Help and Tips for
Lived Experience or Peer Workers

Looking After Yourself During COVID-19

This tip sheet is provided to support Lived Experience or Peer Workers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Undertaking lived experience or peer work can be very rewarding, giving a sense of achievement and real empowerment. Lived Experience Australia is privileged to be able to continue to provide consumer or carer perspectives in our work activities.

Peer workers have a great understanding of mutually sharing respect and experiences. You could see this unique time to use your knowledge to support yourself and others.

You can do this by:

1) Sharing why you are acting in a different way.
2) Encourage others to be involved in 'Stop the Spread'.
3) Be kind in telling others how they can protect each other and our community.
4) Thank people for getting involved.
5) Remind others that this will pass quicker if we all change our behaviours together.

Educated communities empowered to look after each other will have a better outcome.

COVID-19 – Health Advisory

Be guided by and do what the federal and state and territory governments tell us, which may differ from time to time. The consistent directives are:

- Practice social distancing – at least 1.5 metres away from other people.
- Washing your hands for at least 20 seconds, regularly through the day.
- Stay home.
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow.
- Use hand sanitiser.
- Use disinfectant wipes on items such as mobile phones regularly.
- If you have a confirmed case or have been in close contact with a confirmed case, follow health advice and you must isolate yourself to prevent it spreading to other people.
- If you're concerned, call the Coronavirus Health Information Line for advice or 1800 020 080 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Be sure you have the facts – There are updates on the Federal Government Website and state and territory government websites.

Stay informed - download the "Coronavirus Australia" government app in the Apple App Store or Google Play join the WhatsApp channel on iOS or Android.

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Some important reasons to take care of yourself

1. Ensure you protect yourself and others at all times.
2. Practice good hygiene and social distancing to protect against infection and prevent the virus spreading.
3. Before you continue your work activities, consider ways to prepare yourself and the people you work with to ensure everyone's wellbeing.
4. Don't jump in too quickly; consider all requests carefully.
5. Prioritise what is important to you and where you feel you would offer most value.

Ask yourself:

- Do I have the confidence to help during this time of isolation and containment?
- Am I clear about what and how much I am prepared to do?
- Am I able to maintain my energy and commitment?
- Am I able to adopt an attitude of patience and acceptance?
- Am I able to be as empathetic as usual given the current environment which may use more of my energy and resourcefulness?
- Am I able to say NO if I are feeling overwhelmed or unwilling to expose myself?
- Will I be able to navigate potential higher anxiety of others during this time?
- Will I be able keep realistic boundaries?
- Can I work from home, isolated from others who support me?

Ways to Prepare

Recognise that your work and activities will probably need to change

Acknowledge that you might not be able to do some of the things you normally do. Recognise this is happening to everyone and you can only do the best you can. And that's OK. You are not letting anyone down, see it as an opportunity to learn from the situation as you do things differently.

Think about seeing this as an opportunity to reflect and strengthen your self-care. This might be a time to consolidate your own reasons for choosing to be a lived experience worker.

Take stock of your knowledge, skills and resources

Different activities require different personal attributes, especially at this time.

1. Think about your knowledge, make sure you are striking a reasonable balance between doing your best and causing yourself stress.
2. Make sure you have accurate information that impacts on consumers i.e. amendments to Mental Health Acts and other legislation because of COVID-19.
3. Think through taking on other responsibilities that may add pressure to yourself.
4. Take stock of your skills in this new situation e.g. using online meeting tools, and online supports etc.
5. Take time out for reflection.
6. Remain aware of your beliefs, values and how you feel.
7. Listen to and understand yourself.

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Fear

Everyone experiences fear, strong feelings can be aroused by injustice, inequality, things we have no control over or a real or perceived threat to our safety. People can become angry and highly emotional. Recognise that these feelings are common to everyone at the moment. Have confidence in your ability, it will help you maintain your personal resilience.

1. You may be concerned or even afraid of the whole COVID-19 situation. This is entirely normal. Trying to understand the fear makes it easier to overcome.
2. Plan and anticipate possible scenarios but be prepared for unexpected things to happen.
3. Consider strategies for achieving best outcomes.
4. Prepare well – gain as much information as possible.
5. Undertake lived experience work activities that you feel are important and manageable at this time.
6. Ensure that you have accurate information into referral pathways for individuals who may require further support.
7. Get support from an individual or your organisation.

