was never meant to be clinical lite. It was never meant to mirror the same cold systems that so many of us barely survived. It was designed to be the opposite. A response. A refusal. A reclaiming. It came from people who said, "If the system can't help us, we'll help each other." That is radical care. That is where we come from. Radical care is not just about being nice. It is about showing up fully, consistently, and truthfully in spaces that have been shaped by power, punishment, and policies that often forget the people they claim to serve. Peer work has always been about stepping into those spaces with something different. Something honest. Something rooted in humanity instead of hierarchy. But when peer roles get pulled into systems that value compliance over connection, that radical edge starts to fade. Suddenly we are being asked to prioritize documentation over conversation. We are being told to stay in our lane instead of standing in our truth. And before we know it, we start forgetting that our greatest strength is not in how well we fit in, but in how boldly we show up. Radical care means we remember the purpose. It means we do not pathologize pain. We do not treat people like diagnoses or numbers. We do not see someone's worth based on whether or not they completed a program. We understand that progress does not always come with clean metrics. Sometimes showing up is the win. Sometimes surviving another day is the milestone.

We also understand that healing is cultural. That care looks different depending on where you come from, what you have been through, and what you believe in. Radical care means we honor culture, language, faith, gender, tradition, and resistance. We do not force people into treatment plans that erase who they are. We listen first. We adapt. We uplift what already exists in someone's community rather than replacing it with systems that are unfamiliar and unwelcoming. Radical care includes harm reduction. Not just in substance use, but in every part of life. It means offering options without judgment. Meeting people where they are, not where the policy says they should be. It means creating safety for someone who has never felt safe in a care setting. It means saying, "You are worthy right now," not "You will be worthy once you change." To build this kind of care back into peer work, we have to protect the spirit of the role. That means not letting funders or agencies strip away the heart of what we do. It means challenging policies that are dehumanizing. It means creating peer led protocols that allow flexibility, choice, and voice at every step. It means building relationships, not just caseloads. It also means that peers need to be trained in the principles of radical care. We need to talk openly about power, trauma, racism, oppression, and what it means to offer support

without reinforcing the same harm we experienced. We need to practice what it means to hold space, to stay accountable, and to stay present without needing to fix or control. And we need leadership that believes in this kind of care. Not just leadership that tolerates it when convenient. That means hiring people who have been on the receiving end of radical care and know its value. It means building peer teams that reflect the communities they serve. It means making space for honesty, grief, anger, joy, and real connection inside the workplace. Not just in theory, but in daily practice. Building back radical care is not about going backwards. It is about going deeper. It is about reminding the world that healing was never meant to be sterile, rigid, or disconnected. It was meant to be real. Messy. Collective. Loving. And honest. Peer support is

not here to blend into broken systems. We are here to help rebuild them. Not with new policies alone, but with new ways of relating to one another. We are not just staff. We are reminders that care can be different. Radical care is not optional. It is the foundation. And we will keep building on it together.