Recovery Cymru
• Est. 2010 •

VOICES OF PEER SUPPORT

22 SHORT STORIES FROM THE CARDIFF & VALE PEER WORKFORCE | RECOVERY CYMRU MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE PROJECT

Funded by Cardiff & Vale APB
Achieving better substance misuse outcomes

Introduction: Why These Stories Matter

Over the past months, we've been working on something special—a storytelling project called Most Significant Change. It's a way of capturing the real impact of peer support through the voices of those who live and breathe it: the peer workforce.

We did this because we wanted to understand more than what numbers or data can show. We wanted to uncover the deeper, sometimes unexpected ways peer support changes lives—on both sides of the conversation. We also wanted to celebrate the incredible people doing this work, day in, day out, often quietly, often powerfully.

So, we asked a simple but meaningful question: What's the most significant change you've experienced in the last 12 months through delivering peer support?

The answers came in the form of stories—honest, raw, hopeful, and sometimes difficult. Stories that reflect not just transformation, but courage, humour, setbacks, and strength.

We gathered 22 stories from peers working across different parts of Cardiff and the Vale. These came from people in both paid and voluntary roles, working in community and service settings. Each one offers a window into the human side of recovery and support—what it really feels like to connect with someone who understands, to be seen, and to find your place again.

These short stories are the outcome. It's not a final word, but a starting point for deeper understanding. We hope these stories speak to the power of lived experience, the value of peer connection, and the need to protect and nurture this unique kind of support.

To everyone who took part and shared so openly: thank you. Your stories are powerful. Your voices matter. And you are helping shape what peer support looks like—for today, and for the future.

A special thank you goes to all organisations that participated.

This project was made possible with funding and support from the Cardiff and Vale Area Planning Board—thank you for helping us bring these voices to light.

A Beacon of Hope

When I first came back to Recovery Cymru, I was nervous. Despite having done counselling for social anxiety, I still found it difficult to engage with people. Eight months ago, I would actively avoid interactions, unsure of myself and my place in the world. But now, everything has changed.

I started volunteering, co-facilitating peer support groups, and getting involved in as much as I could. At first, it was about pushing myself, stepping into uncomfortable situations, and hoping my confidence would grow. Slowly but surely, it did.

Now, I'm the first to put my hand up. I meet visitors, introduce them to Recovery Cymru, and make them feel welcome. People tell me they love my energy, that they wish they had even a little bit of it. My life was good before, but now, it's ten times better.

The biggest change for me has been my work at Pine Ward. Having been through detox myself three times, I know what it's like to be in that place, to feel lost and uncertain about the future. But now, I go back—not as a patient, but as someone offering hope. I talk to people who are struggling, show them that recovery is possible, and let them know they are not alone.

The staff at Pine Ward love it when I come in. They tell the patients, "He's coming today!" It's not all doom and gloom—I bring energy, laughter, and real conversations about what's possible beyond their current situation. Being able to be that person, to be a beacon of hope, is an incredible feeling.

My confidence has skyrocketed. I never thought I could feel this sure of myself, but every time I walk into that ward, I know I'm exactly where I need to be. I have a purpose now, a reason to get up in the morning, and a real sense of meaning in my life.

People I support tell me I inspire them. They see how much I've changed, and they want to get there too. That's the best feeling in the world—knowing that, by simply being myself, I'm showing others that they can do it too.
The transformation didn't happen overnight. It came from getting involved, showing up, and pushing myself forward. The more I did, the more my confidence grew. And now, I can't imagine my life any other way.

A Different Kind of Confidence

Before I got into peer support, confidence wasn't something I ever struggled with—or at least, that's what I thought. I was confident in the wrong ways, the kind of confidence that comes from not caring. When I was using, I could rob someone in the street without a second thought. I didn't worry about consequences because they didn't matter to me. Then, when my mental health broke down, it all flipped. For the first time in my life, I felt vulnerable, and I started to see the impact of everything I'd done. That realisation floored me.

When I first started delivering peer support, that version of confidence was long gone, and in its place was something I hadn't expected—imposter syndrome. I kept thinking, What am I doing here? How can I be the one giving advice? The first year was tough. I doubted myself constantly, second-guessed what I was saying, and wondered if people really saw me as someone who belonged in this space.

The last 12 months have changed that completely.

We've been short-staffed, and with so much turnover, I've been thrown in at the deep end with groups. But looking back, that was the best thing that could have happened. Confidence doesn't come from waiting until you're ready—it comes from doing it, over and over again, until it feels natural. Now, I can walk into a room, run a session, and know I'm meant to be there.

One of the biggest things I've learned is that peer support doesn't just help the people we work with—it strengthens our own recovery too. I don't do anything outside of work for my recovery. No groups, no meetings. But working with people, running sessions, and having those conversations keeps me connected to why I don't want to go back. It's not just a job; it's something that keeps me grounded.

Another shift for me has been how I see recovery as a whole. Services can sometimes push this idea that your whole life needs to be about recovery, that all your friends need to be in it, that your identity should revolve around it. But for me, one of the most important things was being accepted by people outside of it. When I started working, I wanted to be around people who weren't in recovery, where my past wasn't the main thing about me. I could tell them if I wanted to, but it wasn't the first thing they knew about me. That made a massive difference, and I think we need to make space for people to move beyond services, not just stay in them forever.

The confidence I've gained in this role hasn't just changed how I work—it's changed how I live. A year ago, meeting my wife's family was intimidating. I barely spoke. I sat there, unsure of myself, not wanting to say the wrong thing. Now? I believe in what I say. Whether I'm running a session or having a conversation over dinner, I actually trust my own voice.

Before, I thought confidence was about having no fear. Now, I see it differently. Real confidence isn't about ignoring the doubts—it's about doing things anyway, knowing you can handle whatever comes next. That's what peer support has given me.

