New Study Highlights Key Competencies for Peer Support Supervision

Edwards, J.P., Spagnolo, A.B., Cronise, R.M., Enders, G., Forbes, J., & Pratt, C.W. (2024). Peer Support Supervision Competencies: Results of Participatory Action Research (PAR). *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 24*, 3-4, in press.

A participatory action research (PAR) study has unveiled critical insights into the competencies needed for effective supervision of Peer Support Specialists (PSS), a rapidly growing workforce within behavioral health care. Conducted by a team of leading researchers, PSS, and PSS supervisors, the study provides actionable recommendations for enhancing supervision practices, addressing systemic challenges, and fostering organizational success.

The Challenge: Supervising a Vital and Emerging Workforce

Peer Support Specialists bring unique value to behavioral healthcare settings through lived experiences and training in peer support principles and practices. Yet, supervision of PSS has long been fraught with challenges, including role ambiguity, lack of understanding of peer support values, and inadequate training for supervisors.

"Peer support supervision isn't just about oversight; it's about advocacy, education, and fostering a supportive culture," said Dr. Jonathan P. Edwards. "Our research fills a critical gap in furthering the development of the Five Function Model of Supervision to effectively supervise and uplift this vital workforce."

Key Findings: The Five-Function Model of Supervision

The study employed the innovative Five-Function Model of Supervision, encompassing Administrative, Supportive, Educative, Advocative, and Evaluative functions. Researchers identified 71 key competencies for PSS supervisors, highlighting the importance of advocacy and evaluation functions. Key findings include:

- **Administrative:** High-impact competencies include clarifying role expectations and providing training for new staff.
- **Supportive:** Active listening and fostering trust emerged as essential skills for supervisors to retain and support PSS effectively.
- **Educative:** Models poise, listening, support and non-judgmental stance were highly rated competencies.
- **Advocative:** Supervisors must lead with empathy, ensuring that peer support roles are understood and valued within organizations.
- **Evaluative:** A mix of formal and informal feedback approaches fosters growth and clarity in peer roles.

Why This Matters

With over one million Peer Support Specialists needed in the United States, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2020), effective supervision is key to reducing turnover, increasing job satisfaction, and ensuring the success of peer support programs.

Looking Ahead: Implications for Training and Development

The study's findings pave the way for developing training curricula and credentialing standards for PSS supervisors. Organizations can leverage these insights to:

- Enhance role clarity and reduce peer drift.
- Build organizational cultures that champion peer support values.
- Address systemic barriers to retention and professional growth.

Top 5 Competencies in each Supervision Function

Administrate

1. **Supervisor** clarifies expectations of the PSS worker role
2. **Supervisor** explains the role and tasks of the PS worker in accordance with job description
3. **Supervisor** provides training for new staff
4. **Supervisor** provides access to resource to maintain peer support skills
5. **Supervisor** orients new staff to the organization culture and mission

Support

1. **Supervisor** listens actively
2. **Supervisor** discusses the importance of confidentiality
3. **Supervisor** builds trust through mutuality and transparency
4. **Supervisor** communicates openly, clearly, thoughtfully & responsibly
5. **Supervisor** teaches by modeling

Educate

1. **Supervisor** models poise, listening, support and non-judgmental stance
2. **Supervisor** meets people where they are at, to differentiate approaches to learning styles
3. **Supervisor** demonstrates knowledge of wellness and self-care tools
4. **Supervisor** supports professional development
5. **Supervisor** creates a culture of continuous learning for PSS

Advocate

1. **Supervisor** leads by example through empathy, curiosity and strengths focus
2. **Supervisor** ensures the PSS role retains its identity within the workplace
3. **Supervisor** educates on the organizational mission, vision, and value PSS bring
4. **Supervisor** challenges oppression and stigma
5. **Supervisor** promotes fidelity to peer support values and practices

Evaluate

1. **Supervisor** uses formal, informal, and situational specific approaches to supervision
2. **Supervisor** provides developmental feedback on a regular basis
3. **Supervisor** builds trust and rapport by providing clear expectation about job role & tasks
4. **Supervisor** adheres to organizational policies and procedures governing performance methods
5. **Supervisor** collaborates with PSS to develop a plan of corrective action, if needed

Join the Conversation

The full study and recommendations will be available in the next issue of the American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation. Behavioral health organizations, policymakers, and educators are invited to collaborate in advancing the supervision of Peer Support Specialists by contacting lead author, Dr. Jonathan P. Edwards at: **jonathanedwardsphd@gmail.com.**

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