

Senior Peer Counseling; what it is and what it isn't by Ray Schwartz, L.C.S.W.

In order to clarify exactly what Senior Peer *Counseling* is, as opposed to Friendly Visitors, or Telephone Friends, Senior Peer Counselors actually do some counseling. They are not just there to be a friend. They possess some skills, and lots of experience in aging issues. This experience is used to assist other seniors undergoing an aging issue crisis of which the Peer Counselor has had personal experience. That is a key to the success of Peer Counseling. The training that a Peer Counselor undergoes includes lists of resources available in the community that can deal with the issue presented by each client. In addition, the Peer Counselor meets weekly as a group with other Peer Counselors and a Licensed Professional where cases are discussed, and all the Peer Counselors assist others in finding solutions to these issues raised by clients. This group process is also important because it maintains contact with the counselors and their need for assistance when a case becomes difficult, or issues are raised that require special processing (elder abuse of all sorts, suicidal ideation, poor conditions in the client's home including lack of food, cleanliness, hoarding, etc.).

Peer Counselors do not just call on the telephone, but visit the client who requests this. Going into the home allows the Peer Counselor to get a feel of the situation, not just the issues raised by the client, but the unseen or untold issues that are presented. Peer Counselors can find problems the client is ashamed of addressing publicly, and with the growth of a trusting relationship between the two, get to solutions of benefit that the client accepts.

We are ready to discuss with any agency the program, which is all volunteer. The cost of such a program is very minimal!