A New Reason to Wake Up

When I retired three years ago, I thought I'd finally get to enjoy some peace. But instead of feeling free, I felt lost. I had always been busy—raising my two sons as a single mum, managing a demanding career, and filling my days with purpose. Suddenly, I had nothing but time, and I didn't know what to do with it.

That was when my drinking got worse. I had already developed a serious problem with alcohol, but now, with nothing to break up the days, it took over. I became physically dependent and stopped functioning. It all came to a head when I fell and broke my wrist. I ended up in A&E, spending four days going through detox on a hospital trolley. It was horrendous. I knew then that I never, ever wanted to go through that again.

After I stopped drinking, I was referred elsewhere, but they told me I would be better suited to another place. It just so happened that the week I walked in was the first week of the peer support programme. From the moment I stepped through the door, I knew this was where I needed to be. For the first time, I was surrounded by people who understood exactly what I had been through, without me having to explain.

At first, I threw myself into groups—relapse prevention, Moving On in My Recovery, women's groups—anything that gave me structure and connection. But after a while, I realised I no longer needed to sit in on groups. I still needed something, though, and that's when I decided to start volunteering.

Over the past 12 months, volunteering has changed everything for me. Peer support has given me a new purpose, a reason to get up in the morning, and a way to give back. I now run women's groups and coffee mornings, and I also volunteer with people experiencing homelessness. That has been a real eye-opener—seeing what people go through, understanding how complex recovery can be, and realising how lucky I am.

One of the biggest changes for me has been regaining confidence. When I stopped working and when my drinking became a problem, I lost a lot of who I was. I had always been independent, always busy, always relied upon. When that structure disappeared, so did a lot of my self-belief. But through peer support, I've started to feel like myself again.

It has also changed my relationships, especially with my sons. They spent years worrying about me, but now, for the first time in a long time, they don't have to. They can see that I'm doing okay, that I have a life again, and that I'm looking after myself. That's taken a weight off all of us.

Peer support has also reinforced my own recovery. When I see people relapse, it reminds me of where I could end up if I ever went back. When I'm supporting someone through a difficult time, I'm also reminding myself why I don't want to go back to drinking. Without realising it, every conversation I have, every group I run, and every bit of support I give keeps me on track, too.

A Seat at the Table

Over the last 12 months, the biggest shift I've seen has been in how peer support is viewed within services. It has moved from being something that happens around the system to something that is actively shaping it. We are no longer just included in conversations—we have a seat at the table.

I have been working in peer support for years, supporting others in their recovery, delivering training, and helping people move into peer roles. But despite this, there was always a sense that peer work was on the outside, separate from the core of how services operated. Clinicians made the decisions, and peer support was often seen as an added bonus rather than an essential part of care.

This past year has proven that is changing.

Personally, one of the biggest turning points for me was completing Train the Trainer for Intentional Peer Support. It completely shifted my understanding of what peer support is really about. It's not just about sharing experiences to help someone—it's a mutual process, where both people learn from each other in a space built on trust, curiosity, and growth. This deeper understanding has changed how I train, how I work with colleagues, and how I advocate for peer support.

The most significant change, though, has been at a system level. The NHS has invested in peer support, particularly through the Recovery College, and that investment is making a real impact. The Recovery College has given people with lived experience structured training, clear pathways into peer work, and the confidence to take up space in the system. It's not just about individuals being supported—it's about changing the way services work from the inside.

Now, peer support leads like myself aren't just invited into conversations—we are service leads. We are part of decision-making, shaping how services approach mental health and substance use. Clinicians now ask for our input, not out of courtesy, but because they recognise that peer support brings something vital that clinical expertise alone cannot and offers other positive paths.

This shift hasn’t happened by accident. It has come from investment—not just in funding, but in developing a structured, supported peer workforce. It has come from persistence, from peers continuously showing up and proving their value. And it has come from a change in mindset, where services are beginning to see that recovery isn’t just about medical treatment but about connection, empowerment, and seeing people as whole individuals, not just diagnoses.

There is still work to do. Peer support is gaining recognition, but there is more to be done to ensure it is fully embedded, well-resourced, and given the same opportunities as clinical roles. But compared to a year ago, the difference is clear.

We have fought for our place in these conversations. And now, we have a seat at the table.

Changing How I See the World

For over 30 years, I worked in ground maintenance. It was a straightforward job—cutting grass, clearing bramble—but there was no room for reflection, no space for conversations about feelings, and certainly no place for personal growth. When I left that job, I never imagined I'd end up in peer support.

My journey started when a family member went into recovery. Their decision to stop using substances made me look at things differently, and I got involved with Recovery Cymru. I began volunteering, facilitating the Moving On group, and eventually stepped into a role with the Family and Friends Project. I wasn't sure if I was the right fit, but I knew that if I didn't try, I'd regret it.

This job has changed me in ways I never expected. I used to think I was open-minded, but I've realised I was far more judgemental than I thought. I reacted instead of responding, let my emotions dictate my actions, and didn't always take the time to step back and reflect.

Now, everything is different. Writing reflections during supervision—something I hated at first—has helped me slow my thoughts down and process things properly. I've learned to recognise my emotions and understand where they come from. Instead of immediately reacting, I take a step back.

One moment that stuck with me was during a Moving On session. A young man in his late 20s mentioned that he loved reading. I asked what kind of books, and he said, Charles Dickens. My first reaction was surprise. But why? Why shouldn't he love Dickens? That moment made me realise the unconscious assumptions I was making, and how important it was to challenge them.

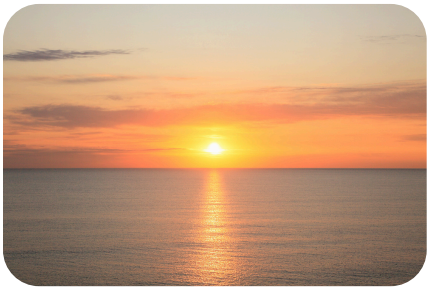
I've also seen incredible changes in the people I support. I remember one woman in the Family and Friends group who had been struggling for a long time. One day, we showed a TED Talk by Johann Hari, where he said, The opposite of addiction is connection. Something clicked for her in that moment. Her empathy for her loved one grew, and she became more willing to reflect on her own behaviour. That shift was amazing to witness.

