Formers as Peer Mentors

LIFE AFTER HATE

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Readiness: Formers

Peer mentors are "Formers," people who have successfully changed their violent extremist beliefs and identity. They are committed to nonviolence, acknowledge the harms of their past beliefs and behaviors, take responsibility for the consequences, and strive to make amends when and where it is possible. They have built and continue to maintain nonviolent social networks and strive to reintegrate into society in prosocial roles. Peer mentors have engaged in intensive self-examination and personal growth to address the vulnerabilities that led them to violent extremism and were caused by their involvement in violent extremism. They are committed to ongoing self-examination and personal growth to benefit themselves and others. As a result of this intensive personal growth, peer mentors are prepared to establish working relationships with others who are exiting violent extremism and share their personal journeys out of violent extremism in a way that promotes exit. Readiness is assessed via a semi-structured interview conducted by a multidisciplinary team, with collateral information to support when available.

Requirements:

Disengagement:
- Ideally, peer mentors have been disengaged from violent extremism for a period proportionate to their time and depth of their involvement in violent extremism (e.g., if actively involved in violent extremism for 5 years, peer mentors have been disengaged for a minimum of 5 years). This time allows for the remaining indicators to be achieved.
- Peer mentors have primary social networks of individuals who are not involved in violent extremism or other antisocial behavior.
- Peer mentors are not engaged in online or real-world violent extremist behavior.
- Peer mentors are not actively consuming violent extremist or hateful content

Deradicalization:
- Peer mentors have rejected violent extremist beliefs, especially the belief that violence is justified to advance political, social, or religious goals.
- Peer mentors endeavor to understand and acknowledge diverse viewpoints.
- Peer mentors believe that all humans are worthy of respect and are committed to recognizing humanity in all others, especially those they once dehumanized (i.e., no longer dehumanizing an out-group).

Responsibility and Accountability:
- Peer mentors recognize and publicly acknowledge that any type of involvement in violent extremism creates harm even when people are not directly committing violent acts. They do not minimize the impact of the creation and dissemination of violent extremist content online or offline. They do not excuse violence or threats of violence as justified, defensive, or provoked by others. They do not try to minimize their involvement.
- Peer mentors take accountability and endeavor to make amends to their victims and society when and where appropriate. They have met or are actively working toward meeting all of their obligations within the legal system.
- Peer mentors have engaged in intensive self-examination and personal growth to understand the reasons they became involved, stayed involved, and eventually exited violent extremism. They endeavor to describe their journey into and out of violent extremism as accurately as possible, maintaining accountability for their choices and actions, while acknowledging the vulnerabilities and unmet needs that may have contributed to their engagement in violent extremism.

Reintegration:
- Peer mentors endeavor to build and maintain primary social networks with individuals who are not involved in violent extremism or other antisocial behaviors.
- Peer mentors endeavor to establish and maintain prosocial roles in society. For example: occupational roles, volunteerism, nonviolent and legal civic engagement.
- Peer mentors demonstrate the ability to make healthy choices over time, to engage in regular self-examination, and seek support when appropriate.

Appropriateness

Peer mentors are individuals who wish to share their stories and mentor others through the process of exiting violent extremism. They demonstrate nonjudgmental compassion, empathy, and openness to learning about and understanding their mentees. Their desire to help others stems from altruism, rather than a desire for status, power, control, or self-promotion. They engage in opportunities for development in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are necessary to be successful as a peer mentor. Peer mentors seek regular feedback for professional growth and demonstrate the ability to adapt and grow from feedback.

