

## Peer Chat *With* – Lisa Archibald

### The power of ‘being with’

#### Podcast transcript for film

**Lesley:**

Hello. Just to give a bit of an introduction, I am Lesley Smith. I’m a Network Officer with the Scottish Recovery Network. I’m really excited because I’m having a conversation with Lisa Archibald here as part of our Peer Chat series. So Lisa - welcome.

**Lisa:**

Thank you Lesley.

**Lesley:**

It’s great to see you.

**Lisa:**

Yeah.

**Lesley:**

So, I met you quite a number of years ago in the Borders when you were the manager of New Horizons Borders. I followed you through the years because you were quite inspiring, well, not quite inspiring, you are inspiring. It’s the first time I heard about a Churchill Fellowship and

following what you've been up to since then has been incredibly exciting, so tell us a bit about yourself.

**Lisa:**

I've worked in peer support, actually I say, 'I've worked in', I've been part of peer support for about twenty years, because originally I actually accessed peer support groups myself, so my starting point was when I was a graduate actually. I finished university, ironically studying behavioural science with the intention of becoming a clinician at that point. I was really struggling with just having an existential crisis probably, and so I started by accessing peer support groups and really falling in love with how that was as a way of being with people. And I tried a few other things - working in social work and doing a few other jobs and just couldn't feel comfortable, so I went to run peer support groups originally and then I started to manage peer support groups and that's obviously when I was at New Horizons. Prior to that I'd been in advocacy too.

And then this Winston Churchill Fellowship opportunity that I got in 2013, took me over to New Zealand and Australia. I loved travel. I loved learning about other communities, I started to do a lot more research and also became a trainer and came back for a bit, packed my bags, applied for a visa and went back to New Zealand. I ended up there for almost seven years and then last year came back to Scotland, mid-pandemic. And I work now for Intentional Peer Support, an organisation that's international but based in Vermont in the USA. I don't commute, just online.

**Lesley:**

Well, with the power of digital these days...

**Lisa:**

Although one thing I would say is I really miss being part of grassroots communities that have that kind of mutual focus. It's the first time in twenty years that I've not been part of a community like that and I do feel I'm missing it.

**Lesley:**

So thinking about that, why is it important to you? What is it about peer support that's important to you?

**Lisa:**

I think, looking back, when I first accessed peer support myself I think what I noticed was that I felt like I'd found my tribe. When I was in all these other spaces, all the conversations were about what's not working in my life and it was like being in this vortex of negativity. If you were struggling or having a hard time, the conversations were about your problems or symptoms or what wasn't working and how you were going to fix it all.

Whereas actually when I was with other people where there was this shared commonality, we just talked about life and actually it's the first time that I'd really talked about the struggles of the fact that my parents were teenagers when they had children and I started to think about actually from their perspective how it must have been hard to be sixteen, seventeen and having kids and grow up in a mining community.

I started to process and communicate some of that stuff around the mining strike and the kind of impact that had on our family and I hadn't talked about any of that stuff and I started to think about how, when I was struggling I went to one place and they wanted to talk about giving me a diagnosis and medication but when I was in this other space, we didn't talk about that. We just talked about our lives and how all these experiences we'd had influenced the way we see the world. So one space was telling you 'you have obsessive compulsive disorder', the other space was going 'wow, no wonder you see the world as unsafe, no wonder the world feels scary' and it's like, thank god somebody understands. And I didn't feel broken, I just felt like I was understood.

And I think that's what I get from peer spaces, whether I'm working there or accessing it myself. There's been times over the years when I've had to dip back into it myself or access some support and I've always found it , just a different way of processing life.

