



# Peer Support & Politics of Belonging

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**CAAN**

**Communities, Alliances & Networks**

## Knowledge Bundle 5



Dr. Peter  
Centre



**“Recovery is about today and tomorrow,  
not Yesterday.”**

– Elder Betty McKenna, Elder in Residence CAAN  
Communities, Alliances & Networks



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# Peer Support & Politics of Belonging

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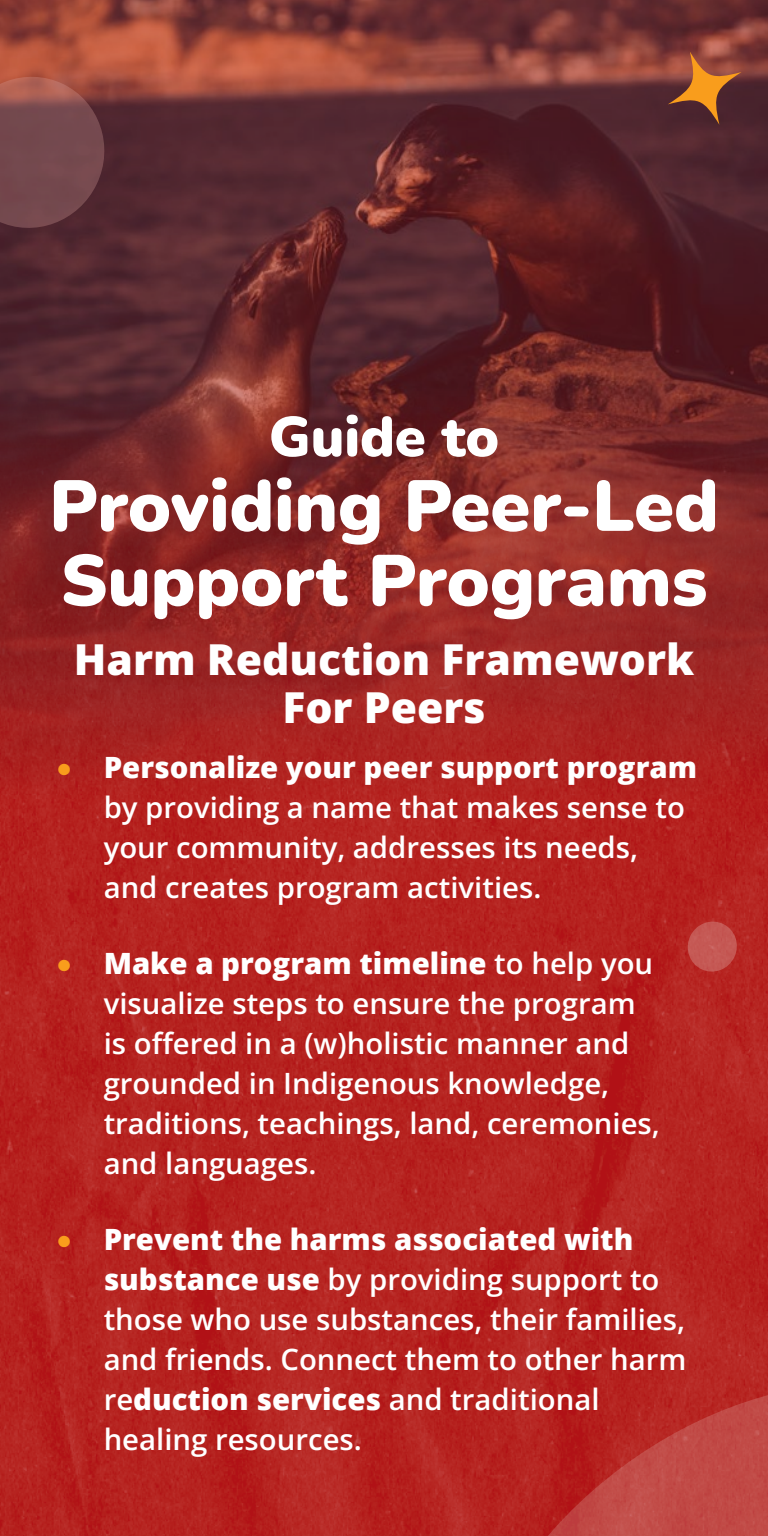
## CONTENTS