Another big change has been in the way I work. My old job didn't involve networking, technology, or speaking to other organisations. Now, I'm doing all of that. It's been a challenge, but I'm learning. I'm developing IT skills, making connections, and building a programme from the ground up—something I never thought I'd do.

The most significant change, though, is how I see the world. I've learned to listen without judgment, to sit with discomfort without needing to fix everything. If someone in a group shares something difficult, I no longer feel the need to 'save' them. My role isn't to provide all the answers—it's to create a space where people feel safe to express themselves.

That's what peer support is about. It's not about fixing people. It's about giving them a place where they can be heard, where they can be vulnerable, and where change can happen in its own time. And in doing that, I've changed too.

Expanding Horizons: Learning, Growing, and Thriving



My recovery has been grounded in a peer-to-peer model for over 15 years, sustaining me and shaping my daily life. When I started working at CAVDAS in July last year, I was drawn to the idea of walking alongside others on their recovery journeys—supporting them as they built lives in which they could truly thrive.

The more time I spend in this role, the more I realise that recovery is deeply individual. No two people's experiences are the same. The way addiction manifests, the consequences it brings, and the paths people take to heal are all unique. What I've learned is that recovery isn't about a destination—it's a continuous journey.

Taking on this role has embedded that understanding in me more than ever. My perspective has widened, my compassion has deepened, and I've become more aware of the complexities of addiction. I used to believe that because my recovery was from one particular substance, I might not be able to relate to those whose struggles looked different. But over time, I've realised that addiction is addiction—it's not about the substance itself, but about the emotions, behaviours, and underlying struggles that come with it.

This job has opened up a whole new world to me. The clients I support inspire me every day. I've seen people make changes they never thought possible—like someone in their late 50s who is now enrolling in a fitness course, a step they never imagined they'd have the confidence to take. Seeing those transformations firsthand is incredible.

I also feel more connected—to the team, to the people I support, and to the wider recovery community. When I first started, I had experience of only one recovery model. Now, I've broadened my knowledge, embracing different approaches and recognising the value in every path. Training has played a big role in that—ACT, SMART, podcasts, reading—it's all shaped the way I work.

The most significant change for me has been this deepening of understanding. I thought I was open-minded before, but working in this role has taken that to another level. It's shown me that recovery isn't one-size-fits-all. What matters is meeting people where they are, helping them feel connected, and supporting them in building a future they believe in.

I came into this role wanting to help others. What I didn't expect was how much it would help me grow too.

From Hiding to Living: Peer Support and Me

For years, I just pushed through. I grit my teeth, went to work, and accepted that I didn't fit in. I never felt like I could be fully myself, especially when it came to my mental health. The message—whether direct or indirect—was that it was something to be hidden, something to be ashamed of.

I first struggled with my mental health at university, and for a long time, I was under a community mental health team. It took years before I found peer support, though I didn't recognise it as that at the time. It was just a cycling group, a walking group, or a coffee morning—spaces where I could just be, without having to explain myself. Those spaces made all the difference.

A few years ago, after a period of intense stress, I became unwell again. Work was a massive factor. I knew I needed something different, so I started attending peer support sessions for my own well-being. Just being able to sit in a room, to talk if I wanted to, or just exist without expectations—it was invaluable.

That experience led me to peer support. Now, I work as a peer trainer, delivering courses on stress management, well-being, and identity. I also run ward-based sessions for current inpatients. Having been in that position myself, I understand how important it is to have a space where you're heard, where your experiences are recognised without judgement.

The biggest change for me has been how I feel about work. For the first time, I actually like my colleagues. I enjoy going in, knowing I don't have to put on an act or hide how I'm feeling. If I'm having a rough day, I can say it out loud, and no one treats me differently. That's never happened before.

I used to have to mentally prepare myself just to function—sitting quietly for an hour before I could engage with people, numbing myself in the evenings with alcohol or TV. I don't need that anymore. I finish work and just exist, comfortably, as myself.

Peer support has given me something I didn't even realise I was missing: self-acceptance. Before, I had the practical tools—I knew how to manage my mental health with things like sleep, exercise, and monitoring my drinking—but I hadn't done the emotional work. I hadn't learned how to be compassionate with myself.

That's what's changed. Working in peer support has shown me that it's okay to be exactly as I am. I'm no longer hiding. I'm living.

Give the Change You Want to See

My journey into peer support wasn't something I planned. During COVID, when I was furloughed from my office job, I started looking for volunteering opportunities. Services near me weren't taking on volunteers, so I searched online and found a peer-led organisation. They were still running sessions remotely, so I signed up, completed the training, and a week later, I saw a job advertised for their administrator. I applied, got the job, and that was it—I had stepped into the world of recovery support. Now, years later, I work as a Recovery Aftercare Support Worker.

Over the last year, I've learned a lot about myself—especially about boundaries. When I first started, I thought I had to be everything to everyone. I wanted to support everyone on their recovery journey, to say yes to every request, to be available all the time. But I've realised that I can't be everything for all people. The only way to do my job well is to look after myself first.

That lesson was reflected right back at me in the most unexpected way. There's someone I support who struggles with boundaries, always saying yes to people, always putting others before themselves. One day, I mentioned in a check-in that someone had asked to come over to my house when I really just wanted a quiet day, but I'd said yes anyway. Without hesitation, they turned to me and said, Why didn't you say no? Why did you do that? And I just had to laugh because they were absolutely right. It was my own advice being thrown straight back at me.

I've realised that, in group settings, I get just as much out of the sessions as the people attending. It's a space for reflection, learning, and growth—not just for them, but for me too.

