

IPS Newsletter Spring 2014



Featured Artwork by Jacks McNamara

Jacks McNamara is a queer writer, artist, activist, educator, performer, and somatic healing practitioner living in Santa Fe, NM. Jacks is the co-founder of The Icarus Project, a radical mental health support network and media project by and for people living with the dangerous gifts that our society commonly labels as "mental illness," and the subject of the poetic documentary film *Crooked Beauty*. Co-author of *Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness*, Jacks' writing has appeared in numerous publications, blogs, and zines. A lifelong artist and designer, their creations have been shown across the US and Canada, as well as appearing on the covers of books and magazines, in posters, and on the web.

www.redwingedjacksbird.net
www.redstarhealingarts.com

In this Issue

- ◆ What Do We Mean By Intentional? by *Shery Mead*
- ◆ Healing Through Relationships by *Eva Dech*
- ◆ Learning To Wear The Suit by *E. Holloway*
- ◆ IPS Spring Announcements
- ◆ Upcoming IPS Facilitator Training

What is Intentional Peer Support (IPS)?

Intentional Peer Support is a way of thinking about and inviting powerfully transformative relationships among people. Practitioners learn to use relationships to see things from new angles, develop greater awareness of personal and relational patterns, and support and challenge each other in trying new things.

Moving Towards

Intentional Peer Support is growing! Our trainings this year are spanning the globe — from our snowbound headquarters in Vermont to the welcomed sunshine of Australia. Meanwhile, we continue to build organizational infrastructure that will sustain IPS and enable it to thrive at the local level. One exciting advancement has been to create a clear pathway for IPS practitioners to become Facilitators of the material ([Learn More](#)).

To meet the interest in IPS, founder Shery Mead and director Chris Hansen welcomed Steven Morgan on last year as Operations Manager. Now we are pleased to welcome Eva Dech onto the team as Training Manager.

Eva comes with two decades of experience in human rights, social justice activism, advocacy, and is one of the pioneers of the youth peer movement. Her passion for creating positive systems change and infusing trauma-informed practices is a welcomed balance within the IPS framework.

What do we mean by Intentional?

By Shery Mead

(A warm thank you to Sarah Knutson, who helped to put language around these concepts)



Intentional Peer Support goes beyond the usual idea of healthy relationships. It is about creating relationships with a specific intention.

Being “intentional” about our relationships means we have a specific purpose in mind. We are deliberately deciding to create something. We are trying to create new awareness and understanding for both of us. We are trying to open ourselves to new ways of seeing, hearing and knowing that neither of us could have come up with alone.

We do this by making a commitment. We maintain our attention on the process of this creation. In real dialogue, we consciously learn how to have a new kind of conversation.

Complicated? Not really. It simply means that when we communicate, we try to stay present, aware and open. We pay attention to what we’re hearing and saying. We step back from our truth. We become willing to question “how we know what we know.” We become deeply open to the truth of the other person while also holding onto our own.

When this type of dialogue occurs, each of us is helping the other to step outside of their current story. We use our relationship as a tool to take a bigger look at how we’ve learned to operate in the world. We begin to understand how we got stuck and what has kept us here. We challenge old ways of thinking and explore new ideas and approaches. In the process, many of us shift our focus away from problems, limitations, illness and coping. We start asking ourselves what we want out of life. We let ourselves dream and hope again. These are the conversations that can be life altering!

A Word about Conversation

In Intentional Peer Support, conversation is much more than “just talking.” It’s more like playing with a great jazz band where you’re giving, getting, and creating together. In a jazz band, each musician contributes their voice, their heart and soul while simultaneously listening (and being affected by) the hearts and souls around them. When this works well, the piece of music being created is way more powerful than any of the parts combined. As this type of creation happens, the process becomes invisible and the players become part of

something that invigorates and energizes them. Out of this energy come possibilities that we couldn't have found had we not been part of the creating.

IPS teaches us how to create this kind of powerful, life-changing “music.” The tasks, principles and values of IPS guide us in this process. Over time, our conversations develop this energy of mutual transformation. The more we practice Intentional Peer Support, the more our conversations have this natural “artful” flow. Practicing the art of creating new conversations is an important part of what makes IPS “intentional.”

