



Peer Support Specialist Times

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

Storing Light in a Hurting Jar A Lesson from the Fireflies

By Chris W. Martin



One warm summer evening when fireflies were lighting up my grandparents' farmyard, my seven-year-old sister had a brilliant idea. Since she was a year older and a lot wiser, I usually followed her lead. And this time **she proposed we collect as many fireflies as we could and put them into a large mason jar.** We figured if we could fill the jar, we would have a light so bright and powerful, it would light up a room in the house - maybe even two. So we asked our grandfather to nail holes into the lid of the mason jar; then we stuffed grass into the bottom so the fireflies had something to eat. We figured they ate grass.

By the time our bedtime neared, we must have stuffed about a hundred fireflies into that jar. But the light wasn't as bright as we had expected. The fireflies weren't all blinking at the same time. In fact, some seemed not to light up at all. All of them were crawling around the jar like they were looking for an opening. We decided we would need to collect many more the next night. **But our grandfather had a different idea. He told us that by keeping them in a jar overnight, we would be hurting them.** So we reluctantly opened the lid and let them go.

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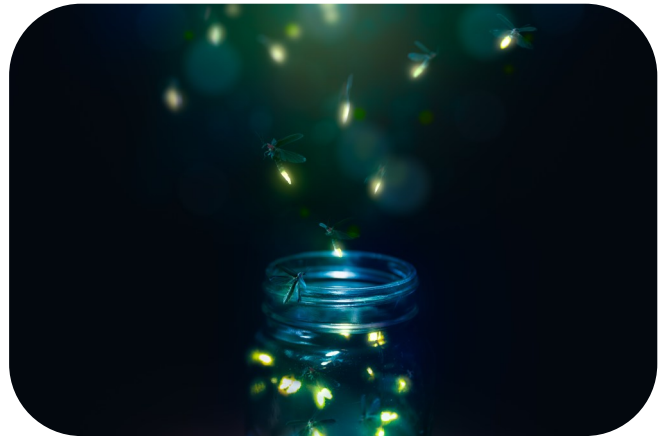
Years later, I learned that fireflies actually light up to keep from being hurt. Their light wards off predators by reminding them they don't taste good. This is due to a chemical in the fireflies' bodies called lucibufagins. **The other purpose of their light is to help them connect and communicate with each other** to procreate. Perhaps an irony is that it's also their light that sometimes gets them put into hurting jars by children on warm summer evenings.

I've discovered that the human heart can sometimes be like a hurting jar. Our light can be dimmed when we stuff in real or perceived hurts. It lowers when we measure and get measured against others instead of remembering we're sisters and brothers. It gets faint when we keep a tally of every wrong while the burden gets heavier and the list becomes long. It can start to flicker when we focus too much on being right rather than being light. You see, I know what it means to hold onto a hurting jar; do you?

So what does it take to open it up so our light can reach its connective and creative purpose? The most difficult part is loosening the lid, especially when it has tightened over time. It can take a lot of strength to turn it toward the right. And that right way is sometimes about doing the hard work of forgiveness

or maybe it's just about forgiving ourselves. It can be about generously giving grace and looking for what's good and positive in everyone. **It takes a strong resolve to overcome the reluctance that contains our light.** But as we let it go, it ends up freeing all that can be hurting us on the inside. And as always, love makes the turning around a lot easier.

When we release our light, then we can shine it so brightly that it will not only illuminate our way, but also give light to the path of others. So the next time you watch the fireflies light up the sky on those warm summer evenings, you can be sure that someone somewhere has opened up another hurting jar. And the proof is in all that light.



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.



The Peer Support Workforce Comes of Age

Can we all rise together?

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By Lori Ashcraft



The peer support movement is coming of age.

Yet, unlike a single human being it is growing up at different speeds in different places. Depending on where you look, the movement may be a confident adult, an ambitious teenager, or a curious toddler still learning how to walk without falling down.

Many of us have taken those longevity tests that tell us our chronological age and then our "real" age, the age our bodies seem to be based on how we've treated them over the years. The results can be humbling. We may be sixty years old but have the body of a seventy-year-old if we haven't taken very good care of ourselves. Apparently, our bodies really do keep score.

Movements are not all that different.

As I look across the country, I see regions where the peer support movement has matured remarkably well. In these places, peers are trusted, respected, and viewed as essential contributors to the mental health system. They occupy leadership positions, influence policy decisions, and are invited to the table not as symbolic participants but as valued partners.

These communities have invested in the workforce. They provide ongoing training, mentorship, supervision, and career pathways. Peers can advance professionally without leaving their peer

identity behind. The result is a workforce with confidence, stability, and a strong sense of purpose.

In these places, the movement begins to resemble a healthy adult. It knows who it is. It understands its value. It has weathered challenges and learned from mistakes. Most importantly, it no longer spends all of its energy trying to prove it deserves to exist.

