

This spring, two classes completed the classroom training portion of the Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) program. They were facilitated by The Transformation Center and funded by the Department of Mental Health. The CPS training took place in Brockton and in Lawrence over a time span of 9 weeks. The training had over 50 participants and focused on training peer specialists to provide paid peer support to other peers, to carry the message of hope, and to utilize and promote effective recovery oriented practices in their work.

The training began with an 8 hour orientation that focused on the requirements for completing the CPS course successfully, the role of the peer specialist, and understanding the Code of Ethics. The requirements encompass attendance, completion of all assignments, and upholding the Code of Ethics all throughout the training. The participants were asked to return the following week with their signature on the Code of Ethics to indicate an agreement to follow them. The class was also informed that they had to attend each and every one of the nine days of training. However, one can miss up to three modules of class throughout the training (each module lasts for approximately 75 minutes and the class is held from 9am to 5pm) . Finally, all homework assignments must be finished by the end of the training in order to be able to take the CPS exam. The test is held about 5 weeks from the end of the last class and has a written and oral component that is equally weighted.

The next 8 class sessions focused on learning about the skills, supports, and resources that help peer specialists be more successful and more satisfied in their work. The training also sought to bring peers together and help them connect with another, in order to create a climate of kindness, acceptance, enthusiasm, and respect to promote learning and growth in a safe environment. This also gives people a chance to enhance their support network by developing positive relationships with some of their peers as well. In fact, a comfort and growth agreement was formed by both classes, in order to facilitate this process and to provide the optimum conditions for personal and professional growth. For some, this can potentially involve expanding ones comfort zone in a variety ways, such as having the courage to take risks, looking at things from a different perspective, and through publicly sharing their recovery story.

Peer specialists are taught that there are many ways to inspire hope, however it can be argued that there is not a more personal way to inspire hope, than through the telling of ones own recovery story. Previously, only the trainers of the cps program shared their recovery story in front of the class, but this year each person in the class courageously shared their personal stories of recovery. The uplifting stories of hope focused on the myriad of strengths that have developed throughout the recovery process, the obstacles that were overcome, the people and events that inspired change, the skills and supports that one used to be more well, the things that one does to stay well on a daily basis and the process of healing, personal growth and transformation. It was a galvanizing experience for the class to hear each other's recovery story. It increased the feeling of mutuality that is so vital in our work as peer specialists. It also highlighted so many empowering messages such as "you are not alone", "if I can I recover from adversity, you can too", "I am not my diagnosis and neither are you", "everyone recovers at a different rate", "we are on unique recovery journeys", "we all have the inner wisdom within us to come up with answers to life's most difficult questions".

Self determination, empowerment, integrity, resiliency, wellness, hope, and the value of peer support were some of the major themes of the cps class recovery stories along with steadfast conviction that everyone has the capacity to learn and grow. This has led to the passionate belief that people can recover from having a mental health diagnosis and as we heard so many times throughout the CPS training "RECOVERY IS REAL"!