**Lesley:**

Yeah, I think I could agree with that as well. There's something about, you can let some of the barriers go or the boundaries go that you'd see maybe in a different type of relationship where you'd think ' oh, I've got to fit in here' but in a peer relationship you can just let some of these things I'd be a bit more wary about out and it feels just like sort of ' aaah, they get it'

**Lisa:**

Yeah, and there's no presumption that you need to do anything different. Like, I would find that I would go to talk to clinical services or

counsellors and there was always this assumption that I would have to do something different. Whether that was, you know, do these things and you'll be well, whatever that was. Whereas in these other spaces it was like, yeah, sucks. Or yeah, it's hard. Full stop. No presumption that I had to do anything different, I could just be accepted as being a little bit manic or a little bit crazy and actually being ok to just be like that.

**Lesley:**

Yeah, I think that was one of the biggest things that I've learned about myself as well and it's through a lot of peer relationships that I didn't have to fix myself, but I could accept myself as who I am. And then beginning to see myself a bit differently did have a profound impact on me so it's really interesting that you're saying something similar.

I was thinking about, what are these bits that make peer support and how important it is that we recognise that and we can articulate that. But also, we're talking about as we create opportunities for peer support to happen, as we bring lived experience more to the forefront, encouraging people to learn from and engage with what people have learned from their own experience and we're seeing peer roles being developed, so one of the things we really want to be mindful of and work hard at is, keeping that integrity of what that peer relationship is. So I wanted to talk a little bit with you is- what are the things that you've learned or done around preserving that uniqueness that is peer support? How do we keep it?

**Lisa:**

I think I'm going to try not to be too controversial around this. I appreciate the fact that I don't sit within services and systems. I'm just an independent person so I can often be a little bit more blunt than if I worked for somebody where I had to watch what I say. I think maybe my passion for being part of grassroots organic communities comes from the fact that it's independent, so what's measured in terms of success is actually relational. If we're having relationships between ourselves and we're part of a community, it's that kind of collective stuff. And I worry a little bit, having been in the peer support world for a couple of decades now, I worry that we're moving towards the individualistic way of being with peer support. In terms of how we keep the fidelity, it's like, how do we make sure we're still being relational.

And I worry a bit, and I do a lot of training and also co-reflection and supervision with peer workers, how often people are coming and talking about a client, or a goal plan, frustrated because people won't change, or they're so stuck. And it's interesting because it's this idea that you know maybe it's a spoonful of peer support like another intervention. And I think we need to be wary of how integrated we become and still remember that this was created from a time and place about doing something different outside the norm. Like, this was about a bunch of activists going 'we're not just a medical model, we're not wanting to be pathologised, we're people and we're humans and we have experiences and we want to connect with other people who have similar experiences. And it was never about systems and services, it was about conversations and relationships and also activism and human rights. And I think sometimes we move more towards becoming services, rather than remembering that we're part of social movements. And part

of being a social movement is that we want change, we want something to be different. And sometimes we lose that flavour a wee bit.

**Lesley:**

So tell us a wee bit more about what you mean by a social movement for peer support.

**Lisa:**

Well, I think about like back in the 60s and 70s, it was a really dominant asylum-based model and actually, people that were most oppressed were the people who are marginalised by society anyway, you know people of colour, queer people, gay people, people who are poor, working class. And these are people who are already oppressed within society and it was another way of reinforcing these social norms. And psychiatry has only existed for a couple of hundred years. It's just one perspective. There's so many others and I think sometimes we're privileging this as a dominant truth, it's become so unquestioned that it's become this global truth. And it's like, where's the spiritual explanation, the cultural explanation, the nutritional explanation, whatever that is. And I see less and less space for us to have these conversations around what's your explanation of your experience. We don't talk about what causes distress. We're so busy trying to fix it or shut it down instead of going 'what's making people go mad in the first place?' Because I think that sits with social justice and we need to intertwine social justice and peer support.

**Lesley:**

Well, thanks. I think that's quite a lot for us to think about. When I think back about what first attracted me to peer support, because at the beginning I was thinking, this is really good, but if we're going to create formal roles, we need to be careful that it doesn't become something that loses that sense of what it is and where we've come from. One of the things that I was really quite intentional about when Scottish Recovery Network was part of peer work, we worked with people to develop a values framework. That was part of our focus because people were concerned about how do we ensure that we don't lose that relational aspect. Like you talked about, the focus becomes on goals and outcomes but it's like, what is it that happens in the space between us? And this was something that we found really helpful. You mentioned about relational, where is the power in relationships in peer support?

