

Peer support plays a crucial role in addiction recovery, but it is not a free-for-all where anything goes. Certified Peer Specialists (CPS)—individuals with lived experience of addiction and recovery—are bound by a clear set of ethics rules designed to protect both themselves and the people they support. These rules ensure peer support remains a professional, respectful, and effective part of recovery services.

In this post, we'll break down the key ethics rules CPS follow, explain why clear **boundaries in peer support** matter, discuss how confidentiality is handled, and look at how peer relationships fuel hope and accountability without resorting to shaming language. We'll reference tools and philosophies from both twelve-step programs and non-twelve-step approaches to recovery, because peer support transcends any single model.

What is Peer Support? Defining Boundaries and Roles

Before diving into ethics, let's clarify what peer support is—and what it is not.

- **Peer support** means people with firsthand experience of addiction—and ideally recovery—help others on their own journeys.
- It's built on *mutuality* and *shared experience*, not on the one-sided expert relationship of clinical care.
- **Certified Peer Specialists** are trained and credentialed to provide structured support while respecting professional boundaries.
- Peer support *does not* replace medical or psychological treatment; it complements those services.

So, what do these boundaries look like? Here's an example:

Imagine it's Tuesday night, cravings hit hard, and the usual counselor isn't available. The CPS who supported you earlier that day can genuinely relate, have faced that struggle, and can provide immediate support without judgment. However, they won't offer medical advice or prescribe medications. They keep their role clear.

Why Boundaries Matter

Without boundaries, peer support risks:

- Unclear roles leading to dependence rather than empowerment
- Blurring lines that could harm trust and professionalism
- Compromising confidentiality or safety
- Undermining other parts of the treatment system

Core Ethics Rules Certified Peer Specialists Follow

Though ethics codes vary slightly by state and certifying body, most CPS ethics share essential principles.

1. Respect and Dignity for All

Certified Peer Specialists must treat everyone with respect, regardless of background, choices, or status in recovery. Shaming language or judgment undermines recovery and is strictly prohibited.



2. Boundaries in Peer Support

The CPS role requires clear professional boundaries to maintain trust and effectiveness.

- No dual relationships that could cause conflicts (e.g., family member or romantic partnerships)
- Clear limits on availability to prevent burnout and maintain support quality
- Avoiding sharing of personal information beyond what helps the peer feel understood

3. Confidentiality in Recovery

Respecting privacy is a cornerstone of ethical peer support. CPS must:

- Protect all private information disclosed during support sessions.
- Disclose information only when legally required (e.g., danger to self/others) or with consent.
- Maintain secure records following regulations.

This confidentiality applies whether involved in twelve-step or non-twelve-step frameworks, although twelve-step programs have a particular emphasis on anonymity.

4. Accountability Without Shame

CPS hold themselves accountable to their peers, supervisors, and ethical codes. This accountability is about growth—supporting peers to make changes while avoiding shaming, blaming, or coercion.

For example, if a peer relapses on a Tuesday night, the CPS doesn't say "You failed again." Instead, they explore what triggered cravings and offer practical support to reengage in recovery.

5. Social Modeling and Hope Through Real Examples

CPS bring hope by sharing real-world stories of struggle and success. They inspire through authenticity—living proof recovery [sober events near me](#) is possible.

Both twelve-step programs and non-twelve-step approaches use social modeling:

- Twelve-step literature and sponsorship emphasize storytelling about ups and downs in recovery.

- Non-twelve-step peer support may highlight alternatives and personalized recovery pathways.

How Ethics Rules Work in Different Recovery Approaches

Peer specialists often support people using diverse frameworks—from twelve-step to other models like SMART Recovery.

Ethics Aspect	Twelve-Step Programs	Non-Twelve-Step Approaches
Confidentiality	Strict adherence to anonymity principles, emphasizing privacy in meetings and sponsorship. Also value confidentiality, often applying HIPAA rules if integrated with clinical care.	Boundaries CPS use their own recovery story but avoid crossing into counseling or medical roles. Similar boundary practices, emphasizing empowerment and self-direction.
Social Modeling	Shares experience around “surrender” and ongoing personal growth.	Highlights varied pathways and problem-solving strategies.
Accountability	Focuses on “making amends” and responsibility without judgment.	Emphasizes personal responsibility with respect to individual goals.

Examples of Ethical Peer Support in Action

Here’s what strict ethics might look like on a typical Tuesday night when cravings hit:

1. **John, a CPS, receives a call from Maria, who’s struggling with cravings.** John listens empathetically without judgment and shares a personal story about managing similar moments.
2. **John offers to talk for 15 minutes but clarifies his role is to support—not to provide therapy or medication advice.**
3. **Maria expresses concerns about relapse.** John discusses practical steps that Maria previously found useful, reminding her of strengths she’s demonstrated.
4. **John respects confidentiality and does not share this conversation with others unless Maria consents or there is immediate risk.**
5. **After the conversation, John checks in with his supervisor to discuss his emotional health but keeps Maria’s information confidential.**

Conclusion: Peer Specialist Ethics Are the Backbone of Effective, Respectful Recovery Support

Clear ethics rules around **boundaries in peer support**, **confidentiality in recovery**, and accountability set Certified Peer Specialists apart as trustworthy allies. They don’t replace medical care, but they bring something equally valuable: real hope through lived experience, social modeling that inspires, and a relationship grounded in respect.

Whenever you hear vague phrases like “community fixes everything,” ask: “What does this look like on a Tuesday night when cravings hit?” Seeing ethics in action answers that question and builds real trust in recovery.

Peer support is powerful when done ethically, and Certified Peer Specialists commit to these ethics every day, helping peers chart a better path forward.