About Giving and Receiving

For many of us, service relationships are like a one-way street. Both people's roles are clearly defined. This might not sound like a big deal, but it can have painful real-life consequences. What happens when our relationships have become all about getting? About telling our problem story and then getting help with it? When there is little, if any, emphasis placed on giving back?



Far too often, being in the role of “getter” all the time has shaken our confidence, making us feel like we have nothing worthwhile to contribute. We doubt ourselves. We start to think of others as the “experts” who know and do better. We give up on trying to contribute anything that is uniquely our own. We let ourselves be done to and for. We become passive observers in the drama of our own lives.

In “regular” relationships in the community, people give and take all the time. No one is permanently on the taking side or the giving side. This exchange contributes to people feeling okay about being vulnerable as well as confident about what they're offering. In this dynamic of mutual ‘give and take’, people keep their sense of authorship. They know the giver and receiver roles change all the time and are just a part of the story. They never stop believing their contributions are needed and that what they have to say is important.

Intentional Peer Support actively seeks to restore this natural, healthy balance. We strive to share power, learn from each other, and take mutual responsibility for the health and well-being of our relationship.

This is Trauma-Informed Peer Support

Trauma-informed peer support starts with the fundamental question: *“What happened to you?”*, rather than the traditional question, *“What’s wrong with you?”* There is much we can learn from each other when we make this shift.

Trauma is practically a given at some point in everyone’s life. Many, many people who receive services in the mental health system have histories of trauma and abuse. People are affected by trauma individually, relationally, and societally (war and other forms of social violence). While a few people may be minimally affected, many others are profoundly impacted (e.g. self concept, relationships, family, meaning). Trauma affects how we think, see, and know, both personally and in our relationships with others. Accordingly, understanding the impact of trauma is critical for our relationships.

In Intentional Peer Support, we seek to make sense of important life experiences, including trauma. We explore how they affect our relationships with ourselves and each other. We find ways to navigate our concerns together. We share the risk and responsibility of growing beyond habits and merely “coping” to a way of life we freely choose.

What About Psychiatry, Therapy, and “Mental Illness”?



Intentional Peer Support really has little to do with traditional mental health. We won’t use psychiatric or clinical concepts and terms. We won’t train you to solve people’s problems, access resources, or help people cope. We won’t teach you to diagnose, assess or treat mental health “conditions” or “symptoms.”

Though this traditional way of thinking isn’t bad or wrong, it is not our focus in Intentional Peer Support. In fact, we really don’t think about illness or symptoms at all!

To be sure, Intentional Peer Support is about creating mental health. But, even more than that, it’s about our relationships. On a fundamental level, Intentional Peer Support is about our ability to feel connected with each other and in the world while continuously learning and growing. It’s a creative process rather than a coping process.

IPS is also not an individual phenomenon. Remember the jazz band and making music? The power of IPS depends on all of us bringing our “real” selves to relationship. We open up to really listen and be impacted by relationship. In the process, a dynamic of mutual discovery and synergy emerges.

If we just come to IPS with the expectation that we’re here to help people deal with their problems, we miss this. We lose the opportunity to dramatically change the overall conversation between us (and probably the outcome of it). This is especially true when we get frustrated, confused, afraid, or uncomfortable. At these times, it can be easy to fall into psychiatric assumptions and start seeing each other through the lens of illness. The temptation is to take control — especially if we fear that someone is “unsafe” and might hurt themselves or others.

In Intentional Peer Support, we view these times of potential “crisis” as opportunities. We challenge ourselves and each other to grow beyond habitual reactivity. Instead of automatically doing an “assessment” or calling 911, we turn our attention to relationship. We find ways to stay connected and rekindle hope. We share power and negotiate risk. We move toward what we both want and emerge together on the other side of discomfort and fear.

