



Struggle to Strength: The Power of Peer-to-Peer Support

Sailors experience stress daily and may struggle to manage its harmful effects.

A peer might notice changes in their shipmate's behavior and want to help but feel unsure of how to do so.

Many find the process of asking for or offering help difficult and avoid those important conversations. However, when Sailors support one another, they strengthen not only their peers but also build team cohesion and resilience. This article explains how Sailors can help each other using peer-to-peer support, effective communication methods, and types of support as well as how to recognize barriers that can prevent meaningful connection.

Peer-to-Peer Support

Peer-to-peer support is a daily form of care used to support individuals experiencing a stress reaction. Sailors supporting one another is the first line of defense in managing the harmful effects of stress.

The interactions between shipmates occur during difficult times, when peers identify signs of stress reaction and offer appropriate assistance, preventing stress injury and stress illness. This early intervention strategy relies on effective communication and knowledge of resources to engage a fellow Sailor in conversation, regardless of discipline or rank.

Peer-to-peer support depends on the willingness and ability of Sailors to notice changes in others and offer help to those who may be struggling. Peers do not serve as therapists or counselors and should avoid pressuring others to seek treatment. Peers can offer support and resources, but the individual themselves must choose to pursue further help.

These conversations often reveal personal information, which must be kept private to avoid spreading gossip and causing harm. In addition to being unethical and irresponsible, doing so may delay or prevent the individual from seeking support.

Confidential Communication



Because Sailors are uniquely present, Sailors can be and should be the first line of defense for their shipmates in managing the harmful effects of stress.

LT Paul Duncan



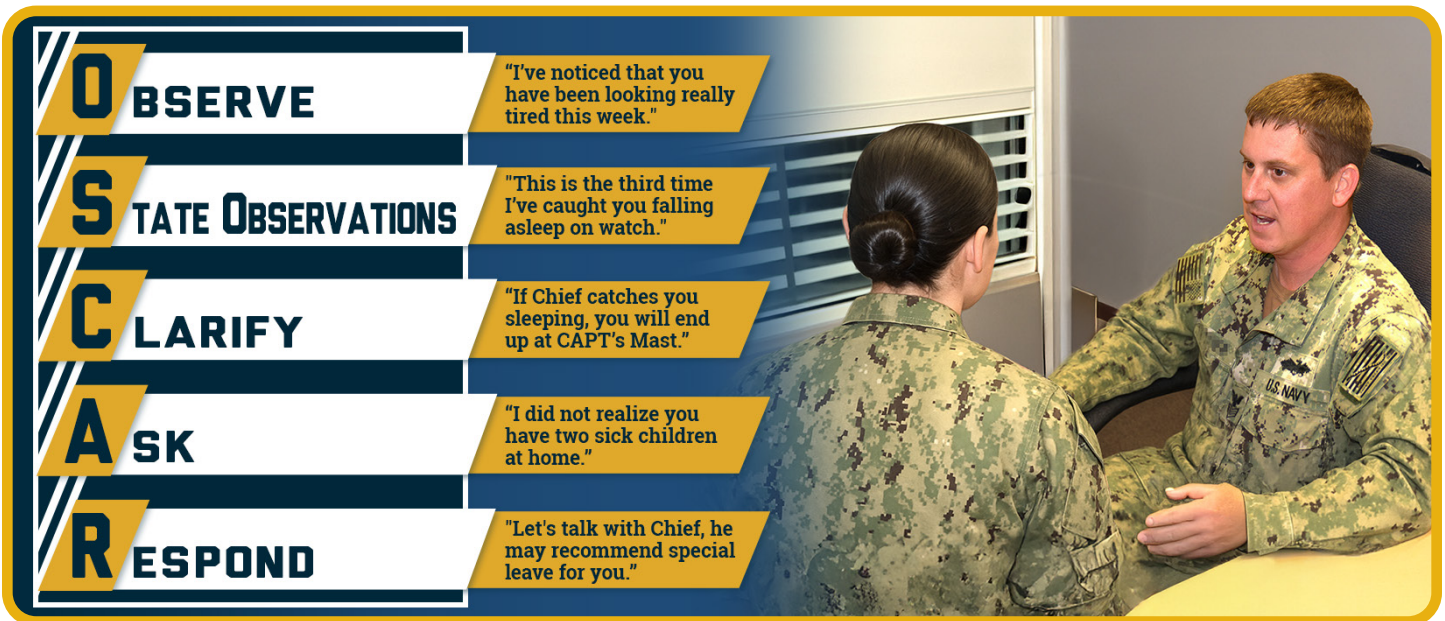
A Sailor on a ship reaching out to another Sailor in a storm