In other areas, however, the movement is still developing. Confidence in peer support remains tentative. Opportunities for advancement are limited. Peers may still find themselves explaining, defending, and justifying their role. The workforce often experiences high turnover, inconsistent support, and few opportunities for leadership.

These regions remind me of adolescence. **There is tremendous energy, passion, and potential, but there can also be uncertainty about identity, authority, and direction.** Like teenagers, they know they are capable of more than others sometimes believe, yet they are still trying to discover exactly who they are becoming.

And then there are places where the movement is still in early childhood. The concept of peer support may be understood only superficially. Lived experience is welcomed in theory but not always in

practice. Coddling and the promotion of dependency are high and are even seen as best practices by other professions. Peers are often hired without adequate training, support, or opportunities to grow.

Of course, every toddler falls down. That is part of learning to walk. The challenge is not the falling down; it is whether there are people nearby who trust the movement enough to encourage it to get back up and keep going.

This analogy reminds us that growth is not automatic. **Human beings do not mature simply because time passes. We mature because we are nurtured.** We learn from mentors. We are given opportunities to take risks. We make mistakes, recover, and try again. The same is true for movements.

When I look at regions where peer support has flourished, I do not see perfection. I see investment. I see leaders who were willing to take chances. I see peers who persevered through skepticism and misunderstanding. **I see organizations that gradually learned that lived experience is not a liability to be managed but an expertise to be cultivated.**

Perhaps the real measure of a movement's age is not how long it has existed but how much wisdom it has accumulated. Movements, like people, do not become wise simply by surviving. Wisdom emerges from reflection, humility, relationships and the willingness to learn from mistakes.

Wisdom shows up when peers support one another instead of competing with one another. It shows up when other professions stop feeling threatened by their new siblings. It shows up when organizations move beyond simply hiring peers and begin creating environments where peers can thrive. It shows up when lived experience is treated not as a story from the past but as a source of leadership for the future.

Like every human being, the peer support movement is still a work in progress. As it continues to grow, stumble, learn, and evolve we all need to keep in mind the value it adds to the whole. Peer support brings something no credential can provide: the credibility that comes from having walked through

hardship and discovered possibilities on the other side. **It reminds the system that recovery is not merely a clinical outcome but a human experience.**

Circling back to our opening comments about those aging tests, let's recognize that there is a big difference between getting older and getting better, and that every stage of growth requires a letting go of identities that no longer serve us.

For peers, this means having opportunities to take on meaningful responsibilities, contribute ideas, exercise leadership, and learn from both successes and mistakes. Confidence grows not from being protected from challenges but from successfully navigating them.

For organizations, it means creating environments where peer expertise is genuinely valued. It means expecting excellence while providing opportunities for learning and development. It means recognizing that lived experience is not a lesser form of knowledge but a different and equally valuable form of expertise. Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, is not the growth of the peer workforce but the growth required of the systems welcoming it.

The integration of peer support calls upon other professions to evolve as well. It asks clinicians, administrators, and service providers to reconsider long-held assumptions about helping. It invites a shift away from seeing people primarily through the lens of deficits, symptoms, and compliance, and toward seeing them through the lens of strengths, possibilities, self-determination, and purpose. **This is not a loss of professional identity. It is an expansion of it.**

The emergence of the peer workforce creates an opportunity for everyone to grow. Peers are challenged to develop their skills, leadership, and professionalism. Organizations are challenged to become more collaborative and inclusive. Professionals are challenged to see those they serve not as problems to be fixed but as people capable of directing their own lives.

We all rise together.



CRRS continues to make meaningful progress in expanding peer support training and employment opportunities across our programs. **By the close of September, we will have 94 graduates** of the 80-hour CMPSS training as well as two successfully completed 40-hour CMPSS Specialization courses.

Looking ahead, we are launching the Kingsburg/Fresno Peer Employment Learning Center rollout in September. **Leadership will participate in the 80-hour MC PSSC Training**, along with the 2-day Recovery Practices for Leaders and the 1-day Recovery Practices for Organizations training for non-supervisory staff. We will also be scheduling the 80-hour MC PSSC Training for residents in our Kingsburg and Fresno programs, helping support the development of additional Peer Support Specialists

working toward state certification.

CRRS is also proud to be presenting for UC San Diego Community Psychiatry Education on the topic of Peer Empowerment, providing an opportunity to share our experience and promote the importance of empowerment within peer support and recovery-focused services.

We welcome feedback and engagement with anyone around topics and information related to the Peer Support Services and Peer Workforce Development, so please reach out to james.ritchie@cbhi.net. We'd love to hear from you!

- Jim Ritchie, Director of Operations

Viva La Evolution!

A podcast on Growth, Resilience, and Transformation



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