

# Confidentiality & Peer Support Services

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**VA**  
**HEALTH**  
**CARE** | Defining  
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# Learning Objectives

- Discuss a definition of confidentiality.
- Discuss reasons why maintaining confidentiality and obtaining informed consent are important.
- Discuss strategies for maintaining confidentiality.
- Identify examples of limits of confidentiality.
- Discuss strategies of what to do when faced with an issue involving confidentiality limits as a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) peer support provider.

# What is meant by maintaining confidentiality?

To maintain someone's confidentiality means to keep the individual's personal information private and to not share the information with people who do not need to know it.\*\*

- Verbal: What a person says to you should remain between you.
- Written: Any personal identifying information you write about a Veteran needs to be kept in a secure place (ex. locked cabinet with limited access to others; documented in the Veteran's electronic medical record where access is tracked).

\*\* There are exceptions where you must share private information about a Veteran with others (ex. threat of suicide; threat of homicide; suspected abuse of children and/or elderly).\*\*

# Why is maintaining confidentiality important?

- Demonstrates respect for others
- Promotes honesty
- Fosters trust between individuals
- Ensures that the only people who have certain information are the ones who need to know it
- Demonstrates professional integrity
- Protects the rights of the Veterans who are served by the VA health care system

# How to Maintain Confidentiality

## DO

- Discuss confidentiality with group members at the beginning of your group and whenever new Veterans join your group. Provide informed consent about their participation.
- Keep written notes in a safe place and enter them in the electronic medical record within a timely manner.
- When encountering a group member outside of the group, avoid “outside talk” about the group.

\*\* These DO's also apply to one-on-one peer support work. \*\*

## DON'T

- Share information you know about a Veteran you are serving with anyone who is not providing treatment services to the Veteran.
  - Talk about your peer support group in a public place (ex. hallway; elevator; cafeteria).
  - Leave notes with identifying information about Veterans lying on a desk or in another open space unattended.
- \*\* These DON'TS also apply to one-on-one peer support work. \*\*

# Why are there limits to confidentiality?

There are times when you are REQUIRED to share certain information with VA clinical staff members.

- Protects the emotional and physical safety of the Veterans you are serving.
- Assists Veterans to obtain help they may need.

# Limits of Confidentiality

- Threat of harm to oneself (suicidal):
  - Concern generates from what the Veteran says and/or how the Veteran acts
  
- Threat of harm to others (homicidal):
  - Concern generates from what the Veteran says and/or how the Veteran acts

# Limits of Confidentiality

➤ Veteran discusses situations where there is suspected child abuse:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Neglect

➤ Veteran discusses situations where there is suspected elder abuse:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Neglect



# Limits of Confidentiality

## ➤ Weapon on VA property:

- Example: Bringing a gun or knife into one of the hospital buildings, community-based outpatient centers, or a VA-operated transitional residences.

## ➤ \*\*Suspected alcohol or drug abuse:\*\*

- Depending on the VA program where you are working, you may be required to report a Veteran's recent suspected or known substance abuse.

# **Confidentiality Vignettes**

**(Refer to the Confidentiality Vignettes Handout)**

# What should I do?: Pre-Planning

BEFORE you begin facilitating a VA peer support group or meeting with a Veteran for individual support:

- Talk with your supervisor about how to handle these confidentiality limits with the Veterans you are assisting.
- Ask your supervisor or your program's director (if different than your supervisor) which VA staff member(s) you should immediately talk with if there is an emergency with a Veteran you are assisting.

# What should I do?: Informed Consent

As you begin working with a Veteran for individual mentoring or as a participant in one of your peer support groups, you need to do the following in regards to confidentiality:

- Explain clearly about the conditions and limits of confidentiality at the very beginning of your working relationship. This is part of informed consent.
  - Example: “As a rule, I will not disclose information without your consent. However, there are some limits of confidentiality which we will talk about now.”
- If confidentiality conditions change due to policy updates or any other unforeseen reason, discuss the new rules with the Veterans with whom you are working as soon as possible.

# What should I do in the moment?

Sometimes, a Veteran may appear angry and/or worried that you are going to tell VA clinical staff members personal information that the Veteran does not want the clinical staff to know.

- Let the Veteran know that you are concerned about the welfare of everyone involved in the situation.
- Tell the Veteran that you are REQUIRED to get VA clinical staff involved in certain situations to help protect the safety of the Veteran and all other parties involved in the situation.
- Remind the Veteran that you are trying to help alleviate his/her suffering by connecting the Veteran to clinical staff members who can assist the Veteran to get the help needed to secure the Veteran's physical and emotional safety.
- Encourage the Veteran to go with you to speak with VA clinical staff members for assistance.

# What should I do in the moment?

If you encounter a situation that falls within the limits of confidentiality:

- IMMEDIATELY consult with your supervisor or the VA clinical staff member in charge at the time.

# Presenter Contact Information

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