Peer mentors have achieved a state of general stability and well-being that contributes to their ability to focus on the needs of their mentee during work hours. Consistent with the Codes of Ethics from other helping professions (i.e., National Association of Social Worker, American Psychological Association), peer mentors take steps to ensure their personal problems, mental health difficulties, substance abuse, legal issues, or other challenges do not interfere with their duties as a peer mentor, jeopardize their mentees, or the organization. They engage in consistent self-assessment and monitoring and seek support, consultation, and services from supervisors, peers, or other professionals to mitigate the effects of personal problems that might interfere with their role as a peer mentor. Appropriateness is assessed via a semi-structured interview conducted by a multidisciplinary team.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

- Peer mentors are individuals who wish to share their stories and mentor others through the process of exiting violent extremism. Their desire to help others stems from altruism, rather than a desire for status, power, control, or self-promotion.
- Peer mentors recognize that their own experience engaging in and exiting violent extremism cannot be generalized or applied to others, though they may find common experiences through which they can establish a bond with their mentees.
- Peer mentors demonstrate the capacity for nonjudgmental compassion, empathy, and the desire to understand and support their mentees.
- Peer mentors demonstrate the ability to connect with others, form appropriate working relationships, and identify and maintain appropriate boundaries.
- Peer mentors are actively engaged in increasing their knowledge and developing the skills necessary to be successful in their role. They seek feedback from their supervisors and colleagues and incorporate that feedback to promote their own professional growth and development to benefit their mentees.
- Peer mentors can center the needs of their mentees during work hours. They work to ensure that their personal problems, mental health difficulties, substance abuse, legal issues, or other challenges do not interfere with their duties as a peer mentor, jeopardize their mentees, or the organization.
- Peer mentors engage in regular self-assessment of their psychological state, set appropriate limits, and engage in healthy self-care practices that promote their overall well-being.

Philosophy

Peer mentors embrace a person-centered approach to supporting exit from violent extremism. They recognize that each person's experience, reasons for exiting, and exit pathway is unique. They strive to understand their mentee's experience, motivation, and goals through a trauma-informed, person-centered approach that supports socially responsible self-determination. Peer mentors recognize that successful exit will look different for every person, while also conforming to core goals of commitment to nonviolence, humanization of others, nonviolent social networks, and prosocial roles in society. They acknowledge that no one can force another person to change; mentees are responsible for making necessary changes in behavior, social networks, ideology, and identity. Their relationships with their mentees provide compassion with appropriate accountability. Peer mentors support independence and empower positive change in their mentees.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

- Peer mentors strive to establish a strong working alliance with all mentees.
- Peer mentors work to understand the individualized reasons their mentees became involved and sustained involvement in violent extremism. They recognize their mentees have adopted violent extremist beliefs, behaviors, social networks, and identities because they satisfied an unmet need, albeit in unhealthy and destructive ways.
- Peer mentors use their knowledge of the historical life experiences of their mentees that created vulnerabilities that contributed to their involvement in violent extremism to bolster their patience and compassion for their mentees and promote change, not to provide excuses for violent, destructive, and harmful behavior and beliefs.
- Peer mentors understand, acknowledge, and embrace the individualized nature of exit from violent extremism. They work to identify their mentees' particular reasons for exiting and help the individual navigate their unique exit pathway.
- Peer mentors recognize that disengagement, deradicalization, and reintegration are not always a linear process. They understand their mentees will sometimes stall in their progress, regress, or shift to other potentially problematic behaviors and beliefs. They endeavor to maintain their belief in their mentees' potential for change, regardless of the speed or trajectory of exit from violent extremism.
- Peer mentors encourage socially responsible self-determination. They acknowledge their mentee must be free to make their own decisions and are responsible for making necessary changes in behavior, social networks, ideology, and identity. Peer mentors understand that change might be encouraged by outside influences, but that no one can force another person to change nor dictate the exact order of change, quality, and outcomes.
- Peer mentors understand that their mentee's right to self-determination must coexist with the rights of other individuals and the safety of society. They recognize that some behaviors require consequences, especially violence, and that rights to self-determination may be limited due to the consequences of their mentee's behaviors.
- Peer mentors understand and embrace equifinality in exit from violent extremism. They know that successful exit from violent extremism will include common features, including rejection of violence and commitment to nonviolence, humanizing others, engaging in positive behaviors, developing and maintaining pro-social relationships, establishing pro-social roles in society, and embracing a multifaceted prosocial identity.
- Peer mentors understand, acknowledge, and embrace multifinality in exit from violent extremism. Though all mentees may start as members of the violent extremist movements, the "end point" of successful exit from violent extremism will look different for every individual. They know that successful exit does not require all individuals to adopt the same beliefs, behaviors, social networks, identity, or prosocial roles.