One of the biggest changes in the last year has been how peer workers are integrated into the wider service. It used to feel like we were on the outside, like we were the last stop when nothing else worked. Now, we're fully part of the team. We collaborate, we're involved in service provision, and people understand that peer support isn't just about having a chat over a cup of tea—it's real, valuable work.

Even my family has changed their perspective. My dad used to make comments like, Oh, you're going to that place with all the druggies, and I'd have to remind him, Dad, I'm one of those people. Now, he understands. He's proud of the work I do, and that means a lot.

I’ve grown so much in this role, and I feel proud of how far I’ve come. I’ve learned to prioritise my well-being, I’ve become more confident, and I’ve seen first-hand the impact of real peer support. And the best part? I get to help others see that change in themselves too.

Growing into Confidence

When I first started as a Peer Worker, I had been in recovery for about seven months. I felt like a fraud. Many of the people I was supporting had been sober for much longer than me, and that really shook my confidence. I worried that I didn't have enough experience to help others properly, that I might say the wrong thing, or that my suggestions wouldn't be good enough.

Now, three years into my recovery, everything feels different. My confidence has grown massively, and I feel much more secure in sharing my experiences. I've realised that my journey has value, even if it looks different to someone else's. The more I work in peer support, the more I understand that everyone's recovery is unique. It's not about comparing—it's about supporting each other.

At times, I still find it difficult when I meet people who were heavily alcohol-dependent. Some drank far more than I ever did, and it can make me question whether my own struggles were as valid. But I'm learning to challenge that thinking. Recovery isn't just about physical dependence—it's about change, growth, and the choices we make every day.

The biggest shift for me has been in my sense of purpose. I no longer feel like I'm just figuring things out as I go. Instead, I feel like I have something valuable to offer. I'm able to make suggestions with confidence, to share ideas that might help others, and to inspire people in early recovery. I've learned that being a Peer Worker isn't about having all the answers—it's about listening, relating, and walking alongside others in their journey.

Every day, I see those 'light bulb' moments in the people I support, but also in myself. Working in peer support has helped my own recovery in ways I never expected. It's given me a strong foundation, a sense of community, and the belief that I do have something to give. I understand now that you can't pour from an empty cup. The stronger and more secure I am in my own recovery, the more I can offer to others—and that's what makes this work so powerful.

Helping Others Helped Me

When I was facing addiction challenges, I was a completely different person. I was stubborn, stuck in my ways, and I couldn't see a way out. I didn't think my life could get better, and I definitely didn't think I'd ever be in a position to help others. Volunteering, working, and actually enjoying life felt impossible. But things changed, and over the past 12 months, delivering peer support has completely shifted how I see recovery, other people, and myself.

Before, I struggled to trust people. I felt like everyone was just telling me what to do, giving advice I wasn't ready to hear, and expecting me to change when I wasn't in the right place for it. It felt like recovery was something people wanted for me, rather than something I had chosen for myself. I kept falling back into the same patterns, surrounding myself with people who weren't helping, and convincing myself that nothing was ever going to change. It wasn't until I changed my environment and the people I spent time with that things started to shift.

That's when I started seeing the impact of peer support—not just receiving it, but delivering it. Over the past year, I've worked in open-access drop-in sessions, supporting people at all different points in their recovery. A lot of the people I work with have been through homelessness, difficult childhoods, and long histories of substance use. Some of them are ready to engage, some aren't, and others don't even know where to start. Seeing that reality up close has given me a massive reality check. I see how quickly things can change for people—how one setback can completely throw someone off course, or how small steps forward can make a huge difference.

The biggest change for me has been how I see recovery itself. I used to believe that there was only one way to do it. I thought that if I ever went near substances again, I would lose everything and fall straight back into my old life. I was terrified of making mistakes, and I saw everything in black and white. But working in peer support has shown me that recovery isn't one-size-fits-all. Some people take different approaches, some relapse and come back stronger, and some take things slowly. It's changed how I see my own journey and taken away a lot of the fear I had around making the 'wrong' choices.

This has also had a huge impact on my relationship with my family. There was a time when things felt distant—when I wasn't in a place where I could properly connect with them. But over the last year, things have changed. As they've seen me working, helping others, and focusing on my future, we've grown a lot closer.

They’ve become more open to hearing about my experiences, and I feel like we have a better understanding of each other now. Instead of just seeing things from a parental perspective, they’re listening to me as an individual, and that’s been really meaningful.

Delivering peer support has given me more confidence, not just in my work, but in my own recovery. I’ve stopped putting pressure on myself to ‘get everything right’ and instead, I focus on showing up and doing my best. The people I support teach me just as much as I teach them, and I’ve learned how to meet people where they are, rather than expecting them to be at a certain stage before I can help them.

A year ago, I wasn’t sure where I fit in or what my future looked like. Now, I know I’m in the right place, doing something that actually matters. And for the first time, I believe in where I’m going.

I Found My Tribe

For much of my life, I felt like I was being pulled in different directions. I had a career as an occupational therapist, but my own mental health struggles left me feeling disconnected from the systems I worked within. My anxiety, depression, and postnatal depression following the births of my children made me feel as though I was failing—both at work and at home. I was in a very unhappy marriage where I experienced domestic violence, and over time, I turned to alcohol to cope. Eventually, everything unravelled. In 2011, I was hospitalised because my anxiety had become unmanageable. Not long after, I had to leave my NHS job. I thought my career was over.

That was when I found Recovery Cymru. Stepping into a peer support group for the first time, I realised I didn't have to explain myself—people just understood. The shame and guilt I carried around my substance use started to lessen, and for the first time in a long time, I could be honest about what I was going through. That was the turning point. I went from attending groups to volunteering, and within a year of leaving the NHS, I was back in work—this time as a peer support worker.

Over the last 12 months, the most significant change for me has been reconnecting with the foundations of peer support—mutuality, connection, and seeing people as whole individuals rather than just their diagnoses. Now, as a peer trainer at the Cardiff and Vale Recovery and Wellbeing College, I co-deliver psychoeducational courses for people with mental health challenges, carers, and professionals. This role has reinforced for me how vital lived experience is—not just in offering support, but in shaping services in a way that truly meets people's needs.