Peer-to-peer support is an informal interaction and not legally confidential. If certain topics arise, the Sailor should stop the conversation and refer the individual to the proper resource. These topics include sexual assault, sexual harassment, drug or alcohol use, legal matters, spiritual matters that may involve confidentiality, Command Managed Equal Opportunity (CMEO)-related issues, and suicide-related issues. The supporting Sailor should offer to accompany their peer and complete a warm handoff to ensure continued support.

OSCAR Communication

The Observe, State Observations, Clarify, Ask, and Respond (OSCAR) technique details the steps to open a discussion with a person who may be distressed. The five steps provide a guide for asking questions, showing concern, and assessing the need for support in a nonjudgmental and nonconfrontational way. Individuals should use OSCAR communication when talking with a peer, especially if the peer does not realize or want to admit they need help.

The first step, Observe, requires awareness of behaviors and patterns. The Stress Continuum lists concerning behaviors related to stress



Sailors using the OSCAR technique

reaction, which may occur over weeks or months.

The second step, State Observations, uses factual statements addressing the observed behaviors. Sharing without interpretation or judgment helps to avoid confrontation, allowing the conversation to continue.

The third step, Clarify, expresses the reason for concern and justifies the need to address the issue. This also reminds the person that others care, potentially lowering defensive barriers.

The fourth step, Ask, seeks to understand the other person's perception of the behaviors and causes by asking open-ended questions. Creating an opportunity for the person to share validates their emotions and experiences.

The final step, Respond, involves clarifying concerns, discussing desired behaviors, and stating options in behavioral terms. This step helps to guide the person to resources and continued support.

Empathetic Listening

Empathetic listening requires the listener to be present, engaged, and actively focused on understanding the other person's perspective, regardless of their own beliefs. By practicing perspective taking, the listener can appreciate the other person's reality without judgment. According to CDR Clinton Woods, listeners "want to understand the emotions the person is conveying, to engage on a deeper level with the person. They may feel vulnerable so it's important to be sensitive to how they feel."

An empathetic listener recognizes and acknowledges the emotions expressed without evaluation or criticism. They do not need to agree with the other's feelings. Instead, the listener respects the personal impact of the situation. People react to circumstances in different ways, and assuming others have the same emotional response can minimize or invalidate their experience.

Rather than attempting to solve the problem, empathetic listeners reflect and communicate their understanding, both verbally and nonverbally. They avoid comparing experiences or downplaying the other's emotions. Creating space for someone to share their story helps them feel heard, respected, and supported.

Support Options

Providing the right kind of



A Sailor listening to another Sailor

support at the right time plays a key role in helping others. Peer-to-peer support means offering assistance when an individual is suffering from wear and tear (repetitive or persistent burdens), inner conflict (values conflict), loss (financial, relationship, death of a loved one, etc.), or threat to life (near-death experience or other catastrophic experience).

Peers support each other in several ways and should assess which option best fits the individual's needs. In some situations, more than one of the following types of support may be required.

Emotional support consists of spouses, family members, or friends expressing their care and love with words or gestures.

Affirmational support helps individuals feel valued or respected for their contributions to work, family, or volunteer efforts.

Belonging affirms a person's connection to a community, such as their neighborhood, professional organizations, religious groups, or family.

Informational support assists others in accessing or learning needed information through resources, namely the Internet, social media, or knowledgeable people.