Goals and Targets for Intervention

Peer mentors are the living embodiment that exit from violent extremism is possible, and change is worth it. They share their reasons for exiting violent extremism, the changes they made to successfully exit violent extremism, and how they navigated challenges along the way. They encourage their mentees to persevere in the face of ambivalence or adversity as the mentees seek to change their lives. They model the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions, accountability for the harms they caused, and making amends when possible.

Peer mentors demonstrate the ability to establish collaborative relationships with their mentees to provide support for individuals as they disengage, deradicalize, and reintegrate into society after involvement in violent extremism. They identify their mentees' stage of change for all targets for intervention and use best practices to increase their mentees intrinsic motivation to change, while minimizing the risk of iatrogenic effects such as creating defensiveness that leads the mentee to commit more deeply to violent extremist beliefs or social networks and/or unintentionally increasing risk for violent extremist behavior. They work to increase their mentee's awareness of problematic beliefs, behavior, and social networks and elicit the mentee's reasons for change, rather than giving advice or commands that might lead to defensiveness or recommitment to violent extremism. They work collaboratively with their mentee to problem-solve around challenges to changing behavior and social networks. They address violence justifying ideologies and dehumanizing beliefs using appropriate strategies based on their mentees stage of change. Peer mentors encourage their mentee to engage in prosocial roles and promote individual self-care and wellness.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

Modeling Hope and Motivation
- Peer mentors believe that change is possible even when others, including their mentee, may be ambivalent or disagree. They endorse and demonstrate the value of change, no matter how difficult the process can be at times.
- Peer mentors use their lived experience to show others why and how it is possible to exit violent extremism, including identifying barriers, navigating challenges, and persevering through setbacks.
- Peer mentors take responsibility for their actions when they were involved in violent extremism and are accountable for harm they caused, either directly or indirectly. They endeavor to make amends with individuals and/or society in a manner that appropriately centers and addresses the needs of the victims and society, not the perpetrator.
- Peer mentors encourage their mentees to imagine rewarding lives outside of violent extremism and set ambitious goals for their future.
- When faced with adversity and setbacks, they remind their mentees of their goals and their personal motivations for change. They work with mentees to proactively build resilience and promote perseverance in the face of challenges or setbacks.

Building a Relationship
- Peer mentors establish working relationships with individuals who are or have been involved in violent extremism. They serve as prosocial relationships in their mentees' lives and encourage positive changes in beliefs and behaviors. During some stages of engagement and exit from violent extremism, they may serve as the only prosocial relationship in their mentees' lives.
- Peer mentors establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with their mentees. They recognize that, though they are a peer they are also in a position from which they could have significant influence over their mentees. Thus, they are mindful of the potential imbalance of power and their mentees' vulnerability to exploitation, do not pursue romantic relationships with their mentees, and are transparent about their role and competency. They seek consultation from peers and other professionals regularly to ensure appropriate boundaries are maintained.
- Peer mentors recognize when there has been a rift in or challenge to the working relationship with their mentee. They make appropriate attempts to repair the working relationship with their mentee by acknowledging the rift or challenge.
- Peer mentors use their life experience and self-disclosure to highlight the reasons and possibility for change (e.g., "I used to believe in the Great Replacement theory, but I don't anymore" or "I used to get so angry at all of the drama and infighting in the movement, I felt like they were all a bunch of hypocrites"). The use of appropriate self-disclosure is an important intervention and differentiates peer mentors from other professions in which self-disclosure is limited and/or discouraged.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (cont.)

