Peer Support: An Evolving Model of Care

The AANA’s Peer Assistance Program began over 30 years ago to raise awareness about the occupational risk of substance use disorder (SUD) in the practice of nurse anesthesia and to provide resources for peer support. Peer support helps facilitate early recovery and serves as a bridge between treatment and successful long-term recovery. It is a living, evolving model of care that capitalizes on the experiences and shared struggles of individuals. It involves giving and receiving assistance based on respect and mutual understanding. When one human being is willing to be with another in a supportive and non-judgmental way, healing occurs.

Peer support can provide practical, emotional, and ongoing support to encourage positive decision making and long-term behavior change. Peers who have directly or indirectly lived a similar experience help empower one another by building on strengths, assisting with recovery goals, and helping provide connections to needed resources. Peers serve as role models and mentors by sharing their personal stories and offering hope that recovery is possible. They help individuals and families initiate and sustain long-term recovery from addiction and other chronic health conditions.

The addiction and recovery field led the way in recognizing the value of peer support through 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) and ALANON family groups. Sharing one’s experience of strength and hope with another human being in a non-judgmental way is the foundation of peer support, and this model of care is being used to encourage long-term recovery in many ways.

Peer support is both therapeutic and educational and has demonstrated positive outcomes in mental health, substance abuse, smoking cessation, dealing with grief, cancer, and other chronic conditions that require long-term self-management.

The peer support model is also being used to address both patient and healthcare professional recovery following an adverse event or critical incident. See www.AANA.com/AdverseEvents for more information.

Peer Support vs. Professional Support Roles

There are many distinctions between professional and peer models of care. Both play an important role in recovery.

Peer support involves giving and receiving non-professional, non-clinical assistance by people who are experientially credentialed. Peers may have directly or indirectly lived a similar experience and can provide hope that recovery is possible. They may help a person initiate, maintain, or enhance the quality of their personal or family life in long-term recovery. Peer support may be offered informally, such as through a 12-step sponsorship, or it may be offered in a more organized system such as a workplace peer assistance program.

Professional support is more clinically focused, and the emphasis is on professional distance and objectivity. With professional sup-

Recovery Philosophy Merges with Mental Health

In 2005, the United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association (SAMHSA) defined recovery in terms of “abstinence.” As mental health and addiction have merged into one model of care, this definition changed and, in 2011, SAMHSA redefined recovery as: “A process of change whereby individuals work to improve their own health and wellness and to live a meaningful life in a community of their choice while striving to achieve their full potential.” For a list of the principles of recovery, see www.aana.com/PAN

Mental Health Moves into Primary Care

Mental health has become a high priority in primary care because of growing evidence that comorbid medical and behavioral health conditions contribute to poor health outcomes and escalating healthcare costs. Peers for Progress is a global initiative of the American Academy of Family Physicians. Its focus is on long-term self-management using peer models of care. The World Health Organization (WHO) Consultation on Peer Support Programs in Diabetes has documented peer support as an effective approach to chronic disease management and health promotion. These and other initiatives are bringing peer support into the forefront as a model of care that is crucial to long-term self-management.

Evidence-Based Healthcare Drives “Best Practice”

SAMHSA recently sponsored a series of studies about which services should be included in public and commercially funded projects. Two randomized controlled trials and one random study demonstrating improved relations, reduced relapses, and increased retention in treatment are bringing peer support into the arena of an evidence-based practice.

Developing peer support standards and peer training programs can lead to “best practice models” and help support an infrastructure of peer support that will lead to improved outcomes. For a list of Peer Support “Best Practice Model” recommendations, see www.aana.com/PAN

Peer Support in Today’s Healthcare Environment

A growing body of evidence is calling for more extensive integration of peer support in mental health, addiction treatment, and the broader healthcare environment.

Three major shifts in healthcare over the past decade have contributed to growing interest in peer support: 1) the merger of recovery philosophy and mental health services into one model of care; 2) the movement of mental health services into primary care; and 3) an increased focus on evidence-based healthcare and best-practice models. 

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port there is a clear separation between helper and helpee, and there is high external accountability for the professional and well-defined legal and ethical boundaries. Peer support does not compete with or replace the role of the professional. Instead, it complements and enhances healthcare, providing the emotional, social, and practical assistance necessary for sustained recovery.14

Peer-Based Support Services
Peer-based recovery support services are organized into a more formal structure. These may be delivered through organizational systems using strategies aimed at initiating or sustaining long-term recovery. Peer support services are an evidence-based mental health model of care where qualified peer support providers help individuals recover from mental and substance use disorders.

Peer support specialists are trained to better help their peers. They may learn to teach goal setting, problem solving, and symptom management skills and use recovery-oriented tools to help their peers address challenges. Peer support specialists may set up and sustain peer-led self-help and educational groups. They may provide emotional support, informational support, practical help, or social connections. Peer support specialists, much like the AANA State Peer Advisors (SPAs) help educate their peers and serve as a resource to help connect them to broader community services.

The AANA Peer Assistance Program is a part of our wellness initiative. The AANA’s Peer Assistance Advisors Committee (PAAC) leads the network of peer support comprised of SPAs in almost every state (see www.AANA.com/SPA). Recent PAAC examination of the program has led to improvements in the SPA training with the goal to incorporate best-practice recommendations. The program launched the revamped application, orientation, and training this year to ensure SPA volunteer readiness. Note: Not all PAAC members and SPA volunteers have a personal experience with SUD. However, they serve as strong allies in this support network ready to connect individuals with resources, such as Anesthetists in Recovery (AIR). AIR is an independent virtual community of CRNAs and SRNAs in recovery (more information is available at www.AANA.com/AIR).

The PAAC and SPAs across the country care about their colleagues who are at risk. They dedicate countless hours supporting colleagues and helping them connect with resources to get the help they need. All CRNAs and SRNAs should be aware of the available resources in case they should need them. See www.AANAPeerAssistance.com for information.

AANA Online Peer Assistance Resources
• www.AANAPeerAssistance.com
• State Peer Advisors Position Description (www.AANA.com/SPA)
• Meet the AANA Peer Assistance Advisors (PAAC) (www.AANA.com/PAAC)
• www.AANA.com/GettingHelp
Intervention essentials and treatment guidelines specific for Anesthesia Professionals (www.AANA.com/Treatment and www.AANA.com/Intervention)

References