

My name is Abby and I work for Pathways Vermont at our community center. We are a peer run drop-in center where we offer intentional peer support (a unique model) and customized employment support. I have been with the center as the Employment Team Leader for 6 years and helped found the space in Spring of 2012. Since working, I have seen the incredibly positive impact of mental health peer support. It is so important that people can connect with others to not feel so alone. I remember talking to a woman who proclaimed that she was determined to talk her own life after we closed at 5pm. I was able to relate to feeling so hopeless and add that, for me, depressed feelings come in waves and they are painful but will inevitably pass. I listened as she shared about her struggles and frustrations. She left the space feeling better, and at the very least, heard. Examples like this make me realize how effective genuine, meaningful, and authentic connection can be.

Mental health affects all of us and finding services that promote more healthy supports, and in my case, peer support, is crucial and literally saves lives. We are able to relate to universal emotions and specific experiences that stem from painful and difficult trauma and offer curious and compassionate peer support based on mutuality.

I am so grateful for the mental health support I've received, without which, I would probably be struggling immensely. When I was in the hospital 5 years ago, it was people who talked to me with respect and dignity and connected with me about things like mutual interests that helped me recover. For me, medication, therapy and tools like yoga and deep breathing have been helpful as well.

Mental health issues can be a huge barrier, but with the proper supports, individuals struggling can overcome these obstacles and contribute unique perspectives in our society.

Right now, our struggles at the center are having funds to provide more drop in hours (we currently can only offer 27 hours per week) and funds to hire, train and pay our hard working staff. There are so many areas of mental health support that also need funding. With mental health affecting so many of us, it's imperative that we address these needs in our community that is filled with complex, valuable and unique individuals.