**Lisa:**

For me it's just, peer support is relational. It's a relational way of being and I worry that we're moving towards it becoming a job or a job title rather than actually... I ask people all the time 'what are you doing differently? How are you working in a way that is about relationships?' so we're not veering towards the whole fixing, helping stuff but we're actually thinking about how we can both learn and grow because we're having meaningful conversations, so because we're having this exchange we'll be co-creating this shared wisdom. So we'll have a conversation and go, huh I've never thought about it that way. And I think what's been so crucial for me around working relationally is that it's reduced a lot of the conflicts that I have and also some of the frustrations that I used to get in peer support, where I'd see people

stuck and not changing and think 'but we just had this conversation. I told you all the things you need to do in your life but you're still stuck and things aren't changing'. And I started to come more from a place of curiosity and think 'this is how I see things through my lens, tell me how you see it'. Actually trying to be curious about the other person's perspective. If we don't agree on something, trying to understand what's happened in your life, and your upbringing and your experience that makes you see things so different from me? And then we can start to open up the conversation instead of disconnecting and getting frustrated. One of the things I was proud of way back when I was in New Horizons as a peer community was, when the Welfare Reform Bill came in, we started to think collectively as a community about the impact this was having on people, in the Borders in particular but also people who were already struggling on benefits and thinking, we are a community here. And even though I was privileged because I was paid, this other person that comes to the same community as me that's on a benefit for whatever reason is going to be really hammered by this. So we started to think about campaigning, advocacy, systemic change. It wasn't just sitting around talking about how crap it is and how it's making us ill, but what are we going to do about it? That to me is so important, if we see ourselves as being in relationships and part of collective communities, we start to think as a whole and we're not just thinking individually, this will affect just you so go and get this help from citizens advice, but actually what can we do together?

**Lesley:**

I think that's a really important point, what can we do together? It's not just about 'I'm here to help you' or the power dynamic is a bit different,

I'm here to do something with you, together we can think about what is it we can do to be helpful. It depends on whether it's a group or a couple of people, how does it work for us both? How do we create more opportunities for that to happen in Scotland today, but also thinking about, we are aware and we are encouraging, certainly within Scottish Recovery Network, roles where people are volunteering, facilitating, paid peer roles. In your experience, you've talked about training people around relational aspects of peer support, but I'm thinking also about, what are some of the things that have helped when you've worked with organisations that are creating these more formal roles? Not the stuff that gets in the way, the stuff that helps.

**Lisa:**

It becomes a recurring conversation for me and I do a lot of work in the US now and it can be a little frustrating how they set things up and it's funded in a very different way and measured in a different way. My starting conversation is always "why peer?" You say you want a team of peer workers, you want to set up something within your state or system of service. Why? What is it you want that's different about this that you've not already got? If it's just about whacking the word peer in it, don't bother. If you actually want to do something different, if you want a group of people who are going to connect with your community in a different way then bring it on. But actually then, how are you going to change your policies, how are you going to change your procedures, how are you going to change all the stuff so that the clinical team are also learning from the peer team and vice versa. So it actually becomes, what have we got to offer and how can we understand each other's way of being, especially if it's a mixed team. So what works well is

having those conversations from the start around what we're talking about today. How is peer support different? How is it unique? Why do you want it in the first place?

**Lesley:**

Yeah - and what's it going to add and what's going to be different from what's already there? I know we've had quite a few conversations recently and I was really struck by the way that you were talking about how peers can be supportive of each other and be supported in the roles that they take on. Can you tell us a bit more about some of the ideas that you have there?

