

Harnessing the power of Peer Support at the workplace: Pointers from a Systematic Literature Review

Shuana Zafar Nasir

Lecturer – Department of HRM and Strategic Management
Australian Institute of Business
Adelaide, South Australia 5000, Australia
Email: shuana.nasir@aib.edu.au

Mamun Ala

Senior Lecturer - Department of HRM and Strategic Management
Australian Institute of Business
Adelaide, South Australia 5000, Australia
Email: mamun.ala@aib.edu.au

Bhavna Bajaj

Lecturer - Department of HRM and Strategic Management
Australian Institute of Business
Adelaide, South Australia 5000, Australia
Email: bhavna.bajaj@aib.edu.au

Abstract

Employee well-being has become a growing concern for organizations, prompting the need for proactive workplace support mechanisms. Peer support programs (PSPs) have emerged as a promising yet underexplored approach to promoting employee well-being, particularly in addressing workplace stress, burnout, and psychological safety. This study employs a systematic literature review to analyze the role of peer support in comparison to other workplace support structures, such as coworker and supervisor support. Using the PRISMA framework, 89 peer-reviewed studies were reviewed to assess the impact of peer support on employee engagement, job satisfaction, and mental well-being. Findings indicate that while coworker support is instrumental in job performance and stress reduction, peer support contributes to a deeper emotional connection and psychological safety. Despite its potential, peer support remains underutilized in organizational settings. This review highlights the need for structured peer support programs and provides practical implications for enhancing workplace well-being through shared lived experiences.

Key words: peer support, coworker support, employee well-being, workplace engagement, psychological safety, organizational support

[3078 words excluding references]

Introduction

Employee well-being, especially emotional and mental well-being, has become an area of significant concern for organizations (Adams, 2019; APA, 2022). With the increasing recognition of workplace stressors and their impact on employees, organizations must adopt proactive strategies to support their workforce (Stringer, 2023). As workplaces seek to address the rising mental health concerns among workers, peer support programs (PSPs) are gaining attention as a potential method of enhancing employee well-being (World Health Organization, 2022)

Research in psychology has demonstrated that peer support can be an effective mechanism for improving mental health (Fortuna et al., 2022). Peer support is a multifaceted concept that involves individuals with shared experiences providing aid, guidance, and empathy to those facing similar challenges (Dennis, 2003). Psychological research highlights the importance of peer support in fostering emotional resilience (Robinson et al., 2015; Connors et al., 2020) and mental well-being (John et al., 2015).

Peer support programs have been shown to enhance outcomes for public safety workers (Fallon et al., 2023), police personnel (Ferraro, 2024; Milliard, 2020), doctors (Horne et al., 2023; Chanchlani et al., 2018; Peterson & Monaghan, 2019), and nurses (Carvello et al, 2019; Watson et al., 2014). The principle of shared experience, promoting mutual support, validation, and coping strategies, has demonstrated efficacy beyond occupational settings. This approach is evident in recovery-oriented programs addressing diverse challenges such as trauma (Wasilewski et al., 2023), chronic illness (Smit et al., 2023), and substance use disorders (Eddie et al., 2019).

By strategically leveraging employee networks and implementing structured peer support programs, organizations could potentially enhance social support available at the workplace

and thus enhance holistic employee well-being. However, peer support programs have not yet been implemented widely despite promising results (Aggarwal et al., 2020). While the role of coworker support (CWS), social support, supervisor support and organizational support are well-recognized in management literature, yet peer- support which arguably aligns with a broader view of the role of social support in the workplace (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016), has not received systematic attention (Nyberg, Shaw, & Zhu, 2021; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008)

The study aims to integrate findings from the literature linking social support, coworker support, and peer support to employee, team and organizational outcomes. The review will critically evaluate whether existing studies on social support within organizations offer preliminary support for the linkage between peer support and positive organizational outcomes. The findings would be useful for researchers studying peer support at the workplace.

With this background, we aim to address the following research questions in this study:

- a) How is Peer Support conceptualised and theorised in the literature?
- b) In what ways does peer support differ from seemingly similar constructs (such as co-worker support)?
- c) What are the theoretical foundations that support the research on peer support?
- d) What are the pathways for advancing knowledge and future research on peer support?