**Guide to Providing Peer-Led  
Support Programs**

**Implementing Meaningful Engagement  
Through Peer-Led Support Programs**

**Peer Support Workers  
In Harm Reduction: Sacred Items**



A photograph of two seals on a rocky shore at sunset. The seals are dark brown and are looking at each other. The background is a warm, orange-red sky over the ocean. There are decorative elements: a grey circle in the top left, a yellow star in the top right, and a grey circle in the middle right.

# Guide to Providing Peer-Led Support Programs


## Harm Reduction Framework For Peers

- **Personalize your peer support program** by providing a name that makes sense to your community, addresses its needs, and creates program activities.
- **Make a program timeline** to help you visualize steps to ensure the program is offered in a (w)holistic manner and grounded in Indigenous knowledge, traditions, teachings, land, ceremonies, and languages.
- **Prevent the harms associated with substance use** by providing support to those who use substances, their families, and friends. Connect them to other harm reduction services and traditional healing resources.

- **Set boundaries** by stating when you are a peer and when you are a friend, family member, or community member. Let them know your work hours as a peer support worker.
- **Protect service users by ensuring confidentiality.** Do not discuss their important stories and shared information with family, friends, or other community members.
- **Ensure you have a safe physical or virtual space.** This space should provide equal distribution of voices so everyone is heard and empowered.
- **Don't respond to emergencies alone.** Responding to emergencies that involve danger or violence that puts your safety at risk. Contact emergency services or direct a service user to them.
- **Maintain your wellness** by evaluating your well-being, developing wellness plans, asking for clinical supervision or support from your team, debriefing after a heavy conversation, and taking time off when needed.

- **Ensure the program is inclusive** of age, gender, sexual orientation, literacy levels, socio-economic status, criminal backgrounds, spiritual belief, or disbelief. As well as family and friends supporting a loved one who uses substances.
- **Honor the principles of non-judgment and non-interference.** Trust that every individual knows what is best for them. Provide them the opportunity to exercise self-determination and meet them where they're at.
- **Evaluate your peer support program** by examining accessibility and barriers, opportunities for equal participation, capacity building, and policies.





# Guide to Providing Peer-Led Support Programs

## Harm Reduction Framework For Frontline Workers

- **Understand the importance of peer support groups.** It allows the community to reclaim and maintain their wellness, while also preventing the harms of substance use.
- **Acknowledge Indigenous Harm Reduction is shaped by Indigenous practices and cultural wisdom.** Its programs are offered in a (w)holistic manner and grounded in Indigenous knowledge, traditions, teachings, land, ceremonies, and languages.

- **Recognize the social and historical contexts of health and health care.** The social and health inequalities faced by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples today are a result of the historic and on-going experiences of and ongoing experiences of colonization.
- **Center power and control** by providing the opportunity for Indigenous communities, organizations, and people with lived experiences to take the lead and be involved in every step of the program.
- **Honor the principles of non-judgement and non-interference.** Trust that communities and individuals know what is best for them. Provide them the opportunity to exercise self-determination.
- **Offer support to peer-support workers** by offering clinical supervision, connecting to an Elder, check-in debriefs, administrative support, wellness resources, a living wage, and providing them time off and breaks.
- **Clearly go over policies surrounding boundaries, confidentiality, and safety** to protect the well-being of peer support workers and service users.



- **Prevent the harms associated with substance use** by providing support to those who use substances, their families, and friends. Connect them to other harm reduction services and traditional healing resources.
- **Ensure you have a safe physical or virtual space.** This space should provide equal distribution of voices so everyone is heard and empowered.
- **Ensure the program is inclusive** of age, gender, sexual orientation, literacy levels, socio-economic status, criminal backgrounds, spiritual belief, or disbelief. As well as family and friends supporting a loved one who uses substances.
- **Evaluate your peer support program** by examining accessibility and barriers, opportunities for equal participation, capacity building, and policies.