Supporting disengagement and deradicalization
- Peer mentors validate their mentees' experiences, when appropriate, and provide compassionate challenges to their mentees' violent extremists beliefs, behaviors, and social networks. They offer concrete suggestions and support their mentees' problem-solving around disengaging from violent extremist social networks and ceasing behaviors related to violent extremism, online and offline.
- Peer mentors work to learn and understand the stage of engagement in or exit from violent extremism and the violent extremist behaviors, social networks, ideology, and identity held by their mentees.
- Peer mentors understand, can identify, and describe their mentee's stage of change for violent extremist behavior, social networks, ideology, and identity.
- Peer mentors use motivational interviewing techniques to increase intrinsic motivation to change. They avoid unsolicited advice, commands, or challenges to ideology and identity if their mentee is not at the appropriate stage of change to hear these messages as they increase the risk of iatrogenic effects.
- Peer mentors recognize that un- or under-treated mental health and/or alcohol and drug addictions can interfere with exit from violent extremism. They encourage their mentees to seek appropriate professional help to address those needs and use their own life experiences to endorse the value of mental health services and substance abuse treatment.

Reintegration
- Peer mentors recognize the importance of prosocial relationships in successfully and permanently exiting violent extremism. They encourage their mentees to engage in healthy interpersonal behaviors and in developing and maintaining relationships with family and friends who support ongoing prosocial behavior. They support their mentees establishing a healthy sense of meaning and belonging from their relationships.
- Peer mentors support their mentees in establishing prosocial roles in society to ensure permanent exit from violent extremism. They encourage and support their mentees occupational and/or educational goals, civic engagement, volunteering, and other positive roles in society.
- Peer mentors assist their mentees in developing and implementing a personalized wellness plan based on the 8 Dimensions of Wellness (SAMHSA): emotional, environment, financial, intellectual, occupational, physical, social, and spiritual.

Multidisciplinary Team

Peer mentors work collaboratively in a multidisciplinary team. Team members may include social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, law enforcement, probation professionals, religious, and community leaders. They understand the roles of various team members, refer, and encourage mentees to engage with other members of the multidisciplinary team and services. They help mentees advocate for themselves and provide support in multidisciplinary services when appropriate.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

- Peer mentors work within a multidisciplinary team using their life experience and specific scope of practice to promote an individual's exit from violent extremism.
- Peer mentors work collaboratively in a team with individuals from different backgrounds (racial, ethnic, religious, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, etc.) and professional training/competencies.
- Peer mentors understand the different roles of multidisciplinary team members within their organization and those outside the organization who are involved in promoting individual exit from violent extremism. They communicate regularly and clearly with appropriate team members about their mentee's needs and barriers to exiting violent extremism.
- Peer mentors encourage their mentees to engage with other multidisciplinary team members within and outside the organization, even when mentees are reticent to trust or engage with other team members. They attend and provide support in meetings with multidisciplinary providers when appropriate and desired by the mentee (e.g., attending meetings with a social worker).

Professional, Ethical, and Legal Guidelines

Peer mentors understand the importance of following ethics and laws relevant to their work. They understand and follow all elements of the National Association of Social Work ethics code, the Prevention Practitioners Network Code of Ethics, and the ExitUSA Code of Ethics. They work within their scope of practice, seeking supervision and consultation from multidisciplinary providers when unsure or concerned about the well-being of a mentee. Peer mentors understand the state and federal laws relevant to their work as a peer mentor for individuals involved in and exiting violent extremism. Peer mentors understand privacy and confidentiality and the limits of confidentiality, including internal staff communication and mandated reporting responsibilities. They complete all documentation based on agency standards in a timely manner.

Peer mentors are held to a standard consistent with the standard set for other helping professionals (e.g., social workers, psychologists, case managers): benefit those they work with and minimize harm. Peer mentors in tertiary intervention for violent extremism work within a scope of practice that is commensurate with peer support models established in substance abuse, mental health, and forensic settings. Training and ongoing supervision of peer mentors ensures they maintain their scope of practice, maximizing benefit to the mentee and society, while minimizing the risk of adverse effects.