One of the most impactful developments in the past year has been our Planning for Discharge course, which helps inpatients prepare for life after hospital. I know from experience how daunting it can be to return home after being in an inpatient setting—when I was hospitalised, my biggest fear was whether I would be able to cope again as a mother. My mental health had strained my relationship with my children. I was always anxious, struggling to be present for them, and I knew they saw that. Even when I wanted to be the mother they needed, I didn't have the capacity to show up in the way I wanted to.

Peer support has helped me rebuild that. Through working with others and sharing experiences, I've learned new ways to manage my anxiety—ways that don't involve substances or withdrawing from the people who matter most to me.

I now approach challenges differently, and my children have seen that change in me. The trust that was once fragile has strengthened, and we've been able to reconnect in ways that felt impossible before. It's not just about them trusting me—it's about me trusting myself to be the kind of mother I always wanted to be.

This sense of connection is something I now bring into the wider work we do. We've expanded our approach to nature-based recovery, integrating outdoor activities and creative sessions into mental health support. Working with organisations like the RSPB, we've helped people connect with nature through art, creative writing, and mindfulness, incorporating the five ways to well-being into practical, accessible activities.

The Recovery College itself has grown rapidly, with our curriculum expanding from ten to thirty courses, many of which have been developed in direct response to student feedback. This term, we're piloting a course for veterans, as well as new training on eating disorders, vicarious trauma, and living with uncertainty. It's been incredible to see peer-led education being recognised as a crucial part of mental health recovery.

Beyond the college, peer support is being embedded in mental health services more than ever before. We now have peer leads and deputy peer leads within the mental health clinical board, ensuring that peer workers are fully supported and not isolated within clinical teams. We've developed a peer support framework, and we're working on offering peer co-reflection spaces across sectors. There is a growing momentum behind valuing lived experience, and peer support is no longer seen as an 'add-on'—it is becoming an essential part of how mental health services operate.

For me, the biggest change has been coming back to what peer support is really about—building connections, creating safe spaces, and empowering people to take ownership of their recovery. When I first started this journey, I felt like I had lost my professional identity, but in reality, I've gained something much more valuable.
I've found where I belong. I've found my tribe.

I Never Thought I Could—And Now I Do

For years, I struggled with addiction. I'd get clean for a while, but I always seemed to fall back into old habits. It wasn't until I reached a year and a half of sobriety that I realised something had to change. I knew that if I wanted to stay on the right path, I needed more than just not using—I needed a purpose. That's when I decided to get into peer support.

I started volunteering, mentoring young people and supporting residents in council-run hostels. Then I moved into substance misuse support, helping people struggling with stimulant use. Eventually, I became part of a specialist stimulant support service. I wasn't just delivering support—I was helping shape a service that reached people who weren't engaging anywhere else.

Over the last 12 months, the most significant change for me has been finding confidence—not just in my recovery, but in my ability to do this work. When I first started, I doubted myself constantly. I was fully dyslexic, had never used a computer, and didn't think I was capable of handling the admin side of the job. I had always told myself that people like me couldn't do things like this.

But I stuck with it. I learned to use Google Workplace and got better at keeping records. I even took courses, something I never thought I'd do. I pushed myself, and now, I don't just manage the work—I enjoy it.

More importantly, I've seen the real impact of peer support. This stimulant support service gave people struggling with cocaine and crack cocaine an option they hadn't had before. For the first time, they had a space where they felt understood—where they weren't judged, where they could talk openly, and where support was shaped around their needs. Many of the people we worked with had never engaged with services before. Seeing them take those first steps, watching them make progress, knowing we played a part in that—that's what's made this work so powerful.

Before this job, I had hobbies, but there's only so much that can fill your time. Having a purpose, something that challenges me and keeps me engaged, has been the biggest change in my life. I used to think I wasn't capable of things like this. Now, I know I am. I never thought I could do it.

And now I do.

Learning to Lead in Recovery

For most of my life, I relied on alcohol to feel confident. I started drinking as a teenager, and by my early twenties, it had become part of my daily routine. I told myself I had it under control—I was working, I had no criminal record, I masked it well. But I wasn't functioning the way I thought I was. Alcohol controlled me, not the other way around.

My last relapse in early 2024 forced me to look at my recovery differently. I had stopped drinking before, but I never really understood what recovery meant for me. I thought I just had to 'get through it'—white-knuckling my way through abstinence without really engaging in what was happening underneath. That's when I found peer support.

A year ago, I wasn't sure if I was 'recovered enough' to support others. I questioned my own journey, worried about saying the wrong thing, and compared myself to other peers. I had spent so long hiding behind alcohol that stepping into a space where I was meant to help others felt overwhelming.

Now, I feel confident—not just in my own recovery, but in my ability to support others in theirs.

Delivering peer support has completely changed my perspective on recovery. I used to think it was as simple as abstinence—that you either drank, or you didn't. But working with peers has shown me how unique recovery is for everyone. Some people focus on harm reduction, others on abstinence, and for many, it's a process of trial and error. Supporting people through that has made me more open-minded and less judgemental—not just of others, but of myself.

At first, I struggled to see how my own experiences could be useful to others. But over time, I've realised that sharing my story in the right moments helps build trust and connection. It makes peer support real. I've seen people grow stronger in their recovery, and I've had the privilege of walking alongside them.

One of the biggest moments for me was when a peer I support challenged me on my own boundaries, throwing my own advice back at me. That experience made me realise just how much I was still learning from the people I support. Peer support isn't just about giving—it's a two-way process.

Through this work, I've become more confident in speaking openly about addiction, more secure in my own recovery, and more connected to the people around me. I no longer feel the need to compare myself to others. I know that I belong in peer support, and I know that what I do makes a difference.
A year ago, I didn't think I could do this. Now, I can't imagine not doing it.

