

EDUCATION BULLETIN Original release: March 31, 2020 Updated: August 16, 2024

## HELPING EACH OTHER THROUGH CHALLENGES: PROVIDING INFORMAL PHYSICIAN-TO-PHYSICIAN PEER SUPPORT

### Content Attribution

Well Doc Canada has reviewed, synthesized, adapted, and added to information from the following sources. Please consult these sources if you want more information.

- [On physician well-being – You’ll get by with a little help from your friends](#)
- [Not all coping strategies are created equal: a mixed methods study exploring physicians’ self-reported coping strategies.](#)
- [Five things to know about peer support](#)
- Flemons D. Conducting supportive conversations with troubled colleagues [not available online]
- Shapiro J. Peer support fundamentals [not available online]
- [Brené Brown on Empathy](#)

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### Is Informal Physician-to-Physician Peer Support Needed?

In short—yes! Informal peer support can be an important resource for dealing with challenging times. It helps with facing the expected stressors of life and the profession, preventing work-related syndromes such as burnout, and surviving times of crisis. Research clearly demonstrates that informal peer support can reduce feelings of isolation, improve coping, support mental and emotional wellness, and buffer the stress of our work demands.

### What is Meant by Informal Peer Support?

As physicians, we often seek and receive informal support from one another. We engage in supportive conversations, even though not formally trained to do so, because we share similar experiences and can provide support around those experiences. This is termed *Informal Peer Support*. It differs from formal peer support, where individuals are trained to provide support within a formal role.

### How Can I Strengthen My Informal Peer Support Skills?

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- **Remember that your role is to provide empathetic listening.** You're there to be present and listen with empathy, because you share similar experiences. *You're not there to fix things.* In fact, we can't fix many of the challenges that physicians face, but we can provide emotional support to get through it. Empathy isn't about problem-solving, but about "feeling WITH people." For a quick primer, watch this [2.5 minute animated clip by Brené Brown](#). It's great!
- **Consider your goals.** You want to facilitate a safe, non-judgemental, resourceful conversation, focused on authentic connection that is characterized by respect and understanding. Your goal isn't to make judgements or tell them what you think they should do. Rather, you're there to listen, acknowledge their experience, and help them reflect on their situation so they may be in a better position to make good decisions. You're also there to guide them to existing resources that may be helpful, as described below.
- **Think about boundaries to your skills.** You're not providing support as a formal peer supporter, critical incident stress manager, social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist. If you feel there's a need for more than a supportive conversation, encourage your colleague to access professional services, such as your provincial or territorial physician health program or others listed on the [Well Doc Canada website](#).
- **Seek professional advice if you're worried about your colleague's well-being.** Be alert to warning signs and troubling behaviors. If you have concerns about potential for harm to self or others, seek advice from your provincial or territorial physician health program and/or the on-call psychiatrist at your site.
- **Include the following components in your conversation, as recommended by Dr. Jo Shapiro.**
  - Invite.** Ask questions like, "How are things, are you ok?"
  - Listen.** It's ok to interject with empathetic statements such as, "I'm hearing you say that you are really struggling right now." Mostly though, you're there to listen. Allow silence. Give people time to think, process, and speak.
  - Reflect.** Honor, validate, and normalize emotions, with statements such as, "It's normal to be worried right now."
  - Probe about coping strategies and support systems.** Reiterate the importance of self-care and make suggestions about basics that work, such as talking to trusted colleagues or friends, getting adequate rest, exercising, and ensuring proper nutrition.
  - Close the loop on the conversation.** Express gratitude that they shared their vulnerability with you, using comments such as, "I appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts with me." Perhaps make a plan for a quick follow-up check-in, but remember boundaries.

**Check in on your colleagues; offer a smile and an ear.  
We can get through the challenging times together.**