

## Peer Support Specialist Times

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

### The Power of Empathy

By Ryan Cooksey



**There is a sacred and beautiful opportunity we have as humans to relate with others** in a way that shows we are connected and can understand. When a person can dig deep, find it within themselves to be vulnerable, and share with a person their similar emotions/experiences, we can create a space where hope and possibilities can grow. Sometimes life doesn't always go as planned and when life takes twists and turns, that hope and possibility can be limited or removed as we try to deal with the experience.

Recently, I had an life experience where someone was able to hold space and hope for me. The birth of my newborn son was a reminder to me that **not only is hope important, but that we are all connected and can support each other through difficult times.** My son was born pre-mature due to health complications. His birth was just the beginning of some unexpected experiences we soon navigated through. After he spent a few weeks in the NICU, we found out he had a life-threatening condition and intervention needed to happen immediately. When my fiancé and I were first notified about his condition, my world felt like it had crashed and I felt overwhelmed with emotions. Through trying to process, sitting next to his bed with my head dropped, a nurse came by and changed our life by sharing only a few sentences. She simply shared that

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her kid had also gone through a NICU stay, and she remembered what that feeling was like. It did not change my son's condition nor get us closer to any answers, but something about **her empathy simply gave me the power to lift my head from looking at the ground.** From there, I was reminded of the many tools I have in my life such as spirituality and positivity. My son had a few surgery interventions and each time that we would meet with a doctor, they were astounded of not only how supportive and involved my fiancé and I were in his care (we started taking over his care in the hospital doing everything the nurses would do), but how fast and well he was progressing. Not only do I attribute how well he is doing to the amazing care he was given, but also the love, hope, prayers, thoughts, and positivity my son has been showered with.

I offer this story with the intent of sharing that **we do not need the answers to another person's situation, we just need to be present with love.**

## 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.

## 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.

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

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.



## Part Three : Focusing on Relationships and Strengths

By Lori Ashcraft, Ph.D., ITE

*This column explores the elements of “recovery Medicine” that compliments and goes beyond what pills can do. While the medicine prescribed on our campuses plays a role in the healing of our guests, they are only one piece of the puzzle. I know this from personal experience of having taken psychotropic medications for over 30 years. Without the other pieces, we only see a reduction of symptoms, but not a lot of evidence of recovery (meaning the person is able to lead a meaningful life while managing symptoms). The other significant pieces are meaningful and respectful relationships, opportunities to work, encouragement and having treatment folks believe in the person, good groups that deliver pertinent information that gives each person a reason to attend. I look forward to your comments and suggestions as we travel this recovery road together.*



### The Power of Strength-Based Relationships in Peer Support: Dr. Bob’s Groundbreaking Study

Last month, we shared insights from a powerful conference workshop led by Dr. Bob Bohensky, Chief of Clinical Services and Clinical Training at Southwest Behavioral Health Services in Phoenix, Arizona. In that workshop, Dr. Bob emphasized a transformative idea: therapeutic relationships grounded in the strengths of the individual being served consistently led to better recovery outcomes. When compared with a variety of treatment modalities, this person-centered, strengths-based approach stood out as the most effective path to recovery.

But Dr. Bob wasn’t satisfied with theory alone, he wanted to test it. Specifically, he wanted to see whether peer-provided services could stand up to scrutiny. Were Peer Support Specialist a viable method of service delivery? Or were they primarily a political response to widespread dissatisfaction with traditional behavioral health systems?

You may have noticed how seriously Crestwood has responded to this topic. Over the past few years, Crestwood has trained four campuses in the power of

peer support and has added peers to the workforce. A lot has been learned about how to do this and gain remarkable results (more about this in part IV).

### Testing the Power of Peer Support

Dr. Bob enrolled 30 Peer Support Specialists working across his organization. His goal was to measure whether these peers could form recovery-promoting relationships, and whether those relationships made a meaningful difference in the lives of the individuals they supported.

Rather than rely on traditional, vague satisfaction surveys, Dr. Bob used more focused and evidence-based tools. One key instrument was the **Relationship Rating Scale (RRS)** by Barry Duncan (2005), designed to be completed by the person receiving services at the end of each session. Another important tool was **the Recovery-Promoting Relationship Scale (RPRS)** developed by Dr. Zlatka Russinova at Boston University in collaboration with Sally Rogers and Marsha Ellison. This scale asks individuals receiving services to evaluate specific qualities of helping relationships.

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## Part Three : Focusing on Relationships and Strengths

*Continued***What Makes a Relationship Recovery-Promoting?**

To build the RPRS, Zlatka first asked people receiving services to describe what a recovery-promoting relationship looks like. Here's what they said they valued most:

- Being respected
- Being helped to build new skills
- Being listened to without judgment
- Having support in developing personal narratives
- Belief in their potential to recover
- Trust in the authenticity of their lived experiences
- Having access to the helper when needed
- Being truly understood

These qualities became the core of the RPRS, which helped measure the effectiveness of peer support specialists in fostering recovery through relationships.

**Key Findings from the Study**

The results of Dr. Bob's study were compelling:

1. **Peers possess recovery-promoting skills that exceed expectations.** Even when held to a higher standard than traditional benchmarks (a cutoff score of 82 rather than the typical 72), only four out of 30 peers fell below that mark. Most peers scored remarkably high, indicating strong relationship-building skills.
2. **Peers reported personal growth.** Providing recovery-oriented services not only helped those being served—it also enhanced the peers' own recovery journeys.
3. **Service recipients improved their recovery.** Over the four-month study, individuals receiving peer support showed significant gains in their own recovery progress, echoing earlier findings by researchers Miller and Duncan (2000) that healing happens best within meaningful, positive relationships.

