

**New England MIRECC Peer Education Center  
Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital  
200 Springs Road, Bedford, MA 01730**

**Making Effective Use of Your Recovery Story in Peer Support Relationships**

**Activity #2: Illness Story or Recovery Story...You Decide!**

*Instructions: Read each vignette and then answer the related questions.*

**Vignette #1:**

Sal is a Vietnam War Veteran who recently had a relapse related to alcohol abuse and then entered treatment at his local Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical center. While in treatment, Sal meets with Ron, a peer support specialist who is also a Vietnam War Veteran. During their conversation, Ron tells Sal a brief personal story about his history with post-traumatic stress disorder and alcoholism to put Sal at ease about Sal's recent relapse. Ron shares that, over the years, he suffered several relapses, but he feels he has "finally gotten it right." With the help of therapy, medication, and being able to share his painful war experiences with other Veterans, Ron feels that he might finally be on the right track. Ron states that he wants to help other Veterans, like Sal, to also feel better.

**Questions for Vignette #1:**

- Is this an example of an illness story or a recovery story? Why?
- Do you think Ron sharing his personal story with Sal was helpful or harmful? Why?

**Vignette #2:**

Suzanne is a Gulf War Veteran who recently enrolled for services at the local VA medical center. She wants to receive help because her mood frequently changes and she does not understand why. Lately, she has been feeling depressed, and she wonders if she might have bipolar disorder. At the medical center's Women's Health Clinic, Suzanne meets Rebecca, a Veteran who is a peer support specialist. Suzanne feels excited to have another female Veteran to talk to, and she and Rebecca go to Rebecca's office to talk further. During their conversation, Suzanne tells Rebecca about her concerns regarding her recent depression and her speculation about whether she might have bipolar disorder because she experiences severe mood swings. Rebecca listens to Suzanne and

then tells Suzanne about her own experiences living with depression and using VA mental health services for assistance. Rebecca tells Suzanne that her own recovery has transformed her life. Rebecca goes on to share that she went from severe drug use and homelessness in her past to her current life that is now focused on helping others through her work as a VA peer support specialist. As Rebecca shares how much her life has changed for the better since beginning her path to recovery, Suzanne admits that she feels hopeful that she can get a handle on her own issues and return to living a meaningful and productive life.

Questions for Vignette #2:

- Is this an example of an illness story or a recovery story? Why?
- Do you think Rebecca telling her personal story to Suzanne was helpful or harmful? Why?

**Vignette #3:**

John and Stacey are VA peer support specialists who work in the inpatient substance abuse treatment program at the local VA medical center. They have agreed to co-facilitate a “Life Changes” group in the program. As part of their role, it is expected that John and Stacey will share part of their personal recovery stories with the Veterans in the group. During the first group meeting, John tells the group members about his history of addiction and how years of physical and emotional abuse took their toll, leaving him feeling hopeless for much of his life. After John finishes, Stacey tells the group members about the many ways her life has changed since entering treatment and beginning her own recovery. Trying to be a positive example for the group, Stacey shares details about the new apartment she recently obtained with the help of the VA Supported Housing Program and the service connection rating she was awarded. She also tells the group members that she will soon be going back to school to study to become a social worker, thanks to the assistance she received from the medical center’s vocational rehabilitation services program. As Stacey continues to share the details of her recovery and recent life changes, some of the group members grow restless. One group member walks out of the room.

Questions for Vignette #3:

- Are these examples of illness stories or recovery stories? Why?
- Do you think John and Stacey sharing their personal stories was helpful or harmful? Why?