

Making the most of informal co-reflection

This resource is designed to explore how to make the most of informal co-reflection opportunities, staying true to Intentional Peer Support principles and tasks. It is part of a series of four resources – the other resources include: ‘Getting started: some co-reflection possibilities’; ‘Co-reflection with a team’; and ‘Navigating challenges and deepening co-reflection practices.’ These resources have been produced by Intentional Peer Support (IPS) and were made possible through funding from the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services’ Expanding Post-discharge Support Initiative.

What is informal co-reflection?

Co-reflection can be arranged formally, e.g. at a set time each month (or each fortnight or week), with a set structure, and/or led by someone who is paid to perform this role, or co-reflection can be offered/sought on an “as needed” basis – this is what is meant by ‘informal co-reflection.’

Many practitioners have informal arrangements with their peers – often someone (or a group) who they trust to offer both support and challenge, as needed. Sometimes this informal arrangement is out of necessity, in the absence of more (effective) formal arrangements. Sometimes, a peer worker simply wants more options for reflecting on their practice. ***Ideally, peer workers have access to both formal and informal co-reflection opportunities.***

Informal co-reflection may be undertaken with a colleague, or with someone who is in a different structural relationship – for example, a manager, someone you manage, or a current service-user. Where there are differences of power, these may need to be negotiated (e.g. what might be needed for someone you manage to be able to give you honest, challenging feedback?).

When is informal co-reflection useful?

Informal co-reflection can be an invaluable resource when we would like to reflect on our practice but more formal arrangements are either not available or do not meet our specific needs. Informal co-reflection is often reciprocal – we might have a relationship with a colleague that we can contact *and they can contact us* for co-reflection as needed.

It can sometimes be difficult to know when is the best time to seek co-reflection. If we have experienced something very challenging, we might not be in an emotional place to really hear challenging feedback. In this instance, we can specifically seek out someone who will listen to us, validate our feelings and refrain from offering more challenging feedback until a later time. On the other hand, remember ‘crisis as opportunity,’ and sometimes the best time to co-reflect is when we are feeling challenged, as this may be a time when we are more open to changing our practice.

Some challenges for informal co-reflection

One of the challenges for informal co-reflection is that we (or the other person) may be unprepared or caught off guard. In practice, we might not hold the Intentional Peer Support principles and tasks in mind *in an intentional way*. So, instead, we may end up jumping to problem-solving, talking about someone behind their back, reinforcing old stories about ourselves (or about other people), gossiping or reinforcing a conflict story. Instead, it will be more useful for mutual learning to stay curious about things like connection, worldview, mutuality, or untold stories. ***It can be useful to review the IPS principles and tasks before or during co-reflection.***

Another possibility is that the person we are co-reflecting with might feel unable to give honest feedback (or say no) – there are various barriers to mutuality, and in informal situations, it can seem like we don't have the time to explore power fully. ***It is a useful practice to ask for permission to co-reflect in a way that opens up space for the other person to honour their own needs and learning.***

The time-pressure of co-reflecting on the fly can lead to us forgetting the most basic element of Intentional Peer Support – *connection!* We may find ourselves talking *at* someone (or being talked at), instead of investing in connection first. ***Remember, without connection it is impossible to practice IPS. Connection, connection, connection!***

Most of us have more experience relating to other people *unintentionally*. Co-reflection involves being *intentional* in our relationships, so that both of us are learning and growing. This can be aided by reflecting on what you are hoping for, what you need (e.g. asking for more validation if that is what you need), and whether there is honestly space for the other person's needs and learning? If someone is asking for help to solve a problem, is there a possibility that "the problem" is not what you initially think it is (remember the untold story)?

Sometimes informal co-reflection involves disconnection, unexpected hot buttons, discomfort and uncertainty, but if we stick with the process and keep in mind the principles and tasks, *both people* tend to come out of the exchange feeling a sense of new possibilities, new learning and a deeper sense of connection.

Informal co-reflection questions/statements

Some questions/statements that might be useful for informal co-reflection include:

- "Can I share with you something I've been struggling with? I'd be really interested in exploring it with you. Is now an OK time?"
- "I'm not sure I can hear about what could have been different just yet, I think I need to feel connected to someone right now."
- "Can you think of what some other possibilities might be?"
- "Do you have an idea of what you might be hoping for, from this situation/conversation/relationship?"
- "Do you mind if I share how I've come to think about it in this way?"
- "Do you mind if I share what's going on for me now, hearing you say that?"
- "What do think might have helped to build (or gotten in the way of) connection?"
- "What might the other person's worldview have been?"