

Peers Helping Peers on a New Warm Line

by Rachel Hays

"Good evening, you've reached the Metro Boston Peer Warm Line. This is Rachel. How are you?" "I'm hungry," a female voice responds. I consider what she means, how to respond. Is "hungry" a metaphorical description of an emotional state of yearning or unfulfillment? Or, if the hunger is physical, could she be out of money or food stamps, unable to afford food and in need of a referral to a food pantry? Or, could she be struggling with compulsive overeating, seeking food as an addict seeks drugs? Working as an operator at the Warm Line has taught me not to presuppose an awareness of a caller's meaning, but rather to retain a certain humility as I seek to enter into a caller's personal frame of reference, gaining familiarity with the individual's understanding of his or her own cognitive and emotional terrain as I learn and use the language of individual human experience.

The Metro Boston Recovery Learning Community's Warm Line opened in the middle of January and answers calls Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays from 4 pm to 8 pm at the nationally-accessible toll-free number 1-877-733-7563 (which can be remembered as 1-877-PEER-LNE). The Warm Line, like the Metro Boston Recovery Learning Community (MBRLC) itself, is staffed entirely by people who are ourselves in recovery from psychiatric conditions and who have been trained to attentively and empathically listen, offering compassion and validation as we assist callers in connecting with their own internal resources, strengths, and direction.

A fundamental principle of Warm Lines, like peer support in general, is a belief that within each of us is a unique value, an emergent strength and wisdom. And so, when callers present problems, we encourage and facilitate their own exploration of the associated issues and concerns, refraining from guiding them with direct advice, but rather engaging as fellow travelers.

Most calls that I have answered are from people seeking a fellow traveler, a compassionate witness to the struggles and joys of their days. We are peers, together engaged in the process of recovery that is both individual and collective, sharing our experiences with a mutuality that challenges and deconstructs the hierarchical role distinctions of the traditional mental health system in which the providers of assistance are separated from the recipients of assistance.

As peer support workers, we do not, however, indiscriminately share our own experiences of struggle and strength, but rather seek to purposefully use our personal recovery stories to facilitate engagement and foster connection, always aware that despite apparent similarities, we cannot assume or presuppose unwarranted understanding.

A certain humility is necessary to suspend one's assumptions and seek to truly understand the world from another person's vantage point. A certain faith is necessary to believe that within all of us resides the wisdom we need to make decisions and address problems. Through all of the vicissitudes of recovery, the Warm Line affirms and supports such

individual understanding and wisdom.

While the Warm Line is operated by the DMH-funded Metro Boston Recovery Learning Community calls from anywhere in Massachusetts are welcomed.

For more information on the Metro Boston Recovery Learning Community please visit www.metrobostonrlc.org For more information on warmlines in general, please visit www.warmline.org

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