

## Creative Peer Specialists



The importance of art and creativity cannot be underestimated. Their importance has not always been identified as a top priority in a person's treatment plan but peers themselves are changing that as they learn how valuable creativity has been for themselves. Historically the arts were part of a daily ritual in hospital settings but often to limit creativity to making ashtrays or key-chains. People's artwork was scrutinized for hints of their mental health symptoms or to assist in their diagnosis. Patients were encouraged to paint bright flowery pictures but not always to reveal their personal trauma issues or dark sides that could be helpful for a person to better understand themselves.

An increasing number of peers, consumers, survivors, service recipients (or other terms we have chosen to call ourselves) have found that being creative, doing something we love to do, relaxes us. Research bears out that when a person is engaged their heart rate may return to normal, and other physical changes may actually occur. Peers are surprised that for the moment they forget their anxieties; they are not reaching to take a Xanax, and voila! they have something to show that they can be proud of.

Creativity may be as simple as cooking using a new recipe, planting a flower or caring for plants, taking a photograph and posting it or admiring a picture just drawn or painted. It may be doing a collage, playing word games or doing a crossword puzzle. Many consumers are finding that they can discover parts of themselves through the maze of difficult emotions, historic painful memories, when allowed to express themselves freely. Emotions come bubbling forth in ways that create a mirror to themselves in charcoal,

pastels, written poetry, journal writing or music. The list is endless of how creativity can be integrated in a person's life for healing and when the opportunity to explore is given to another the amazement and surprise they have at seeing the results

## **The Peer Specialist “Creativity” or “ARTSY” Role**

Our purpose in promoting creativity is to integrate art and creativity into one of the recovery roles for peer specialists and to find simple ways that creativity can be introduced. We are known for being peer counselors, peer motivators, navigators, good listeners, crisis prevention specialists, and crisis interventionists, managers and supervisory peers, drop-in-center staff and dozens of other terms related to our unique and individual duties and titles. We can nicely add to our repertoire “Creativity” or “Artsy” peer specialists.

In order for us to be creative with others we need to find our own interests in ways that we are creative. When you have identified your own creative interests it may help to establish a rapport with someone else.

One of the difficulties in implementing creativity may be dictated by job descriptions that do not have time allotted for many special activities if at all. Peers who work in drop-in centers or peer resource centers are more free to explore ways to provide individual and group activities. It may be necessary for us to get “Crafty” as we look for ways to integrate creativity into what has thus far been considered the “true work of peer specialists.”

## **How to be a Creative Peer:**

### **1. What You Wear:**

First start with what you wear. Be a unique and creative dresser. Wear clothes with color, or combinations of colors that attract attention. Let your attire be a conversation piece. Let it be YOU and if you think you do not have style quickly transform yourself to be someone that has a unique style of your own. Create yourself! Wearing a hat might distinguish you, or a button or pin that makes a point about something or is humorous. Maybe one that says, “I am the evidence.”

Whether male or female there are things you can do to stand out and call attention to yourself. Males can wear interesting ties, or lapels, shoes that are shiny and spiffy; females might find this much easier to do as their hair is another place where they can be creative a bit more than males.

### **2. Communicate Freely:**

Let your communication be open and easy, not stifled with clinical jargon or with overused or carefully constructed words. Give someone a “high five”, or a cheery “Hi, Hello.” “Hey Bro” or “What’s up?” A handshake will go a long way to make someone feel comfortable when you first meet them. Although some people may not want to shake your hand most people are happy that someone is acknowledging them in a more personal way. A look of surprise may show on their face as other providers may not

think of this simple gesture as being important. Add a bounce to your voice. Have a joke handy or funny story to tell. Finding out what they like to do, what they like to read, their hobbies and interests can be among the first things you want to find out about them.

### **3. Be a Person First, Not a Title:**

You may have to wear a name badge if you work in certain settings but even if you do it does not require you to play a particular role with your badge. You may also carry keys but they should not be apparent and certainly you don't want to carry a huge number of keys that jingle in your pocket.

Carry something else with you that will help to start and continue a conversation. A notebook with a colorful cover or theme will draw attention. You might want to explain that the notebook is for taking a few notes so that you can remember what they said but not to chart on their record.

Everyone gets tired of talking. Persons with whom you are talking are probably talked out because their story has been gone over with a clinical fine tooth comb. Don't be another person to ask them "about their story"—not yet. They will share with you when they are ready. Tell them some things about yourself first: safe things that are commonly shared around a kitchen table, about your pet, something that happened on the way to work, what movie you just saw or TV program you watched the night before. Share common things, things of interest. **Be a person first, not a person with a title.**

### **4. Create a "Hope Tote":**

What might you carry with you that helps continue the conversation? Get a canvas bag and create your own "Hope Tote" or what I sometimes like to call a "bag of tricks." Your bag should have items that are fun or stimulating, easily secured with things that make them feel special and sometimes that you can do together. Here are some things you could have in your bag.

- Word Search or crossword puzzles (they can be downloaded on line)
- Simple Games
- Sports magazines or articles
- Peer- written narratives
- Small wrapped gifts that they can choose
- Music CD
- Joke book
- Aspirations or inspirations
- Resource information

### **5. Change Serious Environments into Light hearted environments**

Changing environments is a way to make changes. In many settings the walls are lined with "pretty" pictures. Calm pastures with sheep grazing, for example, or landscapes with trees and flowers. They are often old and the color is fading. Exchange those for artwork done by people you are serving. Be sure to use full names to identify the artist (with their consent).

Creating comfort rooms that allow people to get away for silence and individual activities is another way to change environments both in inpatient programs and in community programs. These rooms should be comfortable with comfortable furniture and with things to do that allow someone to relax, listen to music, or read a book

If a person resides in their apartment show them simple ways to decorate using fabrics from thrift stores, vases of picked wildflowers, even light in their apartment makes their space inviting and comforting. Encourage them to put up pictures of their loved ones or of themselves. A nice bedspread makes their bedroom special. Many programs provide funds for furnishing someone's apartment. Giving them ideas of how to decorate will be helpful; if time permits this may be an activity that is permitted.

#### **6. Organize group projects that are fun, creative and healing.**

**Here are some:**

1. "Hands for Hope"—This is an activity that involves tracing one's hand and writing words that describe where their hands have been and the meanings of their hands. They may use magic markers to create designs and to write significant words in their drawn hands.
2. Journal Keeping
3. Create Hope Totes
4. Drumming Circle
5. Making inspirations and affirmations
6. Hold a talent show on a theme
7. Dance
8. Exercise such as Tai chi

**Give them ideas, then, let them choose.**

The list is endless of what you can do. All of these activities might seem simple but the way you present them will determine how creative others will be.

What is artistic and creative? Everything you do with style, with drama, color and cutting edge thinking. There is Art and there is Artistic expression. There is Creating and there is Creativity.

AS peers we need to beat a new drum, create a new rhythm and style. Be a "Crafty" Peer and Spread the word! Power to the ARTS!

<https://power2u.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ComfortRooms4-23-09.pdf>

Field Code Changed