The Tasks and Principles of Intentional Peer Support

In Intentional Peer Support, we share responsibility for the health and growth of our relationships and communities. The following Principles and Tasks can guide for our efforts. They are not set rules or formulas. But, they do provide a common language, some general guidance and a compass for when we lose our way:

3 Principles To Help Understand What IPS Is About:

1. *Learning & Growing Together.* We join in a journey of growth and discovery. We learn with and from each other, instead of helping, problem-solving or providing one-way expertise. We honor and explore our diverse experiences. We view differences as opportunities to notice and reconsider fixed assumptions.

2. *Caring for Relationships.* We nurture our capacity to share and connect. We offer respect and dignity. We listen to really hear each other. We look for ways to stay in relationship even when we feel uncomfortable. When faced with conflicting individual needs, we consider together: “What is good for our relationship?”



3. *Hope-Based Relationships.* We hold out hope and explore possibilities. We don't let fear or discomfort confine our choices. Instead, we face them together. We share concerns openly and honestly, risk trying new things, and gain trust and experience over time.

4 Tasks To Guide The Practice Of Peer-To-Peer Relationships:

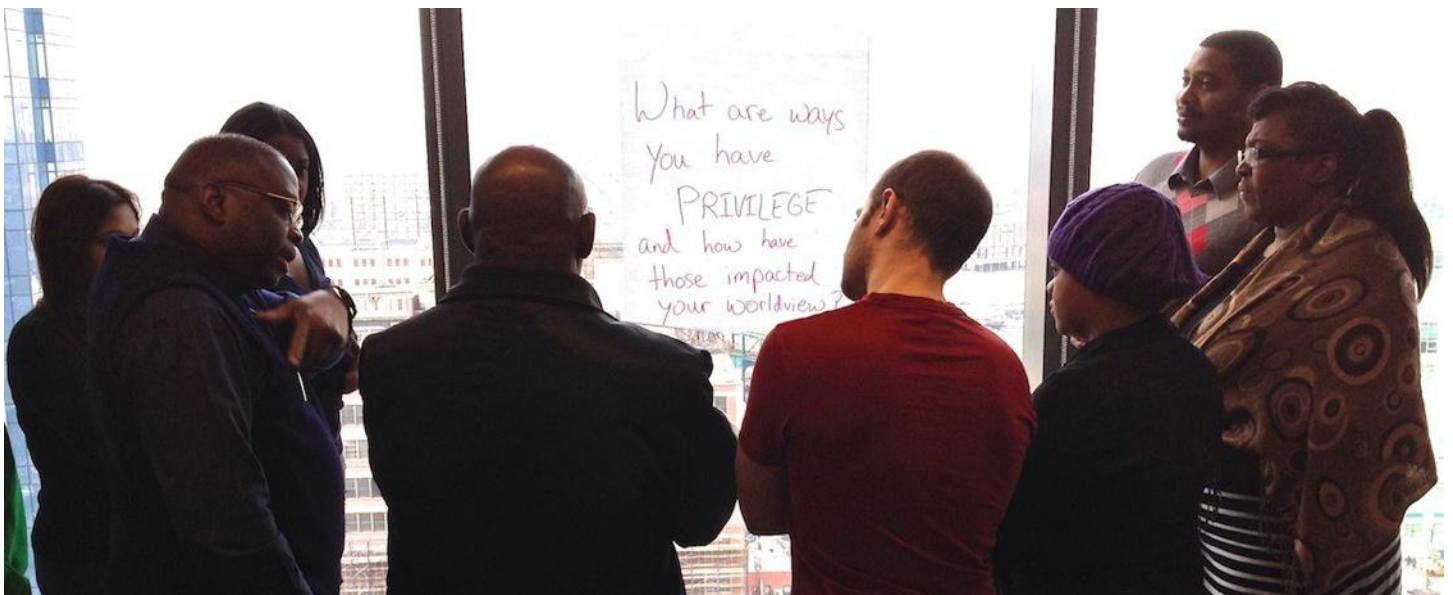
1. *Connection.* We look for areas of shared energy, interest and engagement. We pay attention to “sparkling moments” when we seem to “get” each other. We cultivate this fertile ground. We negotiate the ebbs and flows.



