

## **“Constructing a positive identity”: A qualitative study of the driving forces of peer workers in mental health care systems (1)** (Linked to 2, 3, 4, 5)

### **Introduction**

There is growing recognition in mental health of the value of the perspective of individuals with lived experience of mental health problems and mental health service use. As peer workers, these individuals can use their specific experience to benefit and support peers and professional caregivers, and to participate at all levels of mental health care systems. This study aimed to develop a conceptual framework representing the driving forces of peer workers in fulfilling their position in mental health care systems.

### **Methods**

A qualitative interview approach was employed using principles of grounded theory. Over a period of 5 months, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 peer workers in residential and community mental health care systems.

### **Results**

The conceptual framework that emerged reveals that peer workers strive to construct a positive identity. This process is powered by driving forces that reflect a desire for normalization and an urge for self-preservation. Peer workers realize a meaningful employment by using their lived experience perspective as an asset, liberating themselves out of restrictive role patterns, and by breaking down stigma and taboo. As a precondition to engage in these normalization processes, peer workers perceive they need to secure their self-preservation by balancing the emergence of adverse emotional fluctuations.

### **Discussion**

The conceptual framework can inform the development of work contexts in which peer workers have an authentic and meaningful contribution while being offered sufficient support and learning opportunities to manage their wellbeing.