



CANDIDATE GUIDE

CERTIFIED PEER SPECIALIST (CPS)

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PURPOSE OF THE CANDIDATE GUIDE

The examination for Certified Peer Specialists (CPSs) is an examination that tests knowledge and skills about peer support. The exam is based on current research in the field.

The purpose of the Candidate Guide is to provide guidance for the CPS examination process. By providing you with background information on examination core competencies your preparation for the exam can be enhanced.

EXAMINATION CONTENT

Questions for the examination were developed from SAMHSA's Core Competencies for Peer Workers in Behavioral Health Services (2015). All questions on the examination must be linked to the Core Competencies and a reference.

Examination development for the CPS Examination is a multi-step process and is Subject Matter Expert (SME) driven. The most important qualification of these SME's is that they all hold the CPS certification. SME's are chosen based on their experience, education and diversity. This ensures that examination questions are not too difficult or too easy for applicants. The credential and examination will always be developed for and by Certified Peer Specialists.

The main purpose of any certification and examination is public and consumer protection, not for protection of the professional. These processes ensure that a professional is competent and knowledgeable to provide services. Examinations are designed to prove competence, therefore not everyone should or will pass.

The purpose of an examination is to identify candidates possessing the necessary competencies to practice in order to protect the public NOT to demonstrate expertise, exceptional talent, or knowledge of obscure topics.

A multi-step question writing, and review process is used: (1) questions are written by SMEs, (2) a separate group reviews and edits the questions, and (3) a final group ranks the questions for level of difficulty and provides additional feedback.

TAKING THE EXAMINATION

The CPS examination is multiple-choice, with one correct or best answer. There are no true/false or fill in the blank questions. Questions are never developed to try to trick or confuse a candidate. For security reasons, questions on the examination are not released to anyone.

The examination consists of 50 multiple-choice questions. One and a half (1.5) hours is provided for completion. Successful candidates will draw on knowledge, analysis, and application to identify the correct or best option.

The CPS examination follows a 3 and 4-option multiple-choice format. Questions of this type begin with a stem, the premise statement, and are followed by three or four options. In answering the questions, candidates should read the stem and options carefully. They should then select the one correct or best answer and fill in the letter on the answer sheet that corresponds to the best answer for the question.

EXAMINATION RULES

No books, papers, or other reference materials may be taken into the examination room. No examination materials, documents, or memoranda of any type may be taken from the room by any candidate.

The examination will be given only on the date and time noted on the confirmation email you will receive. If an emergency arises and you are unable to take the examination as scheduled, you must contact the PCB Office.

No questions concerning the content of the examination may be asked during the examination period. The candidate should listen carefully to the directions given by the Proctor and read the directions carefully in the examination booklet.

SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIONS

Individuals with disabilities and/or religious obligations that require modifications in test administration may request specific procedure changes, in writing, to PCB, no fewer than 60 days prior to the scheduled test date. With the written request, the candidate must provide official documentation of the disability or religious issue. Candidates should contact PCB on what constitutes official documentation. PCB will offer appropriate modifications to its procedures when documentation supports the need for them.

ADMISSION TO THE CERTIFICATION EXAMINATION

Upon fulfillment of the appropriate eligibility requirements and completion of the application process for CPS, you will be seated for the examination. PCB will send you a confirmation email confirming your enrollment approximately two (2) weeks prior to the examination date. This confirmation email will also contain the reporting time, test time, location, contact person, and other relevant information.

PHOTO IDENTIFICATION CARD (Work ID, Driver's License, etc.) must be presented for entrance to the examination.

EXAMINATION DATES

The CPS examination is administered on an as-needed basis. The available dates and locations of the examination will be provided to you after your CPS application has been submitted to and approved by PCB.

SCORING

PCB will score all examinations and mail score reports to candidates. Scores will be broken down by category so that candidates can see areas of strength and weakness. This process takes approximately three to four weeks.

The passing point is fixed to assure that all candidates must achieve the same score to be granted certification. To achieve a passing score, candidates must correctly answer 37 questions out of 50 total questions.

TEST DISCLOSURE

If candidates wish to appeal their scores on the examination, they must submit a written request to PCB within 30 days of the postmark on the test score report. Candidates should be aware that test security and item banking procedures do not permit candidate's access to test questions, answer keys, or other secure materials.

RE-TESTING

Candidates who fail the test may re-test if they choose. Candidates must re-test at least one time in the 12-months following the date of the test they failed. All reasonable requests will be considered if a candidate is unable to re-test within the 12-month time frame. Such requests for additional time beyond the 12-months must be submitted in writing to PCB prior to the 12-month deadline.

