

15 years of peer support

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Aim: To demonstrate how the Counterpart Peer Support Model has evolved to meet the supportive care needs of women with cancer.

Peer support in health and community care

Peer support has long been recognised as a valuable support response in many health and social domains: people or peers with a lived experience, supporting others who are undergoing a similar situation. Peer support offers non-judgemental, empathic and authentic support in validating others and providing emotional and practical support. Mental health, parenting, stroke, heart disease, diabetes, gambling, neonatal deaths, are all areas where peer support is well embedded in the care continuum.

Counterpart

- Counterpart's unique model connects, supports and informs women living with a gynaecological or breast cancer to live well, whatever that means to them. Highly trained, professional Peer Support Volunteers with a lived experience of cancer, provide understanding and a listening ear, as well as emotional and practical support.
- Counterpart Peer Support Volunteers:
 - » listen to and provide space for women to talk through their feelings following a cancer diagnosis
 - » validate women's experiences and share useful aspects of their own cancer experience if helpful
 - » assist women to locate reliable information
 - » direct women to other services that provide practical help, medical advice or support.

Elements for success

Over the last 15 years Counterpart (formerly BreaCan) has continuously reviewed and refined its volunteer peer support program to ensure a high standard of care to all who have used the service.

Four areas are critical for success:

- Recruitment
- Training
- Support
- Continuous improvement



Counterpart Peer Support Volunteers

106 trained
9 intakes
50 currently active



- In 15 years of service delivery, volunteers have had over 27,000 contacts with women.
- In 2018, two volunteers are celebrating 15 years of service and another three are celebrating 10 years.
- On average, volunteers contribute one 5-hour shift every two to three weeks.

Volunteering at Counterpart

In addition to peer support, volunteers also provide a range of other services at Counterpart including:

- Library services
- Administrative assistance
- Exercise programs
- Promotional display support



“It's very rewarding to feel you have made a difference to the life of another woman.”

Recruitment

How to get the right women for the role – it's not for everyone

Success factors:

A proven but flexible approach to recruitment of volunteers that:

- builds on lessons learnt from previous intakes
- uses skilled and experienced volunteers to assist with the selection process
- asks women to provide a detailed application, attend a group interview and provide referees.

Personal qualities of women recruited:

- Women need to have understood and accepted the impact of their own treatment.
- Women need to be able to talk about their own experience without distress.
- Generally, women need some space following the end of treatment.

Challenges:

- Achieving a diverse pool of volunteers to reflect the broader population of women diagnosed with breast or a gynaecological cancer. Factors include:
 - » Young women are often busy with families, work or study.
 - » Women from CALD communities may have a different understanding of volunteering and peer support, or have other family and community priorities.
 - » Attracting women with a variety of cancer diagnoses and treatments to complement the support offered.
- Attracting women who can make the commitment to volunteer regularly and commit to on-going training.
- The process is extensive and takes at least three months from application to final selection and then training commences.

Training

Giving volunteers the skills, confidence and knowledge they need to support other women and to care for their own wellbeing

Success factors:

- A qualified training practitioner designs and implements the training program.
- Dedicated resources are adapted and revised following feedback from each intake.
- A mix of online and face-to-face learning.
- A focus on emotional and practical skills with self-care prominent.
- A range of dedicated health professionals provide content and professional skills to support the training.
- Experienced Peer Support Volunteers assist with training content and mentoring.
- A three-month orientation period complements the training.

Challenges:

- Ensuring training content is up to date and reflects best practice – needs constant review.
- Scheduling of guest speakers and manipulating content to ensure flow and pace is time consuming and relies on good will of our many presenters.
- Potential volunteers can find the idea of a 6-week program daunting.
- Some potential volunteers are unable to attend on the chosen day/s.
- Having a suitable training venue available for the program.

Support

Looking after the wellbeing of volunteers; an important part of the equation

Success factors:

- Dedicated coordinator who provides support to volunteers.
- Recognition that continually talking with women with cancer can be difficult and emotionally draining.
- Debriefing/reflection after every conversation – with staff and other volunteers to identify key issues, talk through the conversation and plan for future contact.
- Volunteers and staff share respectful and collegiate relationships with each other.
- Celebrating the work of volunteers at every shift as well as key times throughout the year (National Volunteering Week, certificates of service, social events).
- Flexibility and understanding of the life issues all volunteers face – adapt volunteering to the needs of the women.

Challenges:

- A volunteer's re-diagnosis has an impact on all.
- Death of volunteers is sad and can be confronting.
- Volunteers can gain skills and confidence to enter/re-enter the workforce – impact on availability.
- Size of the volunteer pool is always fluctuating depending on other life factors.

Continuous improvement

The volunteer voice is elemental to the success and development of Counterpart

Success factors:

- Debriefing at every session develops knowledge for all involved.
- Regular in-service training is provided based on skill areas identified by volunteers as useful or derived from topics that are prominent in the cancer sector.
- An evaluation survey is conducted each year to gauge volunteer skills, understanding and satisfaction with Counterpart. This provides Counterpart with information to support the volunteer program and develop additional strategies to meet any needs that are identified.
- A Volunteer Reference Group gives volunteers access to organisational decisions and ability to have input where appropriate.
- Volunteers are included in Counterpart Advisory Group – their voices are heard throughout the organisation.

Challenges:

- The volunteer voice is not homogenous so representing diversity of thought and opinion can be challenging.
- Volunteers have different levels of interest and engagement in the broader organisation.
- Maintaining knowledge and skills across the volunteer pool can be difficult.