



Being Aware of Privilege: Why Understanding Privilege is Vital in Peer Support

What is Privilege?

While the word privilege has multiple meanings, for the purposes of this tip sheet, we will focus on the sociocultural definition. According to the Miriam-Webster dictionary, privilege is defined as, “a right or benefit that is given to some people and not others.”

Privilege is not fixed, in fact it is contextually fluid, meaning it may change depending on the situation or environment in which an individual is currently engaged. This fact is the very reason that being aware of privilege is so important. For example, while you may not hold much privilege in your position at work because you are supervised, you might carry privilege in other instances.

As a peer support specialist, we need to be especially mindful of our privilege when working with other peers. Working in the capacity of a peer support specialist, you are likely holding a significant amount of privilege in a variety of ways. Some examples include:

- You are employed.
- You are *not* currently experiencing homelessness.
- You have a car or other form of transportation.
- You have access to food and clean water
- You speak the language of the dominant culture
- You feel safe most of the time.

While this list is not exhaustive, or applicable to every person in every situation, it helps to illustrate the many ways and possibilities of holding privilege in a given situation.

When working as a peer support specialist, it is imperative that we check our privilege when working with peers.

How do I check my privilege?

Here are just a few examples of how to see privilege in your work.

1) Be aware of the privilege that you hold in a given situation.

Example: If the peer with whom you are working uses public transportation, do not complain about the traffic that you had to deal with in your car on the way to a meeting.

2) Never assume anything.

Example: Ask peers with whom you work what their preferred pronoun is, don't just call them he/she without asking.

Example: If someone is living in a different way than you would prefer, do not assume that they are suffering or uncomfortable with their situation.

3) Understand that the human experience is different for everyone.

Example: Do not expect all people's experiences to be the same. Because we live in an unjust society, people who are not part of the dominant culture often do not have the same experience.

Remember:

Privilege is not something that we choose or have control over. It has been built into the fabric of our society over many years. Although we cannot change our privilege, we can work to keep it in check, to make sure we are aware of it. By checking our privilege, we can ensure that we aren't causing further harm to others that are already experiencing the pain that privilege causes.