Method

According to Palamatier et al. (2018), a systematic review consolidates existing knowledge and systematically advances construct conceptualization. To evaluate the current understanding and future research directions for peer support, we adopted the guidelines of Tay et al. (2021) and employed the PRISMA method for a structured and transparent literature review.

We began by conducting a comprehensive literature search using Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, analysing studies on peer support published between 2010 and January 2025. At the initial screening stage, 46 duplicates were removed, leaving 384 unique studies. We then quickly screened the titles and abstracts of the remaining studies to determine if they captured the peer support phenomenon, reducing the number to 220. In the eligibility stage, we evaluated the full text of these 220 studies, applying the inclusion criteria that required sources to be full-length journal articles, book chapters, books, or conceptual, empirical and review articles. A total of 56 studies were excluded for not meeting these criteria, resulting in 164 sources included in the sample. Finally, non-peer-reviewed studies and those with a lack of clarity on the peer support concept were excluded, leaving 89 full-text studies to be included for the final analysis.

A range of keywords was used in the search process, including:

- "peer support" OR "co-worker support" OR "coworker support" AND "workplace"
- "peer support" AND "employee wellbeing" OR "wellbeing" OR "welfare"

We only considered the sources published in the English Language. The initial search yielded:

- Scopus: 281 sources
- Web of Science: 69 sources
- Google Scholar: 80 sources
- Total hits: 430 (281+69+80)

Following the PRISMA framework, we applied a multi-stage screening process to refine the dataset:

1. **Duplicate removal:** After identifying overlapping sources across databases, we removed duplicates.
2. **Title & Abstract screening:** Studies were assessed for relevance, and those not capturing the concept of peer support were excluded.
3. **Eligibility Assessment:**
 - **Excluded:** Non-peer-reviewed sources and those lacking conceptual clarity
 - **Final selection:** After applying these screening criteria, 89 studies were included for full-text analysis.

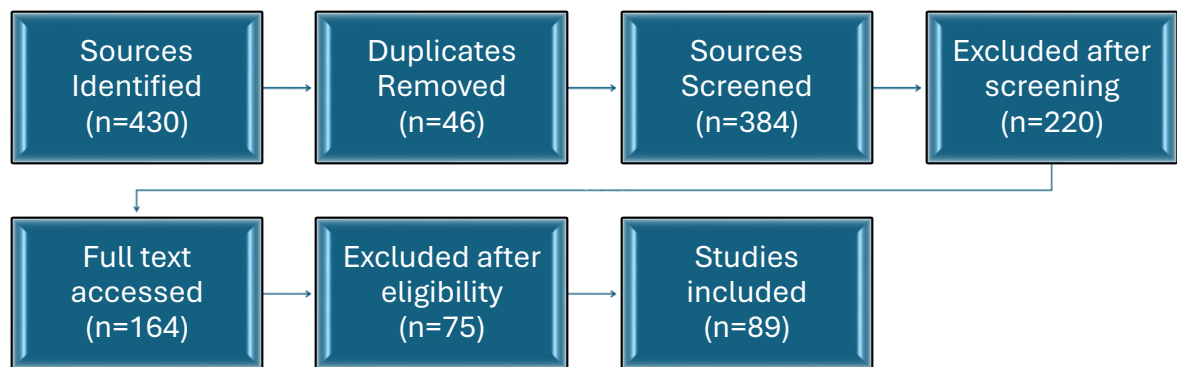


Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart for Search Process

Preliminary Findings

How is peer support understood in earlier literature?

The definition of peer support represents a theoretical challenge within the existing literature, as there is a conceptual overlap with other similar constructs. We compiled and drew on the cited definitions in the above selected sources by searching for the term “Peer Support” and capturing a sample of definitions given by previous researchers in Table 1.

