



An Exploration of the Experience of Peer Workers in SPFT, with Particular Focus on Emotional Labour (PEL), with the Aim of Developing a Good Practice Guide for Peer Working

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Public Summary

In mental health services, peer workers are required to use their lived experience of mental health challenges to support others - directly or by helping to improve service provision.

The existing literature suggested that the emotional impact on peer workers of this work was not fully understood. As a result, I undertook the ARC KSS-funded Peer Emotional Labour (PEL) study in order to provide evidence based on the experiences of peer workers employed by Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (SPFT).

The main conclusions from the PEL study were that aspects of cultural and organisational change (including training and supervision) were needed to support the emotional wellbeing of peer workers.

The bridging funding for my PEL research was awarded to enable me to:

- Deepen my knowledge and understanding of emotional labour in the context of peer support workers.
- Present at an international conference, sharing the PEL findings and developing wider contacts.

I was able to achieve these aims in several ways: working with SPFT's central peer team to translate PEL research findings into practice; presenting at various events, including the Critical Voices Conference in Cork, Ireland; establishing a network to support the development of peer/lived experience researchers; and submitting a proposal for the next stage of PEL work. I also became a Peer Research Fellow.





Public and Community Involvement

Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) is at the heart of PEL work and is evident throughout. The PEL presentation at the Cork conference was co-produced and presented with a PEL co-researcher. The PEL paper was published open access (available freely) with co-researchers as co-authors. The new LERN (Lived Experience Research Network) network is co-produced as is the current grant proposal - all team members have lived experience. We worked with other lived experience organisations to develop the bid (Imroc, McPin, NSUN, Survivor Research Network, Service User Research Enterprise (SURE) etc). A lived experience community filmmaker produced a film to accompany the bid.

Dissemination

- Presented PEL findings at SPFT's Lived Experience Board. Christmas Musonza (Director of Engagement and Experience): *'Thank you for attending and leading some of the discussions today. The work you are doing needs more coverage. Its great work for the organisation and the people we serve'*.
- Asked by The Head of Mental Health Engagement and Recovery (Ireland) to lead training on The Challenges of Staying Well as a Peer Worker (Sept 2024).
- Presented at the Critical Perspectives Conference (Nov 2024) The reality of peer working in an NHS mental health service.

Publications

[What supports the emotional well-being of peer workers in an NHS mental health service?](#)

Impact and Implementation

I am working with SPFT's central peer team to develop and implement guidance based on the study findings - i.e. translating research into practice. The term emotional labour is now used by peers as a way of understanding their lived experience in their professional role and I have been asked to advise on peer emotional wellbeing. We continue to hear that the PEL study is impacting practice, strategy and policy beyond SPFT.

An important impact has been the development of peer researchers. As well as setting up LERN and the current proposal, I have employed peer researchers on grant studies. As part of this activity, I am in the process of developing new NHS Agenda for Change job descriptions for Band 4-6 peer researchers. In large studies, I am pushing that peer researchers are part of our offer. We have developed training and supervision support around these roles.

Finally, I think that becoming a Peer Research Fellow has added to my public credibility and authority too.

What next?

Research will continue to be key to the development of peer support work in both NHS mental health services and other contexts. With collaborators, I am developing plans for the next phase of research to support the development of this new and expanding part of the NHS workforce.