**Visit [www.caan.ca](http://www.caan.ca) to learn more**



Scan for CAAN's  
Reducing Harms  
of Colonialism video.



# **Implementing Meaningful Engagement**

**Through Peer-Led Support Programs**



## **Meaningful Engagement with Peers**

Peer support is common in Indigenous communities and is used as a community-based approach to addressing substance use and community needs while promoting health equity. It aligns with (w)holistic values of community members having a role in community healing. In harm reduction, peers are trained to start and carry out conversations about substance use, connect community members to harm reduction resources and advocate for making harm reduction supplies locally available.

### **Examples of Meaningful Peer Engagement in Communities:**

Participation in policy-making, political advocacy, research, programming, and practices. Hosting healing circles, community dinners, groups, and/or events. Working collaboratively with community health and clinical health teams.

Connecting with community members by offering support, referrals, resources, and sharing stories.





## **What are the Benefits of Peer-led Support Groups?**

- Strengthens existing support networks and creates new ones.
- Works as a preventative method for substance use and overdoses.
- Support is extended to family members and friends who support someone using substances.
- Provides the opportunity for community members and peers to connect over shared experiences.
- Connects community members to appropriate traditional healing resources, treatment resources, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers.
- Community members who use substances feel welcomed, worthy, and safe.
- Service barriers impacting substance users can be addressed by peers in policy-making and program development.

## Tips for Supporting Peers

- Create a safe and judgment-free environment so they have a sense of belonging, meaning, hope, and purpose.
- Provide harm reduction, trauma-informed care, and facilitation training. Provide flexible schedules, transportation, and disability accommodation.
- Ensure peers from remote, rural, and isolated regions are represented and heard.
- Provide them opportunities to take the lead in decision-making processes. Clearly go over policies surrounding confidentiality, boundaries, and safety. Support them in exercising self-determination when creating initiatives grounded in Indigenous language, traditions, knowledge, and culture.
- Perform wellness check-in with peers. Provide more funding for peer support groups and livable wages so they can afford to work as a peer full-time.

**Visit [www.caan.ca](http://www.caan.ca) to learn more**



Scan to watch CAAN's  
Politics of Belonging  
Short Video.





# Peer Support Workers in Harm Reduction: Sacred Items

Peer support workers provide support, encouragement, guidance, and connection to cultural traditions during one's healing journey. Sacred items in personal bundles can help support a peer when they are providing culturally safe and (w)holistic practices. These items are either given by an Elder, parent, or grandparent or gathered during their own journey of personal development. Below, is a summary of each sacred item, based on the traditional teachings provided by the Anishnawbe Mushkiki:



## Drum & Drumstick

The drum is the heartbeat of Indigenous people and of life. It represents the heart of women as everyone hears the beat of their mother's heart while they are inside her. There are various types of drumsticks, therefore teachings vary. Some teachings state it's the arm of the Great Spirit who gave everyone a heartbeat or part of the Thunderbirds.



## Pipe

The pipe provides a way of communication with the Creator. It represents both the woman (bowl of pipe) and the man (stem of pipe). It's referred to as a Grandmother or Grandfather pipe based on if a woman or man is holding it. When smoked or touched, thoughts and prayers are put into the pipe.



## Eagle Feather

It is highly honorable to receive an eagle feather. The eagle is one of the closest things to the Creator. Teachings state the eagle flies high and speaks for Indigenous people. Those who overcome their battle with substances can earn an eagle feather.



## Rattle

The rattle is used in ceremonies and when singing songs. Indigenous teachings state the rattle was made for everyone by the Creator. When the universe was in darkness, you could only hear the sounds of the shaking of seeds in a gourd. Today, spirits are still drawn to the sound.

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