Mimi and Me: A Road to Freedom

When I first stepped into peer support, I knew I wanted to give something back, but I wasn't sure how. It wasn't about telling my own story—I wanted to offer something positive. But first, I had to learn. I had to get myself out there, engage with other peer workers, and understand what real support looked like. It taught me listening skills, empathy, and when to share my experiences in a way that actually helped others.

I started as a member, then completed the volunteer training, and now I work in peer support. But I still volunteer because it comes from the heart. I was afraid that once I moved into paid work, the passion would fade. It didn't. If anything, it's grown stronger.

One of the biggest changes over the last year has been rebuilding trust with my daughter. It's something that's taken time, but now, I can take my granddaughter out in the car, and my daughter trusts me completely. That means everything. There was a moment recently when I tripped while holding my granddaughter, and I panicked, thinking my past would make my daughter doubt me. But she didn't. She told me, "It happens. You turned away, so you fell, not Poppy." That trust is something I've worked hard for, and knowing she believes in me now is massive.

With the members I support, I've seen real progress. One woman I've worked with for a long time went through a rehab programme but lapsed. She wasn't ready to go back through it, so I arranged weekly one-to-ones, focusing on harm reduction instead. She was two weeks sober when she finally re-entered the programme—and she completed it. She had a blip recently, but she's back on track, and I've been there for her every step of the way. Watching her growth has been incredible.

But the most significant change for me? My car.

It might sound strange, but Mimi—because yes, she has a name—has been the biggest symbol of my recovery. She represents my independence, my hard work, and my freedom. Before, I was reliant on others, on public transport, always feeling stuck. Now, I can go where I want, when I want. And I saved for her myself—outright, no finance. That's something I never thought I'd be able to do.

I used to be scared of full-time work, worried that I'd lose the passion I had as a volunteer. But now, I'm stepping into a new chapter.

I’m about to start leading sessions in relapse prevention, and I’ve been asked to help train staff in peer support. It’s a huge step, and it’s exciting to be recognised for what I bring to the team.

Delivering peer support has never felt like a slog—it keeps building on itself. Every step makes me think, What’s next? How far can I take this? It’s given me a sense of purpose, of growth. And now, with Mimi by my side, the road ahead looks brighter than ever.

My Beautiful Recovery Journey

Three and a half years ago, I hit rock bottom. And I kept digging. I didn't want to be here anymore. My life was a cycle of addiction, anxiety, and depression, and I had no idea who I really was. I was always playing a role—the dad, the worker, the friend—but I never truly felt like myself.

Then, I went through detox. I knew I needed something to keep my mind busy, something to stop me from spiralling. A recovery programme helped me start rebuilding, but it was a phone call on Christmas Day that really made the difference. Someone rang to check in on me. It was my first sober Christmas, and that small act of kindness made me think, This is something I want to do for others.

A few months later, I started volunteer training. At first, it was overwhelming. Some days, I sat outside the building, too anxious to go in. But I kept pushing myself. I attended coffee mornings, started shadowing groups, and over time, my confidence grew.

I threw myself into volunteering, giving over 1,000 hours of my time in just a year and a half. I helped set up peer groups that are still running today. Eventually, I realised I wanted to make real changes, ones I couldn't do as a volunteer. So, I applied for a new role and became a team lead.

Now, I get to make an impact on a much bigger scale. I've helped set up an alcohol brief intervention system in a major hospital, improving the way people with alcohol-related issues are supported. I've worked on staff retention, making sure peer workers feel valued and supported so they can build real relationships with the people they help.

But the biggest change for me? Emotional intelligence.

For the first time in my life—55 years in March—I'm just me. I'm not trying to fit into a mould or play a part. I've developed a mantra: I don't take myself too seriously, but I take what I do seriously. It's changed everything.

Before, I lived in constant fear of not being enough. Now, I put myself first—not selfishly, but with self-awareness. I know that when I take care of myself, I can be better for others. I see it in the people I support—those who were at the end of their story but have now turned the page to a whole new chapter.

Recovery has given me something I never expected. I call my recovery beautiful. It's not a word I used to use, but now, it's the only way to describe it. And the best part? I get to help others find their own version of beautiful too.

Owning My Story

For most of my career, I kept my lived experience to myself. I had spent 30 years in this field, focusing on my technical and interpersonal skills, avoiding any mention of my own history. I wasn't in denial, but I didn't want to bring shame to myself or my family. If someone had asked about it five years ago, I would have shut the conversation down with, I'm not here to talk about me, I'm here to talk about you.

But that has changed.

I grew up in Cardiff, struggling through school with undiagnosed neurodiversity. Teachers constantly told me I wasn't trying hard enough. At home, after my parents' divorce, I felt like a burden. Eventually, I left school with no qualifications and found my way to substances—primarily amphetamines, which I used for over a decade.

After years of trying to access treatment, I was finally prescribed dexamphetamine, which helped me get a handle on my attention for the first time in my life. Over time, I tapered off it myself. That was the turning point. I moved into volunteering, worked my way into employment, and built a career. But I kept my past in the background, unsure of how—or if—it fit into my professional identity.

That all changed when I moved into a peer team role.

For the first time, I was encouraged to bring my lived experience into my work. At first, I was hesitant. Imposter syndrome crept in. But the feedback I received—people telling me they saw a change in me, that I looked different, that I belonged in this role—gave me the confidence to embrace it.

Now, I share my story. Not all of it, not all the time, but enough to show others that change is possible. Enough to break down stigma, to challenge shame. And instead of hiding parts of myself, I've found comfort in being fully seen and accepted—lived experience and all.

The most significant change for me has been stepping into my identity as a peer. Moving away from shame. Recognising that my past isn't something to be hidden but something that gives me insight, empathy, and a unique ability to connect with others.

I earned this role on my own merit. I bring knowledge, skill, and experience to my team—not despite my past, but because of it. And that's something I'm proud of.

