

## Peer Support in Gambler's Help – Unique to Victoria

Gambler's Help North & North Western has been offering telephone based peer support for nearly 10 years in Victoria. GHN&NW is a program within the Banyule Community Health Service.

The program, "Peer Connection" is the only peer support program for people impacted by problem gambling anywhere in the world. It evolved from a group of clients participating in a psycho-educational program who said that they would like to continue supporting each other. The telephone service was piloted and has continued to develop, and is now funded by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

The service is delivered by peer support volunteers who have recovered from the impacts of their own or another person's gambling problem. Successful applicants to volunteer receive comprehensive training through a self-paced manual with lots of written exercises and discussion points. While the volunteer works through the manual they attend regular shifts to discuss their work with the program coordinator, and learn about the role by observing and talking with experienced volunteers. Once the training and orientation has been completed the coordinator will allocate a client to the new volunteer. The volunteer will provide support calls over a 5 shift probationary period, with call planning and debriefing with the coordinator. Once the volunteer has successfully completed the probationary period they will continue to support the client and increase their case load with new clients.

Volunteers attend regular weekly shifts to make calls to their allocated clients. A supervisor is present at all shifts to provide advice, guidance, support and feedback for each call. The atmosphere in the office is often lively with discussions about how best to support clients, and new skills to practice on the telephone.

Referrals to the program are assessed by the coordinator to ensure that the service is suitable for their current needs, and to refer to additional or alternative services if required. If Peer Connection is appropriate the client will be allocated to a volunteer, based on a range of factors which may include their age, type of gambling activity, main concerns such as relationships, employment or financial, and general life stage and interests. Peer Support Volunteers call their clients weekly, but as the client moves towards their goals the calls may reduce in frequency to fortnightly or less often. The change in frequency is negotiated between the client and the volunteer.

Peer Support volunteers attend bi-monthly meetings which also have a professional development component. They are also invited to training provided by Banyule Community Health Service and any other providers, to develop their confidence and skills/knowledge to provide a quality service.

While the value of peer support in many areas is well documented there is little evidence about the benefits of peer support for people affected by a gambling problem. Comments from a recent client survey suggest that the benefits of peer support also are gained in this sector.

*"I have found "all" conversations held with my volunteer from Peer Connections, very supportive and his support & suggestions for me have been very valuable."*

*"It lets me have regular contact with someone who has been thru similar experiences to mine, who I can talk to without any fear and who challenges me to face certain issues in my life. And to have a laugh from time to time which might even be the most valuable thing of all."*

*"(I) can discuss my gambling issues with her knowing she has been where I am, and that I am not judged. Even at my lowest she was there with me and I truly value that."*

*"It helps me to keep on a straight path and also makes me feel good about myself when I am told I'm doing well."*

**And the volunteer's themselves? What do they gain from their participation:**

*"I'm learning with every call, every experience of my callers. I'm also improving on my own analytical abilities and communication skills. Also constantly learning new services and supports available out there."*

*"I feel I am contributing to other people in return for help I have received. I enjoy the social contact with my supervisor, volunteers and others."*

*"Giving something back and feeling good about helping someone stop a destructive habit. I feel self-confident and really good about myself, because I was the person on the other end of the phone and I felt bad about myself."*

*"Doing something "good" through such a bad experience."*

**For more information, to refer a client or apply to volunteer with the Peer Connection Program contact**

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