Be aware of your stress

At manageable levels, stress can be an important motivator. Too much can be harmful to you and others. Increasing your awareness of what contributes to your stress will enable you to choose strategies that work for you.

1. Acknowledge things have changed.
2. Acknowledge you don't have a lot of control of the situation right now.
3. Focus on the everyday routines that you do feel able to control.
4. Be guided by what your manager, team leader or others in a management position direct.
5. Don't be overwhelmed by the new challenges i.e. not being able to provide face to face support.
6. Limit your exposure to the media.
7. Ensure your information is taken from a reliable source, i.e. Government websites.
8. Have ways of distracting yourself, i.e. read a book, draw, meditate, listen to music or a hobby that you enjoy.
9. Actively take a break or time out; this can be brief, or it may mean you take some time away from your work.
10. Pace yourself, be mindful of how you feel and when things are getting on top of you and your energy is low.
11. Don't rush.
12. Focus on the task.
13. Sort out what you are going to do and when you are going to do it.
14. Put things in priority order.
15. Value yourself.
16. Praise yourself for what you are doing.
17. Look back and see how much you have achieved to reach this point at this challenging time.
18. Symptoms of physical and mental illness are often a first sign of stress, so be aware of your limitations.

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Create personal boundaries

Sometimes lived experience work is very demanding and especially at this time of COVID-19. Be honest with ourselves about how much we are prepared to extend ourselves. Limits are OK!

Decide what boundaries you are going to create for yourself. These might be things like:

1. Phone calls – when and to who?
2. If you are working from home, be clear about what is work time and relaxation.
3. Will you have costs associated with internet use, or do you need additional equipment?
4. Maintain a regular routine.
5. Ensure you take regular breaks.

Take personal care

Do not put yourself at risk!

Organise your time to create balance between looking after yourself and your work. Be mindful of the need to attend to the ordinary things where you can.

Identify your own barriers

Set realistic goals and expectations for yourself. This is part of caring for your wellbeing. People may create their own barriers, creating difficulties for themselves in their attitudes and fears. Be aware that people may project these onto you because of COVID-19.

Obtain advice from your manager or team leader if you need to step back when needed and that's OK. Others may want you to continue to work in the way you did previously i.e. face to face. You may need to set new boundaries and explain to others that the current situation has changed the way you need to work for now.

Direct communication

Lived experience work involves direct communication with people who have the means to improve a situation i.e. managers, team leaders etc. At these times consider the following:

1. Be focused and clear about what information you need right now, and as the weeks progress, what you need at any given point in time.
2. Be aware that others are anxious at this time and may not respond as you might expect.
3. Be clear about what you are striving for.
4. Be fully prepared – focus, plan, organise and rehearse.
5. Be consistent, authentic and genuine.
6. Separate the issues from yourself and despite your passion be realistic and cautious.
7. Practice active listening.
8. Learn assertion over confrontation.
9. Stick to the facts.

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Develop ways to gain support

It is very important to develop pathways of support, knowing you are not alone and are able to share in a safe and comfortable setting. Personal support may come from almost anyone that you choose. You may need to talk about your fears or other issues which may be a form of debriefing. Sometimes it is about being in the right environment (including personal and community relationships) that enables you to feel safe and good about yourself.

One of the best types of support can be provided by a 'buddy'. This is a fellow consumer or carer who you trust implicitly to keep all information you share about yourself will be confidential.

1) Use support as a way to empowerment.
2) Don't put yourself in the position of needing to be 'rescued'.
3) Maintain your role if you can.
4) Have your contribution recognised.
5) Stop people being dependent on you.
6) Discuss any issues.
7) Recognise your own limits and establish mutually rewarding relationships.
8) Ensure there is a clear line of command.

Most of all take care of yourself, seek professional support if you need it, be kind, stay connected and check in on the people who all support you!

Disclaimer:

The Network acknowledges the source of material for this resource as The Kit, the advocacy we choose to do. A resource kit for consumers of mental health services and family carers published by the Australian Government in June 1998. This particular resource has been adapted for the purposes of COVID-19 from Lived Experience Australia's Training 'Looking after yourself' https://www.livedexperienceaustralia.com.au/training-advocacy-skills While the Network has taken care in the development of the content, it is not responsible for any action taken in response to it. Lived experience or peer workers accessing this resource are advised to seek help from their GP, mental health support worker or Lifeline if they are distressed by any of the content.

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