Right People, Right Place, Big Difference

I've been in peer support for a long time. My journey started in 2009, after years of substance use, homelessness, and trying to work out where I fit in the world. When I first got into recovery, I knew I needed to do something meaningful, something that made use of my experiences. I started volunteering, then moved into paid roles, eventually spending ten years in one organisation before stepping into my current role.

At first, it was exhausting. Going from a desk job—where I was doing maybe 6,000 steps a day—to suddenly walking 30,000 steps daily in outreach was a shock. I was still eating the same, so I dropped a stone and a half in a month. It got to the point where, before she left, a colleague made sure everyone knew: Make sure Tim eats. It took time to adjust, but I got there.

The biggest shift over the last year has been seeing the impact of having the right people in the right roles. One of the strongest members of our team, Callum, made a mistake. He left, but he did everything in his power to turn things around. He reached out for support, engaged with services, and worked on himself. And when he was ready, he came back.

I wanted him back on the team because I knew his value. He knew what he needed to change, and he did it. Now, he's back in the role, bringing lived experience that resonates deeply with the people we support. That's powerful. It sends a clear message—even we can mess up and come back from it. That second chances exist. That recovery isn't linear, but it is possible.

Our team has been through changes—people moving on, roles being restructured—but one thing has become clear: we need the right people, and we need them in the right place. Having a strong, well-supported team isn't just about filling vacancies; it's about filling them with people who truly get it.
The work we do is tough. We engage with people who are frustrated, who take their anger out on the system, on us. But we've learned not to take it personally. We're here to build trust, not to argue. We meet people where they are, offering support without judgement.

And sometimes, the changes we see are immediate. I've worked with people dependent on opiates, guiding them towards assessments for long-acting treatment. The transformation can be astonishing—one day, they're grey, withdrawn, shuffling down the street; the next, they've got colour in their face and a spring in their step, telling me, I wish I'd done this years ago.
That's what makes this work worth it. It's about the right people, in the right place, making a real difference. And I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

The Biggest Change? Belief.

For most of my life, I didn't trust people. I thought everyone had an ulterior motive, that they wanted something from me, that they'd hurt me if I let them. That was just how I'd learned to survive.

I was in and out of systems from the moment I was born—family services, the courts, alcohol and drug services, housing. I was a heroin addict at 13, in and out of prison, in and out of services. I used to say, I'll never do volunteering. Why would you do something for free?

Then, in 2017, I got out of jail. The same day, I overdosed. I hadn't engaged with services for a decade, but I knew I was going to die if I didn't change something.

That's when I saw an old friend—someone I'd last seen smoking drugs in prison. But now, he was clean, doing well, actually happy. I looked at him and thought, I want that.

So I started volunteering. I threw myself into peer work, giving 40 hours a week to a local service. They trusted me—You know what you're doing, don't f* it up*—and people stuck their necks out for me, saying, He's good. He's growing. But I avoided getting a job for a long time. I didn't think I could do it.

When a job came up, my mentor told me it was perfect for me. I listed all the reasons I couldn't apply, and he just said, We all feel like that. Every day we come to work, we feel like that. It's called imposter syndrome.

I ignored the application for weeks. Then, last minute, I sat down, filled it out, and sent it off. I got the job. And I thought, Right, everything's going to change now.

And it did.

I now work in national peer support. I'm learning things I never thought I'd learn—how to manage money, how to have a bank account, how to live like a 'normal' adult. I've never had stability before. Now, I don't have to worry about someone screwing me over.

But the biggest change? Belief.

For the first time in my life, I believe in people. I don't assume the worst anymore. I've built friendships with people I trust completely.

I’ve seen people come through services, broken, and come out the other side. I’ve supported people who thought they had no future, and now they’re back in work, back with their families, actually living again.

Peer support showed me that people want to get better. They just need the chance. The space. Someone to believe in them.

That’s what changed for me. Someone believed in me. And now, I get to do that for others.

To Teach Is to Learn Twice

The past 12 months have been a big shift for me—not just in my job, but in my life. When I started delivering peer support, I thought I was doing it to help others, but the biggest thing I've realised is how much it's helped me.

I've been in and out of recovery for years. It took me a few tries before it stuck, and even then, I still felt like I was just surviving, not really living. My family were always there, but there was a distance. Even when they spoke to me, I could tell they were waiting for me to mess up again. I wasn't a part of things. I felt like I was just there.

When I started volunteering, that started to change. I was doing naloxone peer-to-peer work, training people on how to reverse overdoses. Then I started helping out with local recovery services, running groups and supporting others. It gave me something to focus on, something that felt worthwhile.

But the real change came when I got this job. Delivering peer support every day has done more for my confidence than I ever expected. I work directly with people, running groups, writing support plans, helping them through social services. And I see, time and time again, how much it matters that they're talking to someone who's been where they are.

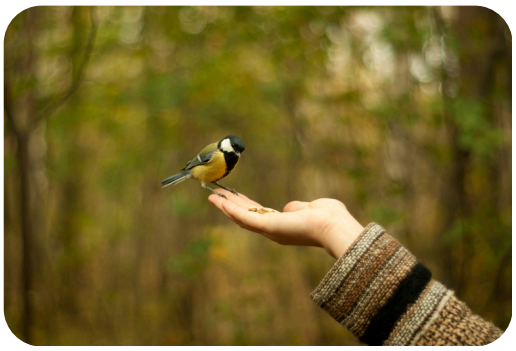
People listen differently when they know you understand. When they know you're not just someone who's learned about addiction in a book, but someone who's lived it. And that makes a difference—not just to them, but to me.

Helping others has strengthened my own recovery. There's a saying, to teach is to learn twice, and I get it now. Every time I remind someone that recovery is possible, that they're not alone, that they can get through it—I'm reminding myself too.

