

# “I CAN TELL SHE LOVES ME”: STORY OF A PEER SUPPORT RELATIONSHIP

“Eu posso te contar que ela me ama”: história de uma relação de apoio de pares

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**ABSTRACT:** Peer support has proven its unique role and efficacy in the recovery process of people with mental health and substance use challenges. This narrative explores elements of a peer support relationship, through the eyes of both someone receiving and someone providing that support, within the context of community-based mental health interventions inspired by the *citizenship framework of care*. The interviewees highlight the personal impacts of the relationship on each person in the dyad and provide a discrete example of the potentiality of peer support work that is practiced outside of the formal mental health system and embedded in the community.

**Keywords:** Narrative. Peer Support Relationship. Mental Health. Substance Use. Citizenship Framework of Care.

**RESUMO:** O apoio dos pares provou seu papel único e sua eficácia no processo de recovery de pessoas com transtorno mental e uso de dependência química. Esta narrativa apresenta informações de uma relação de apoio entre pares, através dos olhos de quem recebe e de quem oferece esse apoio, através de intervenções e cuidados em saúde mental de base comunitária baseados nos princípios de cidadania. Os entrevistados destacam como os relacionamentos pessoais impactam cada pessoa no grupo ao compartilhar um exemplo honesto da

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potencialidade do trabalho de apoio de pares que é praticado fora do sistema formal de saúde mental e incorporado na comunidade.

**Palavras-Chave:** Narrativa. Relacionamento entre Suporte de Pares. Saúde Mental. Dependência Química. Intervenções de Cuidados e Cidadania.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

This narrative was derived from a dialogue between a woman in recovery and fourth author (SS) and her peer support specialist and second author (BW). Recovery does not take place in a silo. The healing happens in relationship and can be greatly enhanced when it includes community connection (ROWE & DAVIDSON, 2016). Citizenship is an approach, complementary to recovery, that supports the social inclusion and participation in society of people with mental illnesses. It has been receiving greater attention in community mental health discourse and literature in parallel with increased awareness of social determinants of health and the continued marginalization of persons with mental illness (PONCE & ROWE, 2012). Both SS and BW have benefited from the support of diverse initiatives that are consistent with the citizenship framework (ROWE, 2015; QUINN, et al., 2019), and those initiatives have provided a context for the relationship to flourish.

## **2 OBJECTIVES**

The dialogue was intended to highlight the 13-year relationship between BW and SS, through discussing the relational elements that built and sustained it, as they happened over time. It aims to provide a discrete example of the potentiality of peer support work that is practiced outside of the formal mental health system and embedded in the community.

## **3 DEVELOPMENT**

This recovery narrative is based on an interview facilitated by the first author (PB) with the second and fourth authors. The interview took place on a video conferencing application and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Though initially the interview was conceived in a chronological fashion, it organically became a dialogue about the 13-year relationship between BW and SS. It was converted to a written

transcript, in its entirety, by third author (TW). The transcript was then transformed into a coherent narrative by the first and fifth (BB) authors, by highlighting the relational elements that built and sustained the relationship. The narrative was discussed with the second and fourth authors to ensure that it accurately described their experiences. It is important to note that all of the authors have participated in projects and community-based groups together, so the interview, its analysis, and the resulting narrative, were informed by pre-existing knowledge of the second and fourth authors' relationship. The authors have interacted with one another several times a week, and in some cases daily, for several years through work on citizenship-based projects. The following narrative covers SS and BW's initial meeting, the formation of their relationship through the Citizens Project, and the multiple ways their relationship has flourished in recent years.

### **3.1 Initial Meeting: *First impressions***

SS met BW at CREST, a structured day reporting program for people with mental illness referred from the criminal justice system, where BW was a peer support specialist. Still deep in substance use, full of anger and scarred by a history of trauma, SS recounts: "I was at a really, really dark, angry place". During that time, however, something was already at work. BW intrigued SS, not without internal dissonance for SS, as a role model: "I met [her] at CREST...I didn't like [her], and it wasn't because of anything [she] said or did. [She] was everything I wanted to be...comfortable with who she is, intelligent, knowledgeable, articulate, loving, compassionate, empathetic...so I kind of used to give [her] a hard time". BW, having been through similar challenges, understood SS's mindset: "I knew that [she] had problems with connecting, and opening up, and safety issues. I knew that she didn't trust me because I am a woman like her. I been in the streets since I was eleven years old, so I trust no one." BW added: "It's OK when you meet people and you don't connect with a person right away. Sometimes it can take years". BW, however, was ready to invest in the relationship at any time: "I knew that once I get her to let that wall down, that me and her could build this relationship that's very meaningful to me and her... I know that [she] would've come around, like she did for me, but it was very challenging for her, putting her foot forward"

### **3.2 The Citizens Project: *Planting seeds***

In 2008, BW planted a seed and waited for SS to be ready. During that time, SS participated in the Citizens Project, a 6 month-program in New Haven, Connecticut geared toward the social inclusion of people receiving mental health treatment who have a history of involvement with the criminal justice system, where BW had started to work. SS came back, from time to time, after graduation. But it was only in 2016 – eight years later – that her relationship with BW deepened.