2. *Worldview.* We listen to understand and explore. We're curious how we've made sense of experience. We wonder about “the untold story.” Together, we question our assumptions: How did we come to “know” what we are so sure we “know”?

3. *Mutuality.* We meet each other as human beings. We share power and responsibility. We hold space for each other. We welcome all sincere contributions. We create vibrant synergies that work for all of us.

4. *Moving Toward.* We focus on what we can create together. We invite energy and inspiration. We dare to dream and envision. In good company, we prosper toward the relationships, communities and world we want to live in.



Healing Through Relationships

By Eva Dech



Reclaiming my personal power was the single most important transformative experience of my journey. My early childhood experiences of trauma had made me feel disconnected, powerless, and helpless. Eventually this led to being labeled “ill” and “emotionally disturbed” by supposedly “helping” systems and programs that took away my freedoms and re-traumatized me. It was through human connection and building mutually supportive relationships where I found my voice and was empowered to believe in myself and fight against injustices. Within that process, I was able to connect to others with similar lived experiences and create our own safe and accepting community. Through peer support, we regained our collective power by becoming a part of the larger community and society, making it possible to create positive social change. I believe that a paradigm

shift — from what’s wrong to what happened, was an essential part to validating my own lived experiences of trauma and enabled me to build healing environments in my community. Intentional Peer Support reinforced this for me by providing a framework that effectively described the process of building healing, trusting, and mutually supportive relationships.

My early childhood experiences of trauma led to years of disconnection from my environment, my feelings, and myself. This left me with a deep sense of hopelessness and despair. I lived in a world of secrecy and isolation, then years of self-injury and self-harm — eventually believing that the only answer was to die. Years of institutionalization as a young person included forced physical, mechanical, and chemical restraints. Being re-traumatized and tortured reinforced the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. The prognosis was grim. The response from systems created to supposedly “help” me had been to label me “seriously emotionally disturbed” and to lock me up in institutions. The systems instilled a belief that I would have a lifetime of chronic illness, living within the limits of “treatment”: symptom management, sedation and poverty. My freedom was taken away and I was forced to live a life shrouded in fear, violence and lack of emotional and physical safety. I felt dehumanized and severely punished for crimes I never committed. The anger was overwhelming and further served to reinforce my commitment to die.

My saving grace came from an unlikely source during some of my worst experiences. Rhonda, a staff person in one of the facilities who had no prior mental health experience, was the first person who saw me as a human being. She reminded me that I was a survivor with strengths and innate abilities to overcome adversities. Through our relationship, I re-connected with the knowledge that I already had gained from my mother who

instilled in me a foundation of love and resiliency. Rhonda's belief in me encouraged me to find my voice, to become empowered and to dream again of a life worth living. She showed me that I was a natural leader with the ability to positively influence my peers.

Over the next decade, my anger turned into passion and a commitment to change the system into one that does no harm in order to help prevent others from experiencing the horrors I had. I devoted myself to creating opportunities for people to find their voice and personal power by sharing my experiences moving from despair to empowerment and self-determination. Connecting with others who shared lived experiences opened a space for expressing our respective, individual truths. We built our own community, a safe environment in which people found their individual voices. Everyone had something to contribute and was valued for it. We identified our individual gifts and dreams, and developed the skills to advocate for each other and ourselves. Together, we came to understand that the essence of healing comes through mutually supportive relationships. Regaining our personal power led to actualizing our collective power and citizenship. We actively involved ourselves in the larger community, generating a social awareness of our human rights and creating positive systems transformation. Peer support, advocacy and systems change became our mission.



In the years to follow, I have continued to work towards building connected, inclusive, and supportive communities. I have been learning that hope, connection, and mutuality are the foundations of healing relationships. Inspired and motivated when I was introduced to Intentional Peer Support, I found that it gives a structure and framework for the values I believe in. Learning Intentional Peer Support and embodying the philosophy has become a model for all the relationships in my life. I'm grateful to be a part of creating spaces for social change and look forward to continuing to grow and learn through the experience of IPS.