And somewhere along the way, my family started seeing the change as well. Maybe it's because I finally believe in my own recovery, and they can see that. Maybe it's because I'm not just staying sober anymore—I'm doing something that matters. But things are different now. We don't just talk, we spend time together. We make plans. They don't look at me like they're waiting for something to go wrong anymore.

I know I've still got work to do, but I can see the difference. And for the first time, I feel like I've actually got something to give.

Trust in Me



Twelve months ago, I was in a completely different place. I had trained as a volunteer before, but after a relapse, I disappeared. It's common—when you fall back into drinking, you don't just stop looking after yourself, you stop reaching out to the people who supported you. I felt embarrassed, like I had let people down, so I avoided them altogether. But in June, I decided to try again. I sent a message to someone I trusted, unsure of how it would be received. Instead of judgement, I was met with warmth. We met for coffee, and before I knew it, she had subtly suggested I rejoin volunteer training. I wasn't sure if I was ready, but she knew what she was doing. I signed up, and soon enough, I was right back in it.

Since returning, I've thrown myself into it. I started back on reception, taking phone calls, speaking to members, and offering support to people who needed to talk. I saw how much of a difference it made for people to have someone on the other end of the line, and I started to feel like I was actually contributing something. But the biggest change has been facilitating a family and friends group. I knew addiction from the inside, but stepping into this space gave me a whole new perspective. Supporting people who have loved ones struggling with addiction has made me see things differently. I've always understood what it feels like to be the person using, but now I see how it impacts those around them in ways I hadn't fully appreciated before. It's been challenging, confronting at times, but also incredibly rewarding.

In the last year, I have matured more than I had in the previous twenty. For so long, I had felt like I was behind in life, like I had wasted too much time, but peer support has shown me that none of it was a waste. Everything I've been through has given me the ability to support others in a way I wouldn't have been able to otherwise. Delivering peer support has given me confidence, self-worth, and the ability to finally trust my own decisions. I used to seek external validation in all sorts of ways, trying to fill a space I didn't know how to manage. Now, I feel like I am making choices I believe in, not ones based on what other people think.

Through peer support, I've been able to use my experience for something meaningful. I've had people tell me they are proud of me, that they're in awe of what I've done. More than anything, I've realised that I don't need other people's approval anymore. For the first time, I feel like I can stand on my own two feet and trust in myself.

Unchained Perspective

When I first stepped into peer support, I was just another team member. I could see the potential in people around me, spot the qualities that would make someone a great mentor or worker, but I had no way to do anything about it. I started as a peer in 2020, fresh out of a life spent in addiction and the criminal justice system. If you'd met me back then, I was rough around the edges, bringing too much of the streets into my work. But I was lucky—I had a team who saw my potential, who guided me, who polished me up and helped me grow.

Now, I get to be that person for others.

Eight months ago, I stepped into my first team lead role. I didn't have a clue what to expect, but it's been a full-circle moment. I've gone from receiving support as a peer to leading a team made up entirely of people with lived experience. I've been able to mentor people, see them develop, and then offer them real jobs when they're ready. There's something incredible about that—watching people you've supported move from service users to volunteers to paid staff.

When I first joined, there were only six staff members. Now, we've filled every role. We've onboarded 14 volunteers, and two of them have already moved into paid peer mentor positions. We've put on activities like boxercise, yoga, football, arts and crafts—things that bring people together, that give them a sense of belonging. We've made a name for ourselves, and people are starting to take notice.

It's a strange feeling, having commissioners, doctors, and psychologists reaching out to me, asking about my vision for the future. A few years ago, I was someone they wouldn't have given a second thought to. Now, they're coming to me for answers.

But the biggest shift isn't just about me—it's about the sector as a whole. We've seen people with lived experience coming into roles for a while now, but this year, we're seeing them step into leadership positions. We're not just waiting for people without lived experience to give us opportunities—we're creating them ourselves.

One of the lads who just got a full-time job with us said, "My life is looking good. My life has changed." That's what it's all about. That's what makes it worth it.

I got here because someone believed in me. My regional manager pulled me aside one day and told me I was wasting my potential, that I needed to apply for something bigger. That push changed everything for me. And now, I get to do the same for others—to see the spark in them, give them the opportunities they deserve, and watch them thrive.

For the first time, I’m not just part of the system—I’m helping to shape it.

You Have to See It to Believe It

Before I got involved in peer support, I didn't know much about it. In work, I suppose we were always peers in some way, but I never thought of it like that. The people around me were just people who drank. That was the world I knew.

After 46 years of drinking, I went to hospital for detox. When I came out, I went straight into a recovery setting. That was in 2016. I joined a programme, spent time in recovery housing, and kept going from there. A year later, I started volunteering. At first, it was just being a recovery buddy—greeting people, making them feel welcome. Then I moved on to running groups. Eventually, I started volunteering in hospital wards, working alongside liaison teams. I loved that work.

Over the years, I've seen a lot of change in peer support. Not in what it is—peer support will always be about trust and connection—but in how people understand it. That's been the biggest shift. It's taken a long time for people to really see what peer support does, what it doesn't do, and why it works.

People still don't fully get it. Some think we're professionals, some think we're just a drop-in service. Others expect us to do things we're not trained for. It's been a challenge trying to explain it, because peer support isn't something you can just describe—it's something you have to witness.

It used to feel like we were a small family unit. Everyone in the space understood what we were doing. Now, we're part of something bigger. That's helped in some ways—more people are recognising what we do—but we still have to explain it, over and over.

The difference now is that people are starting to see it in action. That's when it clicks. You can't just tell someone what peer support is and expect them to understand. They need to watch it work. They need to see the trust being built, the changes in people's lives, the impact it has.

I think we're finally getting to that point. It's taken time, but people are beginning to believe in peer support. And once they see it for themselves, there's no going back.

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Contact Us

07944 851050/
029 2022 7019

info@recoverycymru.org.uk

Recovery Cymru, 218 Cowbridge Rd, East Canton, Cardiff, CF5 1GX

www.recoverycymru.org.uk