SS decided to stop using drugs in June 2015. Since then, she started college for her drug and alcohol counseling certificate, and she has become an advocate with several grassroots organizations in New Haven and built meaningful relationships with their members. She has spoken about her recovery journey side-by-side with BW in conferences, webinars, a documentary, and on podcasts and television. During the interview for this narrative and subsequent conversations, SS and BW came back repeatedly to some of BW's skills that they both identify as pivotal in SS's personal recovery but also in the facilitation of her re-connection to the broader world.

### **3.3 Continuing the relationship: *Elements of long-term peer support***

#### **3.3.1 *Modeling accountability***

BW challenges SS to be her best self: “[She] calls you on your mess. And I got a habit of saying ‘why you always singling me out?’, and she said, ‘because you know better...You’re working to get yourself in a different position’... And she gonna let you make that mistake, but at the same token she’s gonna lovingly correct you, she’s gonna make sure you know, regardless of what that person did, it’s what you did that makes all the difference.”

This acknowledgement of the personal changes she needs to make, and the role BW plays in bringing them to light, are valuable to SS: “[She] keeps my head where my head needs to be. That’s why I’m willing to break bread with people nowadays that I wouldn’t break bread with...because it’s not about me...and that’s what [she] taught me. And being with her out in the community, we get to

continuously talk about things like that, and I get to try and dissect them to make them my own, so that I can be able to easily apply them.”

BW, for her part, observed and nurtured SS’s potential for growth: “I see something in [her] that [she] didn’t see in herself so I kept trying to lift her up... I just seen something bigger than her, and I just kept giving her encouraging words. That’s why I say: as I climb, I bring...people with me. [She] is one of the people that I bring up. People need help, [but] it’s not that I have all the answers for [them]. [She] had her own answers, but we built a relationship together, and we learned from each other...it’s important to empower people so people can grow and move forward on their own.”

### *3.3.2 Supporting an active role in the community*

BW recalled a time when SS had surgery and was not able to access the community-based groups she values as part of her recovery: “She was like isolating, so what I did, I said ‘We gonna call her, we gonna go get her and we gonna get her out to a meeting, ‘cause I could imagine everything she was going through after having that surgery...we went and picked her up...I got her to come back out, to get back into the community. Get back to these meetings, and that’s what I do, if you don’t hear from people we go get ‘em, and that’s what I did to get [her] back involved.”

### *3.3.3 Respecting the whole person*

BW identifies respecting the whole person, with their complex, intersectional identities, as key to her style of providing peer support: “Most people have a life before they took sick; or [if] they was born with mental health, that’s just a small part of us...You got to look at me for who I am! Not for my mental health or my diagnosis, or my drug of choice that I use. I am more than just a diagnosis and a drug. I am a mother. I am an aunt. I am somebody’s daughter. I am a community leader. I’m a co-director of [the] Citizens [Project]. I am a black woman that believes in everyone. I can name lists of who I am. And I want people to see that...So I don’t let words or people define me, where I can go and who I can be. It’s important to put the power back into the people. Instead of people thinking we [people with mental illness] go out and hurt people and that we can’t do nothing but plant gardens and bag groceries...I’m not that person.”

Bridgett believes that human relationships form the core of recovery: “I think it’s very important to give people a place, and a safe place, to be able to open up. Are we clinicians, no? Am I trying to be a clinician, no? I’m not a therapist or a doctor, but I think its people that help people and not a magic pill, or my clinician, or a doctor. It’s people that helped me get well in my recovery, and not a pill.”

#### *3.3.4 Relationship and Love*

SS identified an element of her human-to-human connection with Bridgett, *love*, that is not commonly spoken about when discussing mental health-related care: “I am going to say that it has not been without its rough patches but even with that, I can tell she loves me. And ultimately, [that] is what I need.”

BW agreed that a deep, long-term bond can be formed when peer support is done with skill and dedication: “When building a relationship with two individuals, you’re going to have ups and downs, trials and tribulations, because we are just all different. But what matters is what you do with it: either you just fight against what you’re trying to build, or you keep trying to build it.”

## **4 CONCLUSION**

Through her 13-year relationship with BW, SS as she has undergone a radical transformation, from the period of time following her mother’s death characterized by feeling devoid of emotion and consumed by anger to the one filled with meaningful relationships and engagement in the community at large. Her path has not been linear. There have been setbacks along the way. Throughout those years, however, BW’s support has been a steady and reliable force in her life.

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