

When co-reflection gets real: navigating challenges and deepening co-reflection practices

This resource is designed to explore when co-reflection gets more challenging (or more “real”), and how to navigate challenges and go deeper with co-reflection, 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 ‘Making the most of informal co-reflection.’ 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.

At its best, co-reflection can be incredibly energising and offer space for transformative learning experiences. But when it’s not working so well, co-reflection can also get stale, become only about ‘problems’ and fixing them, a place where people feel they can’t take risks (or just talk about how well they did!), or a place for complaining. For this reason, it is worth fostering a culture of feedback – for example, asking at the end of each (or some) of the co-reflection sessions how things are going, what is working well and what could be different – and asking this in such a way that there is space for people to be honest if their needs are not being met (e.g. not asking as people are walking out the door, hurrying to another commitment).

Some examples of questions that might be asked in co-reflection, to encourage Intentional Peer Support values:

Co-reflection is a skill – it’s like a muscle that needs exercising. Many of us have other habits that are more familiar, like jumping into problem solving, criticising (ourselves or others), speaking about conflict in a way that is seeking confirmation that *we are right* (and the other person is *wrong*), telling stories that make us look competent (or incompetent), trying to participate in a way that is “correct” rather than being honest or avoiding difficult topics. Below are some questions that can be useful to move out of these familiar patterns and move towards Intentional Peer Support principles and tasks:

- “What do you think some of the learnings might be from this?”
- “What might be some other possibilities?”
- “What might that look like, if we were heading towards _____?”
- “What’s an example of a good connection you’ve experienced lately?”
- “What is it about _____ that makes it difficult/easy/fun/boring/...?”
- “What was it about the quality of the relationship that enabled that?”
- (If there has been a disconnect or conflict) “What do you think might have contributed to the disconnect?” or “What might the other person’s world view have been?” “What might be some possibilities for reconnection?”
- “Would it be OK with you/the group if I said something that might be difficult to hear?”
- “What are some untold stories that might be possible here?”
- “How did you come to think about _____ in that way?”
- “I’m noticing _____, I wonder if others see that too, and if there’s some other way we might want to use this time together?”

Some common co-reflection traps:

- **The group doesn't focus on what we are here to do together**, instead gossip is shared, or information about a new initiative, or practical or logistical discussions dominate. While these may be valuable activities, they are not co-reflection. These activities could contain seeds for co-reflection – the challenge is raising this in a way that maintains connection, keeps open space for multiple worldviews, and honours mutuality. Or they may be better shared elsewhere. ***It is useful to discuss together – and keep revisiting – how people would like to use the co-reflection space.***
- **One person takes up the role of “expert” or “more experienced” and dispenses advice from this position**: Once someone notices this dynamic, remember to try to respond using Intentional Peer Support principles and tasks (e.g. connect! What might their world-view be? How can you share what would work for you, while keeping open space for what they might be needing? What would you like the space to look like?). This is particularly difficult when there are structures that mean that being an expert is understood to be part of someone's job, or where people are rewarded for taking an “expert” stance. ***Most of us have either the potential to fall into an “expert” role, or the opposite tendency (i.e. not being comfortable with, or not knowing how to claim our own expertise). It can take time to move beyond conventional power dynamics, but can be part of a rich learning process.***
- **Co-reflection becomes fear-based**, assuming that a peer worker is either fragile or needs to learn how to be “more professional.” ***Intentional Peer Support asks us to keep moving through our fears and keep holding on to hope and possibility.***
- **The group has an inflexible structure** and people don't feel like their needs are being met, OR **the group has no structure** and people don't feel like their needs are being met. Keep in mind that everyone has a different worldview, so what is well-structured to one person is overly-controlling to another, while what one person finds freeing and energizing is boundary-less and frightening to another. Groups often go through different stages in terms of structure – often either starting with too much structure (before someone expresses their need to be able to speak about other things), or not enough structure, (before someone expresses their need a clearer purpose or agenda). ***Negotiation, honesty, self-awareness and flexibility are invaluable.***
- **The group becomes problem-solving oriented**: Many of us are used to environments where we feel like the “appropriate” thing to do to bring specific problems that we need help in “fixing.” In fact, it can feel like this is what co-reflection is about (for many of us, this has a history in counseling or therapeutic relationships, where we may have felt like we needed to bring “problems” to justify the time, or to feel like we were making progress). On the one hand, this can feel like an effective use of the time, but on the other hand, it can lead to us getting stuck in patterns of relating that move us away from Intentional Peer Support. It's not “wrong” to bring specific problems into co-reflection, but it can be really useful to keep in mind the IPS principles – creating mutual learning relationships that come from a place of hope and possibility – and the tasks – we are trying to build connection, explore world-views, negotiate mutuality and open up possibilities for what we might be moving towards.
- **The group gets boring or feels lifeless**: Co-reflection is not meant to be boring! Some groups decide to “break bread” together (i.e. have food), or a simple energizer or ice-breaker might be included ... unleash your creativity and create the co-reflective space that you want!