

Confidentiality & Professionalism Guide for Peer Support Specialists

Introduction

Confidentiality and professionalism are **core principles** of ethical peer support. They ensure that peer relationships are built on **trust, safety, and integrity** while upholding the rights and dignity of those in recovery. This guide provides **clear best practices** to help peer workers navigate confidentiality, professionalism, and ethical communication in their daily roles.

Section 1: Understanding Confidentiality in Peer Support

What is Confidentiality?

Confidentiality in peer support refers to the **ethical and legal duty** to protect the personal information shared by those receiving support. Peer workers are entrusted with sensitive information and must ensure that it remains **private and secure** unless disclosure is required by law or ethical guidelines.

♦ Key Principles of Confidentiality:

- Peer workers should **only share information with explicit consent** from the individual.
- Confidentiality builds **trust and rapport** in peer relationships.
- Some situations **require breaking confidentiality** to protect safety.

When Can Confidentiality Be Broken?

Confidentiality has limits when it comes to **safety concerns and legal obligations**. Peer workers must follow **mandatory reporting laws** and organizational policies in situations such as:

◆ Exceptions to Confidentiality:

- When a peer expresses **intent to harm themselves or others**.
- When there is **suspected child abuse, elder abuse, or abuse of a vulnerable adult**.
- When required by **a court order or subpoena**.
- If there is **a medical emergency where disclosure is necessary** to protect the peer.
- If an **organization's policies** require documentation or reporting in certain cases.

◆ Example Scenario:

A peer you support discloses that they have been experiencing severe depression and are having thoughts of suicide but ask you not to tell anyone. What are your ethical and legal responsibilities in this situation?

Best Practice: Always explain **confidentiality limits** upfront, so peers understand when information might need to be shared.

Action Steps: Seek **supervision or consultation** if unsure about whether confidentiality applies in a particular situation.

Section 2: Maintaining Professionalism in Peer Support

What Does Professionalism Mean in Peer Work?

Professionalism in peer support means maintaining **ethical behavior, appropriate boundaries, and a commitment to ethical standards** in all interactions. Peer workers balance **lived experience with professional responsibility** while ensuring the well-being of those they support.

◆ Core Aspects of Professionalism:

- **Respect:** Treat all peers with dignity, avoiding judgment or bias.
- **Integrity:** Be honest and transparent in communication and decision-making.
- **Accountability:** Accept responsibility for actions and seek guidance when needed.
- **Boundaries:** Maintain **clear professional relationships** while offering support.

- **Confidentiality:** Protect the privacy of the peers being supported.

◆ **Example Scenario:**

A peer you support starts inviting you to social gatherings outside of scheduled meetings and asks for personal favors. How do you reinforce professional boundaries while maintaining trust?

Best Practice: Set **clear expectations early** in the peer relationship about the professional nature of your role.

Action Steps: If a peer relationship starts crossing professional lines, consult **a supervisor or ethics committee** for guidance.

Section 3: Ethical Communication in Peer Support

What is Ethical Communication?

Ethical communication ensures that peer interactions remain **respectful, nonjudgmental, and empowering**. Peer workers should use **language that upholds autonomy and dignity** while avoiding personal bias or assumptions.

◆ **Best Practices for Ethical Communication:**

- **Use person-first language:** Say “a person in recovery” instead of “an addict.”
- **Listen actively:** Validate a peer’s experiences without imposing personal beliefs.
- **Avoid giving direct advice:** Instead, ask open-ended questions to empower peers.
- **Respect different recovery paths:** Support individual choices without judgment.
- **Clarify misunderstandings promptly:** Ensure that communication remains open and honest.

◆ **Example Scenario:**

A peer shares that they are choosing a harm reduction approach rather than an abstinence-based recovery model, but you personally believe in abstinence. How do you provide support ethically?

Best Practice: Maintain **neutrality** and support the peer's chosen path to recovery, even if it differs from your personal views.

Action Steps: Practice **nonjudgmental communication techniques** and seek training on cultural competency if needed.

Section 4: Navigating Challenging Ethical Situations

Handling Peer-Worker Boundaries Ethically

Peer workers often develop strong connections with those they support, but it is essential to maintain **professional distance** to avoid role confusion or ethical concerns.

♦ Signs of Boundary Challenges:

- Feeling personally responsible for a peer's recovery.
- Accepting or offering financial support to a peer.
- Over-sharing personal information or struggles.
- Engaging in friendships outside of peer support sessions.
- Making decisions for a peer rather than empowering them.

Best Practice: Set and **reinforce boundaries consistently** to maintain ethical professionalism.

Action Steps: Seek **supervision or peer consultation** when facing a boundary dilemma.

Responding to Ethical Dilemmas

When faced with an ethical dilemma, use **the following process** to ensure ethical decision-making:

- **Identify the Ethical Issue** – What is the main concern?
- **Gather Information** – What are the policies, laws, and ethical guidelines involved?
- **Consider Possible Actions** – What are the pros and cons of each approach?
- **Seek Consultation** – Discuss the situation with a supervisor or ethical review team.
- **Make an Ethical Decision** – Choose the action that aligns with **peer support ethics and professional standards**.

◆ **Example Scenario:**

A peer confesses that they are engaging in high-risk behaviors but do not want anyone to know. You are concerned about their safety but also want to respect their confidentiality. How do you handle this ethically?

Best Practice: Weigh **confidentiality, harm reduction, and ethical responsibility** before making a decision.

Action Steps: Apply the **five-step ethical decision-making model** and **seek supervision** for guidance.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Maintaining **confidentiality and professionalism** in peer support is **essential for trust, ethical integrity, and effective relationships**. By following best practices, setting boundaries, and engaging in ethical communication, peer workers can provide high-quality, ethical support.

✓ **Additional Resources:**

- **Confidentiality & Boundaries Workbook**
- **Ethical Decision-Making Guide**
- **Peer Support Supervision Toolkit**

Next Step: Reflect on how you apply confidentiality and professionalism in your peer work and set a goal for strengthening these skills.