**Implications for the Workforce**

Dr. Bob's research supports what peer advocates

and recovery leaders have been saying for years:

**Peer support is not just valid—it's powerful.**

When implemented with training, intention, and support, peers can be at least as effective as traditionally trained staff in promoting recovery.

But there's a critical caveat. Peers must be allowed to function as equals on the team. Their unique lived experience is their strength—not a sideline to be overlooked. Organizations must avoid relegating peers to menial tasks like fetching food boxes or rearranging waiting rooms. Instead, peers should be valued for their ability to deeply engage with others and create the kinds of relationships that fuel recovery.

**Moving Forward: Training All Staff in Strength-Based Practice**

The most empirically supported principle in helping relationships is this: People are more likely to reach their goals when they experience a positive relationship with the person helping them. If we know that strength-based, recovery-promoting relationships work—why not teach all staff how to build them?

Dr. Bob's work serves as a wake-up call and an invitation. If we want to improve our outcomes, we must:

- Invest in training all staff—peer and non-peer alike—in recovery-promoting relationship skills.
- Create cultures where these relationships are not just encouraged but expected.
- Ensure peers are treated as equivalent contributors to the healing process, with roles that highlight their unique insights and gifts.

**Final Thoughts**

Thanks to Crestwood for the belief in the power of peer support and the commitment to put it into action. And, thanks to Dr. Bob and Dr. Zlatka, we now have more than anecdotes—we have data. Data that shows peer support is not a novelty or an experiment, it's an effective, evidence-based strategy for promoting recovery. And it starts with something beautifully human: forming real, respectful, empowering relationships.



# CRESTWOOD PRESENTS

## ONLINE CMPSS SPECIALIZATION

### PEER SERVICES FOR JUSTICE INVOLVED

40-Hour Training for CMPSS who want the specialization on their existing certification.

When: August 17 - 28  
8:30am - 12:30pm  
Monday - Friday

#### Become a Champion for Justice-Involved Peers

One in three adults in the U.S. has a history of justice involvement. Behind every statistic is a real person trying to find their footing in a world that wasn't designed to help them succeed. Peer support specialists are uniquely positioned to empower a different outcome when they have the right tools. This course gives you those tools.

Register here:



Would you like to develop or enhance your recovery and resilience skills?

### Big News!

Crestwood Behavioral Health, Inc. is offering an opportunity for **YOU** to receive training in an online CMPSS Specialization in *Peer Services for Justice Involved*.

**Peer Services for Justice Involved** is a 40-hour, skill-based training designed to elevate your peer support practice through dynamic, interactive, and real-world application.

Participants will gain advanced skills to support people at every point in the justice system, from first contact with law enforcement all the way through reentry and community reintegration. You'll learn how to show up for the people who need you most, no matter where they are in the system.

You'll explore:

- Person-centered support that is responsive to the individual
- Trauma-informed practice specific to justice-involved experiences
- Advocacy skills for individuals, within systems, and through civic engagement
- Cultural humility when navigating a system that doesn't always reflect the communities it serves
- Ethical standards that protect both you and the people you serve

People with justice involvement face some of the most complex barriers to recovery, including legal obligations, housing instability, trauma, stigma, and more. Peer support specialists who can navigate those systems with them are urgently needed.

Become the Champion your community deserves!  
Register here:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CMPSSJusticeInvolvedPreRegistration>

## Crestwood Recovery Resilience Solutions

Launches No-Cost CMPSS Continuing Education Series.

As an authorized provider of Continuing Education (CE) for Certified Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialists (CMPSS) through CalMHSAs, and in alignment with Crestwood Behavioral Health Recovery Resilience Solutions' mission to support and advance Peer Support services across behavioral healthcare systems, we are excited to announce the launch of our new **Recovery Practices in Advancing Peer Support** monthly training series.

Beginning June 30, 2026, CRRS will offer a no-cost, live-facilitated online 2-hour CE training on the last Tuesday of every month from 2:00–4:00 PM. Each training provides 2 Continuing Education credits for eligible CMPSS participants.

We currently offer seven curricula in the series, with additional trainings planned for the future. CMPSS participants who attend one training each month can earn up to 14 of the 20 CE credits required for bi-annual renewal through CalMHSAs (please note that 6 of the required 20 credits must be in Law and Ethics).

### First Featured Training

Our inaugural Recovery Practices in Advancing Peer Support course will be:

### Sharing My Story: Resilience and Connection

## Viva La Evolution!

A podcast on Growth, Resilience, and Transformation



Join The Conversation!



This foundational Peer Support training explores meaningful and impactful ways to strengthen connection and relationships through intentional sharing of recovery journey experiences.

### Additional Upcoming Trainings Include:

- From Conflict to Connection: Recovery Practices for Resolution & Reconciliation
- Ten Tenets of Team-Building
- Stepping Up While Stepping Back
- Facilitate to Fascinate
- Listen to Glisten
- Personal Advocacy
- Rising as Leaders – Maximizing Your Impact

Additional curricula will continue to be added to the series throughout the year.

### Eligibility & Participation Requirements

These trainings are open exclusively to currently certified CMPSS professionals in California seeking CE credits for bi-annual renewal.

To participate at no cost, attendees must:

- Provide a CMPSS certification number in good standing
- Be fully present and actively participatory during the training
- Remain on camera for the entire 2-hour session in order to receive CE credit
- Receive an e-copy of the curriculum workbook prior to the class start date.

Please note: Participants who are not on camera during the training will be removed from the session.

### Registration Information

Advance registration is required through the CMPSS CE Training link on the CRRS Training Products webpage:

[Register for CMPSS CE Trainings](#)

- Jim Ritchie, CRRS Director of Operations