

*Tony Gee (Compassionate Friends) gave this talk at the Launch of the Charter for Peer Support and the Centre for Excellence in Peer Support on 21 June 2011.*

First I would like to say I feel honoured to have been invited to speak at this launch ... and while I will share what is in part my own thoughts and story, I am also aware that I speak on behalf of my peers and the organisations through which we are connected.

From that point of view, I would like to acknowledge the inclusive and collaborative nature of this project. Not only were seven organisations involved (and they produced a common document - a remarkable feat in itself!), they represented many diverse and varied experiences. From the very beginning consumers and carers alike participated in an open and invitational way, AND from within this diversity, when talking of the importance of peer support, we found that we all spoke with one voice ... this Charter is a testament to that voice.

So on behalf of all of those involved (and who we represent), I say thank you to the organisations and in particular to those individuals who continued to drive the project and keep everyone included, informed and empowered.

So some of my story. My professional background is in psychology and I have worked and continue to work, in areas from mental health to family breakdown. But my professional and personal life was turned upside down with the suicide of my youngest daughter Nellie in 2005. Nell had just turned 15 and for me, her two older sisters, her extended family and friends, life had suddenly altered irrevocably ...

So how did we manage. I think my professional background helped in some manner, but I found it somewhat odd at the time that help for me did not come from professionals or experts in the field (in fact some of the strangest and least helpful responses came from experts), but came essentially from two main sources.

The first was from meeting, talking to and sharing with people who had experienced something similar, people whose lived experience was somewhat akin to mine, who like me, had wrestled in the dark of night with issues of guilt, of responsibility, of 'what if's', of deep and all consuming loss. On some level they just understood what I was going through, they quietly accepted my pain and in their own special ways, they were just simply available and 'there' ...

And the second source was that in the meeting, hearing, sharing and ongoing connection with peers, my own inner resources were somehow enabled or enlivened or even respirited. Perhaps I found hope in others who had journeyed ahead of me, perhaps I found some guidance in their experience, perhaps in the chaos of loss, I simply found somewhere I now found safe and understood.

In any case, for me this is what Peer Support is all about. It is about finding and relating to others who have had similar lived experience. And with that, and through that, it is about finding, enabling and activating one's own inner resources for recovery and healing.

This is a very different model of help than the professional or expert model.

I say this as I believe (as a consumer and carer and psychologist) that it is almost impossible to adequately understand the experience of life trauma, of loss, of addictions, of physical and mental illness, of chronic mental and physical ill-health, to those who have not had the 'lived experience'. It is almost impossible to convey how isolating and emotionally devastating such experiences can be. It is impossible to convey that these experiences do not last for the hour in the counselling office, the few hours of the group, or the weekend of the workshop, they continue day in and day out, hour by hour, minute by minute for each of our lives. This is our lived experience.

And while professional support and intervention at times is extremely helpful and indeed necessary in many situations, it seems to me that it is one part of the journey and indeed, in many cases, can only take us so far ...

And this is why I welcome this Charter. I think it marks a milestone in Peer Support so Peer Support can stand up and take centre stage as a primary and essential intervention. And when we are struggling with mental health budgets, with interventions that may be problematic and so on, Peer Support is not only extremely cost effective but a proven and validated method of help.

And on a final note, I have been lucky enough to spend some time recently working with indigenous people, both Australian and Native American. What I am learning is how community connected they are. In our western individualistic tradition we have tended to establish expert hierarchies, separate 'other', marginalise 'them', pathologise illness and distress and leave it to 'experts' to help. I have found the principles of Peer Support to be very consistent with the wisdom traditions of indigenous culture and in particular the focus on the 'self in community' and the deep connectedness that we all share.

I hope this Charter will lead us further along this path and towards greater community understanding and ultimately towards a true Community of Care.

Thank you.