Learning to Wear the Suit

By E. Holloway

Founder and Co-Administrator for The Oikos / IPS core class AK '14

When identifying as a peer I find myself consistently qualifying my professional value.
Look at my eyes, stop imagining how thick my file is.
See my survival as one of my successes,
instead of obsessing over the potential of my future so-called symptoms.

A Dr. once told me that when an illness is obvious — being overweight as an example, people are more apt to judge in an almost autonomic fashion and with a harsh alacrity, but that to keep in mind there were far more “ill” people who appeared far more “together” than I did.

Still other would-be mentors would indicate to me that the professional judgments (I felt I labored Herculean in vain to debunk) were related not to my weight or “symptoms” but rather my language and demeanor. Telling me the key to success was to “Put on the Suit.” Doff my tie-dye and Birkenstocks for the vestiges of academic and fiduciary credibility. I think that means slacks... To stop cracking wise before I am relegated to the status of being a joke... To check my passion before it appears too grandiose.



Thing is, most “Suit Wearers” (as they shall be affectionately referred to from herein), their language and demeanor, appears calculating, aloof, goal-oriented, time-sensitive, efficient and exclusive. In short. It’s cold. The well-heralded and cosmic birthplace of many a sui-homi-geni-cidal ideation.

So then I, the unwilling canary in these cramped, crumbling, and chaos ridden coal mines, must struggle to wear the suit to avoid the straight jacket still. Until the message saturates our society of what IPS has reminded me.

I am reminded that hope for us humans doing is not dead as one may have supposed after long exposure to these travails. The knowledge that through authentic and transparent, ever-increasingly deliberate connection, we can overcome the pitfalls of disparate worldviews, persecution and hard-dying habits of victimization and disconnection. That if we are willing to remain teachable, to hold multiple truths, to embark on learning new human-centered dialects of experience, we will remember that mistakes are a normal part of learning and life is messy. To know that when this message truly saturates our society we will learn how to be a tribe again. That we can work all of us out of a job and into a diverse, growing, viable and ever-evolving community.

In the meantime I have decided that I am tie-dying my suit.

IPS Spring 2014 News Updates

Are you interested in taking the IPS Core Training?

We host pay-by-the-seat trainings several times a year!

**Please register your interest
[HERE](#)**

If you would like to arrange a training in your area, please contact us at info@intentionalpeersupport.org

IPS Meets WRAP! Webinar

July 1st 2014 / 1 - 2PM EST

Ever wonder how IPS and WRAP work? Do you want the opportunity to learn about these two peer-led, life-changing processes and tools? Then this is a must attend webinar!

Register [HERE](#)

We have a new website!

Please visit us at:

www.intentionalpeersupport.org

[Join our mailing list](#)

for updates and our newsletter

We're on Facebook!

Please visit our [Facebook Page](#)

Check out the [IPS Learning Community](#) on Facebook for online gatherings and discussions

Save the Date

Oct. 27th-31st, 2014

The IPS Advanced & WRAP Refresher Course Retreat

This is a special opportunity to cross-train with some of the best trainers from both the Copeland Center and the core team from Intentional Peer Support.

Newsletter Submissions

We warmly welcome art, stories, and articles related to IPS for consideration in future newsletters!

Please email

eva@intentionalpeersupport.org

Upcoming IPS Facilitators Training

Burlington, Vermont
August 18th-22nd, 2014

Venue to be determined

[APPLY HERE](#)

**Applications must be received by
June 20th. Accepted applicants will
be notified by June 27th.**

For further inquiries:
info@intentionalpeersupport.org

*“IPS offers a way of being in the world –
whether or not we’re working in
conventional or alternative mental health –
which is congruent with a healing and
recovery-based community. It can be life
changing. It was for me.”*

- Participant, IPS Core Training

Our Facilitator Training is a 5-day, hands-on seminar that prepares and certifies IPS practitioners to pass on the content of our 5-day Core Training to folks within the organizations where they work.

We are looking for IPS practitioners who have a solid grasp of the principles and tasks, who can clearly communicate the value of mutual relationships, and who are passionate about creating social change through peer support.

If you are interested in learning more about the process and requirements for becoming a Facilitator, please read the [Facilitator Pathway](#).



Facilitators Training
Vermont 2014