intentional peerSUPPORT
Peer Support is about Social Change

An Interview with IPS Founder, Shery Mead

What does recovery mean to you?

"It's funny, I never really liked that word, to be honest, even when we were sort of throwing it around in the early 90s because I guess it for me, it means sort of going back to something and I never really wanted to go back to something. I sort of never had a place that I wanted to return to.

I know what it means in the general sense, and I know what other people mean by it, but I guess I kind of like the language of evolution or, you know, growing or something like that. So, what that means to me is that I'm sort of ever learning, ever becoming more complex and growing more mature is sort of one of the ways that I look at it. I guess that would be a word I would use even though that probably doesn't strike people as a very positive thing.

Sometimes, when I was a kid, when I was 16 and in high school and there was a lot of secrecy, partly because I was a kid, but you know the messages weren't good. I was told I had schizophrenia, which was kind of a garbage-can diagnosis for anybody they didn't know what to do with, and told that I'd be on these medications. I got told I was going to live in a group home and all that stuff that lots of people get told. And then, as an adult, in my 30s, I had a great psychiatrist who didn't do the labelling thing. But when I got back in the hospital system, they told me, you have this major mental illness and you need to go on disability and you'll be in and out of here for the rest of your life and all the nonsense that everybody else gets told.

What does peer support mean to you?

Peer support in general, I think, is that moment at which you meet somebody who has something in common with you that very few other people do, and you just feel that immediate kinship with. You know, it's that instant bond, that instant, oh good, somebody gets it kind of feeling. I think that's where all peer support begins, whether it's 12 step or for whatever kind of peer support it is soccer mom peer support, or whatever it is. I guess over the years I've thought a lot about it and when I got involved in peer support early on, when I was working in the field, I saw people kind of find that bond, which is a wonderful thing. But then they get stuck in it and think about how that commonality that they shared in that kind of peer support was something that kept them tied to that disability. So, I got very involved in using that peer support to intentionally challenge each other. You build this strong relationship in which there's trust and respect and honesty, and then you use that to really help each other move and grow as opposed to just sort of commiserating around the thing that you're that you've got in common.

I guess peer support means to me developing strong and healthy enough relationships so that you allow the person to open you up a bit and help you grow both ways, and if it doesn't go both ways, it's not peer support, in my opinion. Mutuality is integrally tied to doing peer support effectively, I think.

Can you share a bit about what this looks like in your own life?

I really like working out a lot. When I was younger, I ran and I biked and I did a lot of athletic kinds of things and that was life saving for me, totally lifesaving. My knees went and I got Parkinson's, and you know, little by little I lost those kinds of things. And, for a while, I think I just sort of survived, you know, in the light of this new thing. Now Chris [Hansen, Shery's wife] and I go back to the gym and that's really nice. That has been really important to me, but I guess the other thing is I really like this work and watching. I like to think about stuff a lot and then try it out with people and see where it goes. It's been really interesting over the last 15 years to kind of watch people I've known challenge themselves and each other to move out of the system, out of these concepts they've held about themselves. You've got to walk the talk to do it. When I watch other people challenging themselves, it kind of reminds me what I have to do to keep doing the work. So, it's very stimulating to be involved in other people's movement because it pushes me as well. I've developed a lot of relationships that are peer support for me as well, and it's helped a lot.