Peer mentors work within their scope of practice and do not engage in practices for which they do not have adequate education, training, or skills. Peer mentors are not therapists or counselors, a role that requires advanced education, training, supervised practice, and licensure. They do not diagnose, provide therapy, or recommend specific types of therapy. However, peer mentors can describe their own positive experiences with mental health care and encourage their mentees to engage with mental health services. Peer mentors engage in regular supervision to ensure they provide mentoring that promotes exit from violent extremism while minimizing the risk of iatrogenic effects.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

- Peer mentors understand the limits of their scope of practice and do not attempt to provide services outside of that scope of practice. Specifically, peer mentors do not diagnose, provide treatment, recommend specific types of treatment, or provide legal advice.
- Peer mentors are supervised by a licensed psychologist and attend weekly peer mentor supervision meetings, biweekly all-staff case staffing meetings, and engage in regular training and continuing education to ensure their mentoring promotes exit from violent extremism and minimizes iatrogenic effects.
- Peer mentors follow all state and federal laws applicable to the organization and to their role as peer mentors. They consult with supervisors to clarify and ensure adherence to legal codes.
- Peer mentors understand and follow the National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics, Prevention Practitioners Network Code of Ethics, and ExitUSA Code of Ethics.
- Peer mentors are honest and transparent with their mentees about their role in the organization, their role within the multidisciplinary team, and their scope of practice as a peer mentor. They do not intentionally deceive or manipulate mentees.
- Peer mentors seek consultation with supervisors or multidisciplinary team members when unsure or concerned about the wellbeing of a mentee, especially when concerned about the risk for suicide or threat of violence.
- Peer mentors understand privacy and confidentiality, including the limits of confidentiality such as internal staff communications and mandatory reporting responsibilities.
- Peer mentors protect the privacy and confidentiality of their mentees. They do not disclose personally identifying information about their mentees to people outside of the multidisciplinary team without the written permission of the mentee.
- Peer mentors understand they are Mandatory Reporters of abuse or neglect of children or vulnerable adults consult with the multidisciplinary team members responsible for reporting potential harm.
- Peer mentors understand the duty to warn and duty to protect and consult with the multidisciplinary team members responsible for reporting potential harm immediately upon learning of potential risk, threat, abuse, or neglect.
- Peer mentors complete their professional duties in a timely manner. They respond to mentees communications within one working day unless otherwise authorized to delay replies. They complete documentation within 24 hours of meeting or corresponding with mentees. They document only the information that occurred/was discussed and refrain from making inferences or interpretations about motivations or causes.

Training & Continuing Education

Peer mentors are provided training prior to working with mentees and engage in continuing education and development while working with mentees. Peer mentors recognize that their lived experience in and exiting VFRE is unique to them and does not mean they are experts in violent extremism or in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to help others exit violent extremist movements. They adopt a growth-oriented mindset and endeavor to continue learning, incorporating new knowledge and skills, and improving in their role as peer mentors.

Training and Continuing Education Topics

- Subject matter – VFRE ideologies, push/pull factors, theories of radicalization; identity; moral disengagement; research on disengagement push/pull and pathways.
- National Association of Social Work code of ethics; ExitUSA code of ethics
- ExitUSA Theory of Change
- Scope of practice for a peer mentor: what you can and cannot do.
- Privacy, confidentiality
- Limits of confidentiality = internal; mandated reporting, duty to warn/protect
- Recognizing risk for suicide, self-harm, targeted violence, street violence, intimate partner violence; Screening for suicide and violence, documentation, and consultation requirements
- When to consult with a supervisor or case manager
- Documentation – how to document, what to document
- Team assessments – VFRE ideology, behavior, social networks
- Building, maintaining, and repairing rapport with mentees
- Appropriate self-disclosure – when, where, and how
- Stages of Exit: how to recognize and what to expect.
- Stages of Change: what are the stages of change, how to recognize them, how to interact with mentees at each stage
- Motivational Interviewing
- Goal setting: helping your mentee with SMART goals.
- What to do with your mentee: Questions, prompts, and activities
- Mental health or substance abuse treatment: Encouraging your mentee to engage.
- 8 dimensions of wellness (SAMHSA)
- Recognizing and managing your own emotions
- Intimate partner violence vs toxic relationships: knowing the difference
- Assertiveness and boundary setting
- Exit is not linear: promoting progress, responding to regression or relapse.
- New research in PCVE/TVTP
- Emerging promising- or best-practices from the field and complementary fields