TEST TAKING SKILLS

Developing good test taking skills help decrease stress and anxiety. They can also optimize your performance on an examination. Knowing the content is most important, but a skilled test taker can utilize techniques to help them answer questions correctly when they are unsure of the answer.

- Eliminate obviously incorrect responses after the first reading so as to increase the probability of selecting the best response. If you determine that there are two reasonable options, you should select the most plausible choice. Study the material over time, in a distraction-free environment.
- There is only one correct choice for each question. Carefully read each question and all of the choices before making a selection. Choose the single **best** answer. You will mark your answer on the answer sheet by blackening the circle by the letter of your choice.
- Study in groups.
- Study in smaller blocks of time over several days instead of one long session.
- Get rest the night before, drink lots of water and dress in layers on the day of the exam.
- Review the test in its entirety – just look it over.
- Make sure you understand the questions. Ask yourself, what is the question asking?
- Look for grammatical clues in the answers. The question should be grammatically consistent with the correct answer.
- Multiple-choice will include options that are plausible so read every answer carefully before selecting a final answer.
- Once a final answer is determined, avoid changing it.
- Always choose a response, even if it's your best educated guess or you "go with your gut" - avoid skipping questions. If you used your best effort and are still unsure about which answer is correct, then take a guess. If there are four responses, you have a 25% chance of selecting the correct answer.

READING COMPREHENSION

In some cases, a candidate can be fully qualified and know the content, yet still perform poorly or fail an examination. Often, going over some basic reading comprehension skills and seeking assistance in this area is very helpful to candidates. There is nothing wrong with brushing up on these skills from time-to-time as it can dramatically increase test scores and competence.

- Identify the main idea of the question.
- Use context clues to help you understand the question.
- Make connection to what you know about the topic and your work and training experiences.
- Take your time.

There are also resources available to assist candidates who may want extra help in this area.

- Local library
- Community colleges
- Community centers
- Online tools

PEER SPECIALIST CORE COMPETENCES

Retrieved from SAMHSA's Core Competencies for Peer Workers in Behavioral Health Services (2015)

Category 1: Engages peers in collaborative and caring relationships.

This category of competencies emphasized peer workers' ability to initiate and develop on-going relationships with people who have behavioral health condition. These competencies include interpersonal skills, knowledge about recovery from behavioral health conditions and attitudes consistent with a recovery orientation.

1. Initiates contact with peers
2. Listens to peers with careful attention to the content and emotion being communicated
3. Reaches out to engage peers across the whole continuum of the recovery process
4. Demonstrates genuine acceptance and respect
5. Demonstrates understanding of peers' experiences and feelings

Category 2: Provides support.

The competencies in this category are critical for the peer worker to be able to provide the mutual support people living with behavioral health conditions may want.

1. Validates peers' experiences and feelings
2. Encourages the exploration and pursuit of community roles
3. Conveys hope to peers about their own recovery
4. Celebrates peers' efforts and accomplishments
5. Provides concrete assistance to help peers accomplish tasks and goals

Category 3: Shares lived experiences of recovery.

These competencies are unique to peer support, as most roles in behavioral health services do not emphasize or even prohibit the sharing of lived experiences. Peer workers need to be skillful in telling their recovery stories and using their lived experiences as a way of inspiring and supporting a person living with behavioral health conditions.

1. Relates their own recovery stories, and with permission, the recovery stories of others to inspire hope
2. Discusses ongoing personal efforts to enhance health, wellness, and recovery
3. Recognizes when to share experiences and when to listen
4. Describes personal recovery practices and helps peers discover recovery practices that work for them

Category 4: Personalizes peer support.

These competencies help peer workers to tailor or individualize the support services provided to and with a peer. By personalizing peer support, the peer worker operationalizes the notion that there are multiple pathways to recovery.

1. Understands his/her own personal values and culture and how these may contribute to biases, judgments and beliefs
2. Appreciates and respects the cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices of peers and their families
3. Recognizes and responds to the complexities and uniqueness of each peer's process of recovery
4. Tailors services and support to meet the preferences and unique needs of peers and their families

Category 5: Supports recovery planning.

These competencies enable peer workers to support other peers to take charge of their lives. Recovery often leads people to want to make changes in their lives. Recovery planning assists people to set and accomplish goals related to home, work, community and health.

1. Assists and supports peers to set goals and to dream of future possibilities
2. Proposes strategies to help a peer accomplish tasks or goals
3. Supports peers to use decision-making strategies when choosing services and supports
4. Helps peers to function as a member of their treatment/recovery support team
5. Researches and identifies credible information and options from various resources

Category 6: Links to resources, services, and supports.