**Lisa:**

In terms of co-reflective spaces? I think sometimes we make this assumption that we're all like, vulnerable and fragile because we've got these experiences that we've had and I think - there's a Frieda Kahlo quote that I always remember that's "not fragile like a flower, but fragile like a bomb". And I always like that because it's like, maybe we actually are a bit fragile and the reclamation of the word "mad" is like, what have we got to be mad about? Because there's some things I feel really mad about - like the injustice and the inequality and the unfairness. And I think there's a lot we can learn from each other in terms of spaces where we can just connect and talk about this because often times I'll see services that are set up and it's a supervision model and actually all the spaces are set up around an agenda. So you come with an agenda and you've got to talk about clients and actually at what point do we talk about ourselves? And actually when do we talk about our own stuff? Like I know I make mistakes all the time in every

relationship I am in. Like, all of us do. I don't think any of us could say 'I have a perfect relationship' full stop and I never make mistakes. So when do we talk about that in our workplace? Actually I'm going to make mistakes, how do I talk about it? How do we talk to each other about when we see ourselves and each other making mistakes? And there needs to be spaces like that where we can just go, oh hang on a minute, I made a mistake there, can we try that again? And actually could you give me feedback- would you be open to feedback? And how do we have those kind of spaces? Because I think work, it feels so structured that it's formal and there's all these expectations that we have to get it right all the time. And the beauty of being relational is that we can say 'ok we're going to mess up, but we can own it and work through it and we can try something different'

**Lesley:**

Yeah, I totally agree and that was a really powerful way that you described that there and it was one of the things that I do and my colleagues do in our roles. If we're talking to groups and organisations around how they're either developing roles or supporting peer workers or with the peer workers themselves and saying, 'what's it you need?' It's re-thinking that supervision to a reflective space. How can we reflect on what it is we're doing? How can we use our values as a way to have the discussion, to frame things rather than- have I got it right, have I got it wrong? Or has somebody achieved something or not. To go back to these values - are we in a relationship in a way that is what we define as fear. As fear? (laughs) As peer.

**Lisa:**

But actually you're right, sometimes it is quite fear-based. Peer-based, not fear-based. We'll go with that.

**Lesley:**

But sometimes you are stepping outside your comfort zone because I found it really easy to, it takes a really intentional way of trying to pull myself back and times and think 'what is it that I'm saying? How am I being?' rather than just go 'hey ho, let's get this fixed'.

**Lisa:**

And I think being able to talk about where some of that stuff comes from has been helpful. I've been able to have really honest conversations with colleagues around when I feel like I'm not getting it right, I start to get this fear of failure stuff and I know how that comes out and I'm going to start to try to control things and it's like 'can you let me know when I do that?' so we can talk about what I could do differently. Because that's how I learn and if we're open to doing that rather than this presumption that because I'm the manager of the CEO or something I'm going to get it right all the time.

**Lesley:**

That's really powerful. I'm now aware of the time. I would love to carry on this conversation because I think it really digs deep and there's some really gold nuggets in there. Is there anything else you'd like to add for people who are listening to our conversation?

**Lisa:**

I suppose my last message is- I'm an activist at heart and I think about what can we learn from other social movements in terms of how they achieve change? I look at the LGBTQ movement, I look at the feminist movement and civil rights and it's like, some significant and radical changes happened when people have thought like activists and I think at times, if we want to see the system being different, sometimes we need to challenge it too and start to go 'what's possible? What could be different and how do we work in a relational way regardless of what our roles are and push for something that feels, I'd like more radical change, I'd smash the whole thing. But I'll start more manageable and just say, think change.

**Lesley:**

Brilliant, thank you. And I think that's a good way to end for just now and a bit of a challenge to the rest of us to think about change and think about what we can do. So thank you so much.

**Lisa:**

And thank you for listening to my rants, people, I much appreciate it.

**Lesley:**

I wouldn't have called them rants. I think they are really insightful comments and show the depths of how you've come to think and experience things the way that you do and we're really grateful for you to share that with us, so thanks Lisa.

Lisa:

Thank you

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