

# I Am a Survivor and an Advocate

## Peer specialists in prison help others and themselves

*Sergio Hyland*

**BEFORE YOU READ:** Think about the meaning of the word “peer.” Who are your peers? Why might peers be good at helping each other?

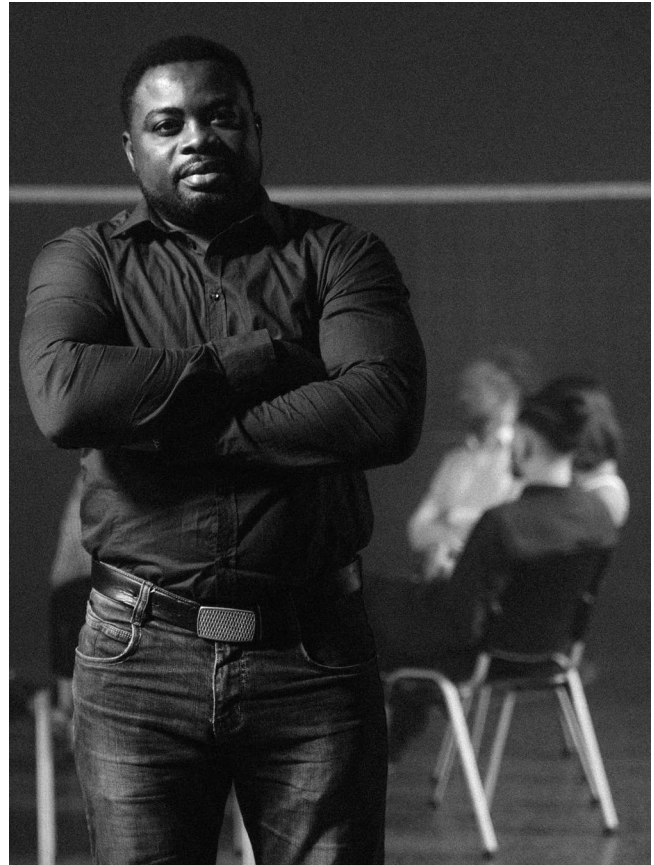
### Can't Rely on Prison Staff

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit, prisoners all across America have been suffering from diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health issues, mainly depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and suicidal thoughts. I witness these issues firsthand. In fact, I've suffered from them myself. Most prisoners feel that we can't rely on prison staff and administrators to treat our mental health needs adequately. So we have Certified Peer Specialists (CPS) to help mitigate the depressing consequences of the pandemic.

At my prison, I work as a Certified Peer Specialist (CPS), and I enjoy my job. It's very challenging, but it's also very rewarding. As a CPS, my primary objective is to focus on a peer's recovery. Nearly 20% of Americans are diagnosed with a mental disorder in any given year. It's likely that plenty of your peers are dealing with mental health issues, too. Therefore, it's in all of our best interests to know how to support those who are struggling, so that they can begin the process of recovery.

### A Foundation of Love

From a CPS standpoint, recovery means to remember who you are, and use your strengths to become all that you were meant to be. Sometimes, after a person is diagnosed with some form of mental condition, they start to feel as though their diagnosis is *who they are*; they begin to feel stigmatized. They “lose their self.” In the recovery paradigm, we counter that narrative by reminding a peer of their good qualities. They are more



Tima Miroshnichenko, pexels.com

than their diagnosis. We also make it clear that recovery isn't our job; it's up to each peer to embark upon their own path of recovery. However, we play a role in helping them find their path. My job is to be with a peer who is suffering or headed toward a crisis. Sometimes a person just needs to be validated as a human being.

The CPS approach to recovery is based on a foundation of love. We offer these key recovery pathways:

- We instill hope, partly by modeling our own recovery.
- We remind peers that they have choices.

- We point out where they are already powerful so they can claim their own empowerment.
- We encourage them to put themselves in social and cultural environments that promote recovery.
- And we encourage them to embrace a higher being or meaning for survival.

### It Helps Me When I Help Others

Helping others on their path to recovery has been very therapeutic to me. We all need to be reminded of our humanity; we need to know that we're loved and appreciated. It's sad – but honest – to say that the prison environment doesn't promote a culture of love, empathy, and understanding. Still, I'm encouraged by the ways that many prisoners – especially the elders – have come together and given support to other prisoners in need. When I mentor the younger guys here, I keep in mind their internal suffering, and I'm always sure to remind them of their positive qualities, so that they can find the strength to move forward in such a depressing environment.

I'm no different than anybody else. I suffer just as much as any other person in prison – or anywhere for that matter. But when I have the opportunity to give support to another human being, I feel as if I've taken another step forward on my own recovery path. Being there for my peers has taught me to have empathy and respect for the struggles of others, and to see myself more clearly.

Let's face it, prisons weren't created with humanity in mind. Needless to say, they are not equipped to treat people with mental health issues. Yet mental wellness isn't impossible to achieve – even in prison. Recovery is sometimes a lifelong process. But we don't have to be victims of our ailment. No matter who you are or where you live, you have the ability to be a part of the solution. You have the strength to help others, and in the process, you will help yourself. I truly believe that the best deed any person can perform, is to serve the needs of others. That's what keeps me going in such a desperate situation as this.

### AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, why is it helpful to have Certified Peer Specialists in prison?
2. The articles on pp. 26-27 and 30-31 are also about people who work as or hope to work as peer counselors. What are some common themes in their stories?

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Source: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov).

## Become a Peer Specialist

A peer specialist is someone who shares the experience of living with a mental illness or addiction. If you are interested in becoming a peer specialist, research what is required in your state to become certified. Check out <https://www.mhanational.org/how-become-peer-support-specialist> for more information and resources.

Becoming a peer specialist could be a first step on a career pathway (see image below). Our "Career Pathways" issue of *The Change Agent* (#45) explores this career pathway (p. 13) as well as many others.

Mental Health/Community Outreach Career Pathway		
Median Hourly Pay* & Title	Skills	Education & Time Required
\$28.86 Social Worker	Trained to treat mental, emotional, and behavioral problems, able to problem-solve, communicate, manage time, navigate health, school, and government systems	Bachelor's and/or Master's in Social Work 4 years
\$21.38 Health Educator	Trained to educate people about health, communication skills, leadership skills, organization and interpersonal skills, computer skills, critical thinking	Bachelor's Degree 2 years
\$17.95 Community Health Worker	Rooted in and connected to the community, strong communication skills (eg., reading, writing, listening, and speaking in more than one language)	H.S. Diploma or Equivalent, 1-year certificate or Associate's Degree 3-7 yrs.
\$13.74 Substance Abuse Counselor	Trained in counseling and experience with substance abuse, strong communication skills (eg., reading, writing, listening, and speaking in more than one language)	High School Diploma or Equivalent, Certificate 1 semstr.
\$12.93 Peer Specialist	Lived experience of addiction, and/or mental or physical health problems; strong communication Skills	High School Diploma or Equivalent, 40-hour certificate various