

Back to Work and Couldn't Be More Grateful

A Certified Peer Specialist Helps Others—and Himself—Stay Well

Sergio Hyland

Before Covid-19 took over the world and changed the way we do... EVERYTHING, many of us held the kind of jobs that allowed us to mingle, move around, and experience something different every day. That was especially true for me.

I am a Certified Peer Specialist (CPS); and I am a prisoner.

Being incarcerated for such a long time can be depressing. I mean, let's face it, prison isn't a happy place. Due to my many years of incarceration, I took on the typical view of the average prisoner. I was unhappy, depressed, and very

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short on hope. Then I was selected to be a CPS, and everything started to change.

As a CPS, I'm given certain liberties that most prisoners don't enjoy. For instance, while most prisoners are confined to their

respective housing unit, I get to walk around the prison, talking to staff and prisoners alike, hearing stories and listening to people reminisce on better days. My job was to support others, but I found it to be therapeutic for me too.

This job helped me to wake each day with hope, excited about what I might hear, and whom I might be able to help. Then, in March of 2020, everything changed. First, our in-person visits



were suspended, then school; before we knew it, all prisons were on an enhanced lockdown. All prisoners were confined to their cells for 23½ hours per day.

I was devastated. I never realized how much I depended on my job for the maintenance of my mental health. After a few days of this enhanced lockdown, I found myself slipping back into a deep state of depression. To make matters worse, no psychologists were available on the inside.

I was on the verge of a mental health crisis. Now, more than a year since this pandemic began, I sometimes wonder how I made it. Things aren't back to normal yet—and they may never be—but I'm back to work, and I couldn't be more grateful.

Since I've been around so long, I'm well known, and prisoners call day and night from every unit to speak with me. I feel a sense of freedom each time I put on my green shirt that says "CPS" on the back. When I'm walking down the long, empty hallways to do my job, I know that I'm on my way to provide support for a fellow human being. The only real difference now is that it isn't just a green shirt anymore, it's also a green mask!

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Still, working during this pandemic has its challenges. For instance, because of the potential for spreading Covid-19, I'm only allowed to provide support for those prisoners who reside in the same tower as me. I understand the need for caution, but I still miss talking to those whom I used to assist regularly.

One of the skills I learned as a CPS was to help someone recognize the difference between what it feels like to be well versus unwell. That way, you can see the signs of a potential crisis, and implement measures to avert it. Being back at work has enabled me to see the difference between what I look like when I'm well, and what I look like when I'm unwell. I never thought that a job would contribute so much to my wellness. If my own mental wellness is attached to my abil-

ity to help others be well, then I believe I play a critical role in the overall wellness of my community. And I hope to be able to continue playing that role when I'm out of prison.



AFTER YOU READ: According to the author, how does his job support his mental health? Describe the ways your job supports or detracts from your mental wellness.


Sergio Hyland has written many articles for The Change Agent. He edits the prison newsletter, he has a podcast at [Prison Radio](#), and his Instagram is [Uptown Serg](#). He is incarcerated in Chester, PA.

Learn about Careers in Peer Support

Read more stories by adult learners who found careers as peer support specialists. Alex Tingler (below left) is a recovering addict who works at an addiction treatment facility in Maryland. Zenaida Garcia (center), who suffered depression and abuse, works as a Peer Recovery Specialist in Rhode Island. Sergio Hyland is a trauma survivor and Certified Peer Specialist at the prison where he is incarcerated in Pennsylvania. Explore a career in peer support by looking at [this collection](#) of stories and career ladders. Find more career exploration activities under "Extras" for [Issue #53](#).

I Got Help And Now I Help Others

Alex Tingler



BEFORE YOU READ: Look at the subheadings and the chart. What will this article will be about?

Raised by Parents with Addictions
Growing up I never had a stable home. My parents were both addicts. My dad left when I was a child and my mom would randomly leave me with people while she was out using drugs. When I was six years old, my aunt finally took me in as one of her own, but she was an addict as well. Next thing I knew, I was that girl living in a house with drug paraphernalia scattered all over, and random strangers

Next thing I knew, I was that girl living in a house with drug paraphernalia scattered all over, and random strangers coming in and out all hours of the night

outside watching us. She opened the windows so no one could see us. As a child, I had to feel a lot more mature than you. I never celebrated holidays, have toys like other children, late to what they did for any specific group of people, drugs destroy my family, that little girl who swore all my life I just wanted to

be accepted, so I started hanging out with the older cool kids and partying. My dad passed away from an overdose when I was 13 years old. During that time, my aunt would go on binges. She would disappear for days, sometimes weeks at a time, which meant I needed to stay home and watch her kids.

I missed so many days of school, I failed my classes. I dropped out of the eighth grade, my partying took off from there. It went from occasional thing to an every-chance thing. I was from smoking weed, to smoking weed and doing, to doing anything I could get my hands on. I found freedom in getting high and for the first time in my life, I was comfortable. I was no longer

mentally, I fell in love with it. I absolutely became. I was just the two people I resent

Scared
ous times for possession to distribute. I was sentenced to a completed my year, I was Arundel County Circuit Court. I was sent to treatment. I was angry and her I wasn't planning asked me to complete I acted on impulse and my life be like if that question interrupt could think for a mur

My Couch, My Walls, My Hair What to Do (and Not to Do) for your Mental Health During a Pandemic

Zenaida Garcia



My Work and My Wacky Moments
Part of my job is to be well and to help others find wellness. But sometimes we all lose the sunlit path. We find ourselves wandering into darkness. In this essay, I'm going to take you on my journey into the darkness of depression and show you how I found my way back to the path.

Like many Americans, before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, I was more or less fine. Then, things changed. Because of Covid-19, the city bus became a scary place, a strange condition, and I induced anxiety. At work, I would see my clients except through myself isolated. I hit a low.

I work as a Peer Recovery mental health center. As part of people and support them in the them know that they're not alone there is a better life out there. I me, too. It gives my life purpose.

But sometimes my clients share their innermost secrets with some of my own. I know how to be to do things that we're not times, such as the one we're in out strange feelings. Here are some out pandemic moments. I share here so you can see you are not have to throw away your furniture don't have to repaint your entire I did, you don't have to cut off did. You can learn from my fail better, as well as from my success

Furniture / Paint / Hair
I live in a small apartment. When I moved in, my son bought me a beautiful, comfortable, beige couch. I loved it. So many beautiful memories happened on that couch. My grandson's face used to light up when he jumped on it—he thought he was Superman! I used to catch him and tickle him and hug him. I taught him how to read on that couch. And I told him bedtime stories on that couch until he fell asleep, getting drool on my beautiful upholstery.

making me str-crazy! I away my couch. I was stuck for what seemed side felt irritating. I before. I swear it goal. And it took up was suffering from induced claustrophobia. I posted on Facebook—"and it didn't in it. The couch wasn't gone? My anxiety closing in on me. color started irritat at the bone white, washing serotonin ware and picked white paint. And, I did my best color. But what it sion. Even as the

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 "peer." Who are your peers? Why might you be helping each other?

on Prison Staff
Covid-19 pandemic hit, prisoners all over the world have been suffering from undiagnosed mental health issues, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and thoughts. I witness these issues firsthand, suffered from them myself. Most prisons that we can't rely on prison staff and officers to treat our mental health needs. So we have Certified Peer Specialists help mitigate the depressing consequences.

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

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.