

Peer Support Specialist Times

"Recovery and healing happen in relationship." - PSL for the 21st Century

The Power of Vulnerability in Peer Relationships

By Lori Ashcraft



Talking about vulnerability in the context of peer relationships may come as a surprise since we may think we already know and do this, so lean in. **We're going to discover some very effective ways of promoting recovery and building resilience.** The role of vulnerability in the work we do was brought home once again after reading books by Henri Nouwen

Henri played a key role in developing the field of pastoral counseling. He was a Dutch Catholic priest, theologian, professor, and prolific writer. He earned a master's degree in the Netherlands and was ordained a Catholic priest in 1957. He later pursued advanced studies in psychology at the Menninger Clinic in Kansas, where he studied clinical psychology. He taught at Notre Dame, Yale Divinity School, and Harvard Divinity School. He was highly respected for his academic rigor and the deeply personal nature of his writing. Here are a couple of quotes from his book, "The Road to Daybreak:"

"I used to think that leadership and service meant always helping others. But I've come to learn that true connection happens when I allow others to help me, too. By letting go of my need to always give, I discovered the healing power of receiving."

"I used to be afraid of being vulnerable. Now I see that it's a beautiful gift when someone can give something to me. It allows them to see how much they have to offer."

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These quotes reflect Nouwen’s profound shift in understanding—that **true healing is often mutual, and that vulnerability and receptivity are not weaknesses, but deep strengths.**

After acquainting myself with Henri’s “knowings” I started learning how to put them to work. I remember one morning, stepping into the program room with my arms full of papers, and being confronted by Larry, a large man with anger issues. I



I saw that the coffee pot was empty, so I turned to Larry, smiled and asked, “Larry, I’ve got my hands full here. You could really help me out by making a new pot of coffee. OK?” Larry was taken aback. We had not

asked him to help much, just tried to help himself regulate. He blinked a few times, and then said, “uhhh, sure Doc.” and headed toward the coffee pot. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, fumbling around with the coffee and the pot. He figured out how to do it and soon we had a fresh pot of coffee. **I had just changed Larry’s role from “client” to “assistant.”**

The next part is crucial. Larry needs to know how much I appreciated his help; otherwise, the moment would be wasted.

“Hey Larry, can you bring me a cup of your newly brewed coffee? I really need it right now.” Larry found a cup in the sink that was sort of clean, filled it up and brought it to me.

“Here you go Doc.”

“Larry, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you doing this for us. You did a great job. The coffee is just right.”



Larry was beaming. “Any time,” he said. “Anyone else want coffee? It’s fresh.”

What do these stories have to do with vulnerability? In our behavioral health universe, **we are taught that we, the deliverer of the services, and yes including peers, are better equipped to**

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CMPSS Specialization Training for Parent, Caregiver, Family Member Peers-Supporting Family Resilience

40 hours [32 CES available upon request]

The “Supporting Family Resilience” course is a fun, skill-based, and highly interactive workshop for individuals providing specialized peer-to-peer family member and caregiver support services.



CMPSS Specialization Training for Justice Involved Peers—Recovery, Resilience, and Reintegration

40 hours

This dynamic 40-hour, skill-based, and wholly interactive course will provide participants with an understanding of how to provide person-centered support to individuals with justice involvement experiences.



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decide what needs to happen to each person, and the person is simply the recipient of our knowledge and skill. From this position we have the occupation hazards of developing an ego-driving approach to our work. This situation often creates insurmountable blind spots and we miss many opportunities to bring about healing both for those we serve and for ourselves.

The ego driven approach is hard to give up because it feels like it validates us as the one who knows best; the one who should be listened to; the one who should have the last word; the one who decides how to describe things in the record. Trading this position of superiority for a more vulnerable position of



partnership can feel like a step down. But when we give this position up we move from a “point of view, to a viewing point.” A place where we can see beyond our blind spots and see those we serve as equal players in the healing process. **Working together we have a more accurate roadmap to**

healing. We are better able to see the person’s strength and what might motivate them.

Circling back to Larry, we find that giving him a chance to contribute helped him come alive. And giving him a chance to help me, instead of me helping him, put me in a vulnerable position of needing his help.

Leading thinkers like Dr. Brené Brown, a research professor and storyteller, have helped reframe vulnerability as the birthplace of creativity, belonging, and courage.

