



Prioritizing Mental Health  
in First Responders

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# Peer-to-peer Support Programs

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An average day for a first responder is anything but average. First responders witness events that cause strong emotional, physical, cognitive, or behavioural responses. When compounded with the stressors of daily life, this exposure to trauma and pressure can have a severe negative impact on their mental health.

## **Your team is a valuable support resource**

While everyone's experience is unique, coworkers and managers who have been through similar experiences can offer their perspectives and assistance through peer support. Team members with lived experience can provide valuable support by guiding first responders facing mental health challenges toward hope and recovery.

When a peer understands and discusses what a fellow first responder is going through, it can promote socialization, reduce feelings of isolation, and help remove the continued stigma around mental health challenges. It may also reduce the need for formal medical intervention.

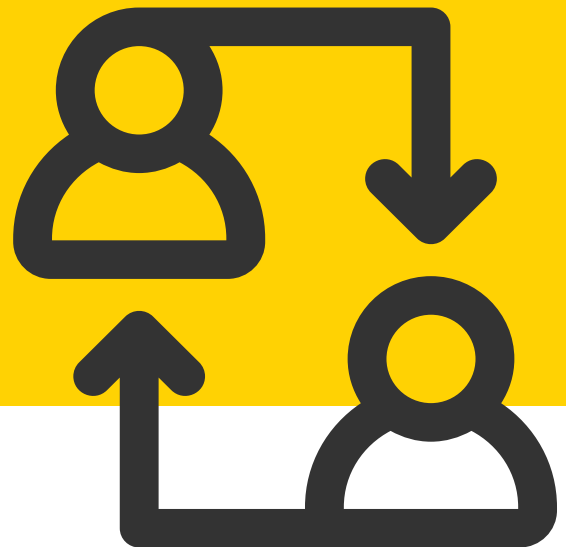
## **Is peer support right for your organization?**

First responder organizations across Canada are adopting peer support programs. They empower workers to make their own decisions and feel in control while receiving support from others. The most effective peer support programs are formalized and structured.

## Benefits of a peer-to-peer support program

Peer-to-peer support programs are mutually beneficial for both the team member offering support, the one receiving support, and the organization as a whole. These programs foster an environment of hope and recovery for all. They can also:

- Support mental health resilience
- Help humanize mental health challenges
- Help workers learn coping strategies
- Encourage healing for supporters as they listen and help peers work toward their goals
- Reduce time-loss incidence for first responders, allowing them to remain on the job and all the benefits that come with that for them and their loved ones



# How to start

Initiating a peer-to-peer program in your organization requires an investment of time, resources, and, often, money. However, given the importance of your team’s psychological health, peer support’s ability to help people stay on the job, and the financial benefits of avoiding time-loss claims—it is well worth it.

Unless your organization has in-house expertise, initiating a peer-to-peer program will require a partner. There are organizations across Canada that offer peer support program training and support for leaders and workers who wish to become peer supporters. These partners can help guide you through starting a program, training peer supporters, and maintaining the program.

## **Badge of Life Canada**

Badge of Life Canada is a mental health support resource for first responders and their families. It offers peer support sessions, a list of approved therapists, and peer support training specifically tailored to an organization’s needs.

## **Wounded Warriors Canada**

Like Badge of Life Canada, Wounded Warriors Canada is a nationally recognized mental health support service specifically serving first responders and their families—including peer support training.

## **CMHA-NS**

The Canadian Mental Health Association (Nova Scotia Division) is a mental health advocacy organization that provides educational support and resource navigation for mental health services. Although not specific to first responders, they offer educational programs on workplace mental health safety.

# What does peer-to-peer support training involve?

Although training will vary depending on the provider, there are some fundamental core concepts that most will cover. Here is a high-level overview of what potential peer supporters can expect to learn:

## 1. Understanding mental health

- Basic concepts of mental health and mental illness
- Common mental health issues faced by first responders

## 2. Effective communication skills

- Active listening and empathy
- Techniques for providing emotional support

## 3. Self-care and resilience

- Strategies for self-care and maintaining mental health
- Building resilience to cope with stress and trauma

## 4. Crisis intervention

- Identifying signs of a mental health crisis
- Steps to take during a crisis situation

## 5. Confidentiality and ethical guidelines

- Understanding the importance of confidentiality
- Ethical considerations for peer support

## 6. Referral and resources

- Knowing when and how to refer to professional help
- Information on available mental health resources and support services

# Resources

This First Responders Tool Kit also includes a Guide for Managers and Supervisors and Getting the Conversation Started sections. Both are very helpful resources for promoting workplace psychological health and for determining what to do when a team member becomes injured.

For more information on first responders' peer support programs and their benefits, you can also visit the following resources:

## **BC First Responders' Mental Health**

- [An Overview of Peer Support Programs](#)

## **CIPSRT (Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment)**

- [Peer Support and Crisis-Focused Psychological Intervention Programs in Canadian First Responders](#)