Tangible support provides aid with practical needs (e.g., transportation to an appointment, help with moving, or preparing for an exam or event).

Barriers to Support

Stigma surrounding mental health often prevents Sailors from seeking help. Many feel embarrassed and fear that others will see them as weak, lose confidence in them, or blame them for their struggles.

Sailors may encounter the following barriers that keep them from reaching out for support.

Trust in leadership: Some Sailors worry that their personal details will not be kept confidential and may negatively impact their Naval career.

Time and energy: Long workdays and emotional stress can leave Sailors too tired or overwhelmed to find the time and energy to talk with someone.

Lack of understanding and support by leadership: A lack of understanding about mental illness can lead to dismissal or minimization of someone's struggles.

Fear of reprisal: Sailors may avoid seeking help because they believe it might reflect badly on their character or lead to negative consequences.

Access: Even when interested in help, many believe they have limited access to care or are unaware of how to obtain it.

Lack of communication: Talking about getting help lessens the stigma and fear Sailors can experience when seeking assistance.

Understanding these barriers allows peers to respond with empathy and address the specific concerns preventing a shipmate from pursuing help. This builds trust and helps create a safe space where the individual feels validated and supported.

Code of Silence

Breaking the code of silence helps normalize the process of Sailors seeking and providing help. It reinforces the message that asking for support during times of distress is both acceptable and necessary. Without help, any stress

illness or injury may worsen over time. Suppressing emotions or struggles only builds pressure, which can eventually lead to harmful behaviors and outcomes. Leaders and peers must recognize the signs and symptoms of stress reactions, foster a safe environment, and promote a positive culture that encourages seeking help and supports early intervention.

Follow-Up

Peer-to-peer support does not end after the initial conversation. It continues in the form of follow-up care, making sure the person progresses toward a resolution. LT Paul Duncan emphasizes the importance of following up, saying, "This is vital. Follow up after you've tried to support an individual and see how it's going. We should never think that something's automatically fixed because we had a conversation. We don't want to assume something worked and then your peer is left still struggling with the same issue. Follow up with your peer to make sure they're doing okay and to see if the support worked."

Connection to Warrior Toughness

Peer-to-peer support builds connection and cohesion by fostering proactive, confident communication between all Sailors. Warrior tough Sailors support each other daily. They help shoulder each other's burdens, overcome obstacles

together, and build resilience as a team. True toughness includes the courage to admit when help is needed and reach out. Peer-to-peer support normalizes this behavior, helping fellow Sailors overcome stigma and understand that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.



The important part of peer-to-peer support is that you have a responsibility to take care of your shipmate. Sailors should always be willing and able to support their fellow Sailors.

LT Paul Duncan

Check. Connect. Support.

At the end of a meeting, one of the other officers came up to me and said, "Hey, is everything okay?"

I told her, "Yeah, everything's good."

She continued, "Well, I know you have a lot going on in your life. You seemed distracted in the meeting, and I noticed a hospital bracelet on your wrist."

I looked and sure enough, I did have a hospital bracelet on. "Ah, yes, I had to go over to Balboa this morning to get some X-rays. I had to go through the ER, and they just put the bracelet on me. But yes, everything's okay."

"Okay, I just want to make sure everything was fine."

Later that day, she came by to check on me. Even though nothing seemed obviously wrong, she noticed something and spoke up. She engaged, creating the opportunity for me to share what was going on with me. And it reminded me that people care.

– CDR Clinton Woods

Wrap-Up

Peer-to-peer support calls on Sailors to observe, identify, and own the well-being of shipmates. Communication techniques such as OSCAR and empathetic listening engage a struggling peer in a meaningful conversation.

Understanding another’s experience builds trust, allowing individuals to gently push through possible barriers and ultimately connect with available resources.



Warrior Toughness Peer-to-Peer Support infographic

For more information, check out the videos and podcast about Peer-to-Peer Support.



SCAN THE QR CODE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT
WARRIOR TOUGHNESS