Here are some thoughts that might help us discover our ability to explore vulnerability:

1. **Identify personal barriers to receiving help.**
2. **Reflect on the emotional impact of being vulnerable and open.**
3. **Explore how allowing others to help strengthens peer connections.**
4. **Ask: “How might allowing others to help you change the way you lead, support, or connect with others?”**

Recovery Practices for Ethics and Law for Peer Support

6 hours [6 CES available upon request]

This fun six-hour dynamic, skill-based, and wholly interactive course will provide participants with an understanding of how the recovery movement and principles became the foundation for peer support ethical codes as well as many laws regulating behavior healthcare and psychiatric treatment.



Our Job as Recovery Facilitators is to Empty Out Our Classroom

By Chris W. Martin

If your training experience is like mine, then you've likely conducted recovery and peer support training in all kinds of humble spaces. My list includes 20 or so bodies crowded into bitty back rooms, boardrooms, basements, and even a bus station. Many were wall-to-wall classrooms in which "standing room only" meant that there was only enough space to walk sideways when entering or leaving the room. **This always posed a challenge because what I wanted to bring them was something bigger, grander, and larger than life.** I felt I needed to move around the room to inspire them by acting out impactful stories and dramatizing deeper truths. What I learned is that awakening transformation in others is not about the knowledge I could sling, but it's more about the emptiness I should bring. **It is not about being constrained in a lowly and cramped facility, but it's very much about creating more space with humility.**



Most of us would agree that in recovery and peer support work, humility is our primary utility. In other words, the giving of ourselves so others will grow is our useful tool of humility. **We vulnerably share our recovery story to connect and help others see potential in themselves.** We devote additional time by giving them a lot from ourselves. We give them our knowledge; we give them facts and inspiring stories; we share our learned skills; and we give them examples of challenging experiences we've overcome. In fact, we can sometimes fill up the classroom so much with our glorious giving that it only leaves just enough elbow room for their passive receiving.

What's needed is a classroom remodeling job. An interior design expert once told me that by emptying out a compact and crammed room full of furniture, a vision will become clear about what the space can be. And likewise, **the goal we recovery and peer support facilitators are striving for is that our participants get the vision of their own strengths, brilliance, and potential.**

Years ago, I was fortunate to learn about creating bigger spaces in the classroom from a great instructor and facilitator. From his style, I learned how to empty out "me" in the classroom. After doing that, I put the room together again by rearranging the giving and receiving parts. **In this new arrangement, the participants became the givers, and I became the receiver.** In their new role, they suddenly gained all this extra room to stretch, grow, and glow.

My mentor was a facilitator named Henri Nouwen, who had a jam-packed resume that could crowd any classroom. He was a prolific and popular author, psychologist, theologian, and professor. He taught clinical psychology at Notre Dame; he also taught at Harvard and Yale. Although he always had the luxury of large theater style spaces, his classrooms were literally standing room only. **Henri facilitated by creating a classroom atmosphere of hospitality.** He certainly gave of himself by sharing his own vulnerability, knowledge, and experiences, but he mostly made it a place in which he was the one receiving instead of giving. He wrote:

"Receiving often is harder than giving. Giving is very important: giving insight, giving hope, giving courage, giving advice, giving support, giving money, and, most of all, giving ourselves. Without giving there is no brotherhood and sisterhood.

But receiving is just as important, because by receiving we reveal to the givers that they have gifts to offer.... Sometimes it is only in the eyes of the receivers that givers discover their gifts." ¹

In our work as recovery and peer support facilitators, creating a classroom like Henri's, no matter how small or large, is a spacious facility of humility. And that is a learning place where we can all grow. So, please stay tuned for our next edition when we take a look at Henri's five principles of hospitality teaching and his 3 action steps to implement them. Until then, let's remember to empty out our classrooms.

1. Nouwen, H. J. M. (1996). *Bread for the journey: A daybook of wisdom and faith*. HarperOne.

Alumni Connection Meetings for Graduates of Crestwood's Peer Support Learning Program

“This has been an amazing course. Being in class gave me a positive boost each day!”

“I’m excited to graduate, but I’m going to miss being in class! We’ve become like family.”

“The bonds I’ve made with other students are so positive. I want to stay in touch with my classmates!”