These competencies assist peer workers to help other peers acquire the resources, services, and supports they need to enhance their recovery. Peer workers apply these competencies to assist other peers to link to resources or services both within behavioral health settings and in the community. It is critical that peer workers have knowledge of resources within their communities as well as on-line resources.

1. Develops and maintains up-to-date information about community resources and services
2. Assists peers to investigate, select, and use needed and desired resources and services
3. Helps peers to find and use health services and supports
4. Accompanies peers to community activities and appointments when requested
5. Participates in community activities with peers when requested

Category 7: Provides information about skills related to health, wellness, and recovery.

These competencies describe how peer workers coach, model or provide information about skills that enhance recovery. These competencies recognize that peer workers have knowledge, skills and experiences to offer others in recovery and that the recovery process often involves learning and growth.

1. Educates peers about health, wellness, recovery and recovery supports
2. Participates with peers in discovery or co-learning to enhance recovery experiences
3. Coaches peers about how to access treatment and services and navigate systems of care
4. Coaches peers in desired skills and strategies
5. Educates family members and other supportive individuals about recovery and recovery supports
6. Uses approaches that match the preferences and needs of peers

Category 8: Helps peers to manage crises.

These competencies assist peer workers to identify potential risks and to use procedures that reduce risks to peers and others. Peer workers may have to manage situations, in which there is intense distress and work to ensure the safety and well-being of themselves and other peers.

1. Recognizes signs of distress and threats to safety among peers and in their environments
2. Provides reassurance to peers in distress
3. Strives to create safe spaces when meeting with peers
4. Takes action to address distress or a crisis by using knowledge of local resources, treatment, services and support preferences of peers
5. Assists peers in developing advance directives and other crisis prevention tools

Category 9: Values communication.

These competencies provide guidance on how peer workers interact verbally and in writing with colleagues and others. These competencies suggest language and processes used to communicate and reflect the value of respect.

1. Uses respectful, person-centered, recovery-oriented language in written and verbal interactions with peers, family members, community members, and others
2. Uses active listening skills
3. Clarifies their understanding of information when in doubt of the meaning
4. Conveys their point of view when working with colleagues
5. Documents information as required by program policies and procedures
6. Follows laws and rules concerning confidentiality and respects others' rights for privacy

Category 10: Supports collaboration and teamwork.

These competencies provide direction on how peer workers can develop and maintain effective relationships with colleagues and others to enhance the peer support provided. These competencies involve not only interpersonal skills but also organizational skills.

1. Works together with other colleagues to enhance the provision of services and supports
2. Assertively engages providers from mental health services, substance use disorder services, and physical medicine to meet the needs of peers
3. Coordinates efforts with health care providers to enhance the health and wellness of peers
4. Coordinates efforts with peers' family members and other natural supports
5. Partners with community members and organizations to strengthen opportunities for peers
6. Strives to resolve conflicts in relationships with peers and others in their support network

Category 11: Promotes leadership and advocacy.

These competencies describe actions that peer workers use to provide leadership within behavioral health programs to advance a recovery-oriented mission of the services. They also guide peer workers on how to advocate for the legal and human rights of other peers.

1. Uses knowledge of relevant rights and laws (ADA, HIPAA, Olmstead, etc.) to ensure that peer's rights are respected
2. Advocates for the needs and desires of peers in treatment team meetings, community services, living situations, and with family
3. Uses knowledge of legal resources and advocacy organizations to build an advocacy plan

4. Participates in efforts to eliminate prejudice and discrimination of people who have behavioral health conditions and their families
5. Educates colleagues about the process of recovery and the use of recovery support services
6. Actively participates in efforts to improve the organization
7. Maintains a positive reputation in peer/professional communities

Category 12: Promotes growth and development.

These competencies describe how peer workers become more reflective and competent in their practice. The competencies recommend specific actions that may serve to increase peer workers' success and satisfaction in their current roles and contribute to career advancement.

1. Recognizes the limits of their knowledge and seeks assistance from others when needed
2. Uses supervision (mentoring, reflection) effectively by monitoring self and relationships, preparing for meetings and engaging in problem-solving strategies with the supervisor (mentor, peer)
3. Reflects and examines own personal motivations, judgments, and feelings that may be activated by the peer work, recognizing signs of distress, and knowing when to seek support
4. Seeks opportunities to increase knowledge and skills of peer support

REFERENCES

The following resources were used as the basis for most of the questions on the CPS examination. Consulting these references may be beneficial to you as you prepare for the exam. Please note that not all questions on the exam came from these references.

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