These are comments we often hear from soon-to-be graduates toward the end of each Peer Support Learning class. The “secret sauce” of this course is the combination of skill-building, personal growth, fun, and mutual connection that students generate together.

Based on feedback from graduates, the Crestwood Recovery Resilience Solutions Team has created an opportunity for PSL Alumni to stay connected with one another and keep the positive peer support energy going! We are officially launching Crestwood PSL Alumni Meetings!

Below is some information about our initial plan for these meetings. We will continually draw on ideas from Alumni to develop the structure of our meetings and the activities we do together.

Who are these meetings for?

Anyone who has graduated from Crestwood's Peer Support Learning course, whether they are currently working, looking for a job, focusing on personal growth, or other important pursuits.

What will we do in our meetings?

Our meetings are a dynamic forum for PSL Grads to connect with fellow Peer Support Specialists and share...

- Successes, challenges, and mutual support.
- Knowledge, experience & tips about providing great peer support.
- Info about job leads, further training opportunities, and staying well as we work.
- Other ideas that Alums suggest!

When will meetings occur?

Starting in July 2025, we will meet twice per month at these times:

- **The second Thursday of each month at 1:00 pm**
- **The fourth Thursday of each month at 3:00 pm**

Where will meetings occur?

We will meet by Zoom so PSL Graduates throughout California can participate.

The link is <https://cbhi.zoom.us/j/98402077839>

If you are a graduate of Crestwood's Peer Support Learning course, please join us at an upcoming meeting! If you know someone who is a graduate of our course, please help in spreading the word about this opportunity.

If you have any questions, please contact Ryan Cooksey (rcooksey@cbhi.net) and Michael Zeeb (michael.zeeb@cbhi.net).



We're proud to share that the CRRS team has successfully completed three Specialization Courses, thanks in large part to the generous tuition scholarships provided by **CalMHSA**. We deeply appreciate their continued support in helping us build capacity in the Peer Support workforce.

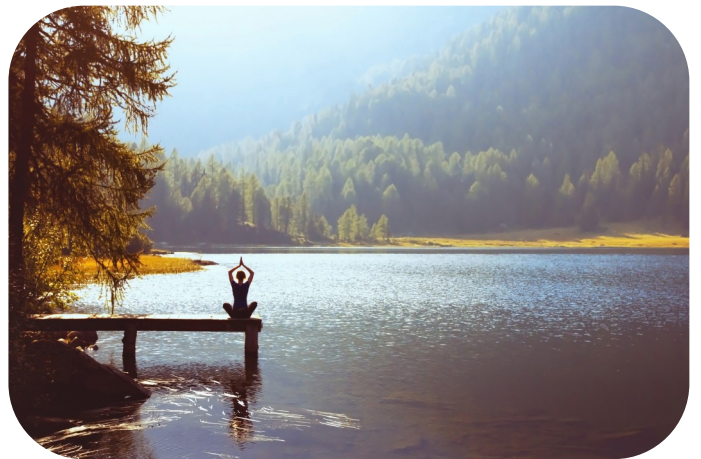


Looking ahead, we're gearing up for the October launch of our **Peer Employment Learning Center** project in San Diego. This initiative will support persons-served in becoming certified Peer Support Specialists through the 80-hour **MC PSSC training**, followed by a 70-hour internship under the guidance of experienced mentors at our campuses. This marks our fifth rollout of the program in San Diego, and we're excited to work alongside both staff and guests under the inspiring leadership of Robyn Gross.

Across the state, the CRRS team remains fully engaged in delivering a variety of Peer Support and Recovery-focused courses. Even as we stay committed to our mission, we also continue to emphasize the importance of intentional self-care and maintaining a healthy work/life balance.

It's been wonderful to see our team members taking their well-earned vacations and embracing the joys of life in recovery. **We encourage all behavioral health professionals to prioritize your own well-being**—your self-care strengthens not only you, but also the support you provide to others.

- Jim Ritchie, CRRS Director of Operations



Viva La Evolution!

A podcast on Growth, Resilience, and Transformation



- ◆ Promote the recovery process with individuals and teams.
- ◆ Shift your organization's culture to a recovery focus that builds resilience.
- ◆ Listen to interviews with important leaders in the recovery field and hear from people who are in recovery and how they got there.
- ◆ Discover unique ways peer support specialists can support your team and enhance recovery service outcomes.

Join The Conversation!