Table 1: Peer Support Conceptualization

Description	Source
Peer support emphasizes shared lived experience and understanding, creating a unique bond of empathy and reciprocity. This shared understanding allows for deeper emotional connection and more targeted support, specifically addressing the challenges and stressors related to the shared experience.	MacNaughton & Frey (2010)
Unlike professional interventions, peer support focuses on shared lived experiences as a foundation for connection, resilience, and recovery.	Repper & Carter (2011)
Peer support refers to structured programs or informal relationships in which individuals offer each other emotional and practical support through empathy, active listening, and mutual understanding. These programs aim to foster a supportive work environment and can help prevent issues such as employee disengagement, absenteeism, and turnover by addressing mental health and well-being early.	Whybrow, Jones, & Greenberg (2015)
Peer support in the workplace involves colleagues providing each other with confidential and informal support. It is based on the understanding that personal challenges can impact job performance. The goal is to address concerns early by offering a trusted support network among peers before issues become more serious.	Wallace (2016)
Peer support is a form of mentoring where individuals receive guidance from peers with slightly more experience. It aims to enhance psychosocial wellbeing by fostering a sense of community, offering emotional support, and helping individuals navigate challenges in their personal or professional environment.	Chanchlani et al. (2018)
Peer support is built on empathy, trust, and shared humanity. It involves individuals offering one another emotional and practical support through compassionate listening and mutual respect. This support does not require shared experiences of trauma or specific challenges, but is rooted in genuine care, understanding, and the willingness to help others navigate their personal or professional difficulties.	Millard 2020

To resolve the definitional challenges, it is helpful to draw from the preliminary concepts of peer support. Mackenzie et al. (2011) suggest some essential criteria that need to be met for a clear definition of a concept. This includes the level of focus (what the concept is focused on; for example, individual, group, organization, or society), its characteristics (what properties it involves; such as perception, feelings, values, behaviours), and the targeted entity (what will be affected by the concept; for example, someone's well-being or performance).

Based on these considerations, we propose the following definition for peer support:

“Peer support is an individual-level, relationship-based process where individuals with similar experiences or shared challenges provide each other with social, emotional, and practical assistance. This is characterised by core properties such as mutual respect, empathy, active

listening, and the voluntary exchange of support. The aim is to enhance emotional health, build resilience and support individuals in personal or professional functioning effectively, across organisational, educational, or community contexts”.

Peer Support and Other Similar Constructs

We now address a crucial theoretical challenge concerning the distinctiveness of the peer support construct from other similar constructs. For example, Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) argued and conceptualised coworker support as a form of peer influence, highlighting its impact on perceptions, attitudes, and performance. Their work suggests that coworker support encompasses elements typically associated with peer support, such as emotional and informational assistance among colleagues. Similarly, Eisenberger et al. (2002) include coworker support as a component of the social support system within organizations. This perspective aligns coworker support with peer support, emphasizing the role of colleagues in providing emotional and instrumental assistance. It is important to make the distinctions between peer support and other related constructs to address the issue of construct redundancy. Hence, we have provided more clarity by comparing peer support with coworker support to enhance our understanding of this peer support construct.

Coworker support, often differentiated into emotional and instrumental forms, is the most frequently studied independent variable. Coworker support is usually studied in conjunction with Supervisor support, while Peer support is rarely examined separately in training contexts or specific professions. The most common dependent variables include employee well-being (encompassing mental health, job and life satisfaction, and work-life balance), job performance (including productivity, creativity, and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB)), turnover intentions, and stress. Coworker support significantly enhances job satisfaction, stress relief, and life satisfaction, while peer support has a strong effect on stress relief, job satisfaction, and

burnout reduction. The combination of supervisor and peer support is particularly influential in facilitating the transfer of training and workplace engagement. In contrast, social support from coworkers and supervisors broadly affects psychological distress, job performance, and well-being.

A closer examination reveals that while coworker support is more job-focused, aiding stress management, job satisfaction, performance, and turnover reduction, peer support has a stronger emotional and psychological impact, contributing to mental well-being and psychological safety.

Findings & Discussion

A total of 430 articles were identified through comprehensive database searches, including 281 from Scopus (65.3%), 69 from Web of Science (16.0%), and 80 from Google Scholar (18.6%). After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, these sources were screened for relevance, and duplicates were removed. Non-peer-reviewed publications and articles lacking conceptual clarity were excluded as part of the selection process to ensure quality and focus. The final set of articles was then reviewed for thematic analysis.

Workplace social support emanates from three distinct but interconnected sources: co-workers, supervisors, and the organization itself (Kossek et al., 2012). Our review highlights strong evidence of a positive relationship between each of these support sources and various aspects of job performance. Although each source may influence different outcomes, they all seem to be grounded in a shared understanding of helping individuals perform their roles effectively and meet workplace expectations. Even when these support systems are examined in relation to more personal, human-centered outcomes, such as burnout and emotional exhaustion, their strongest and most consistent impact still appears to be on job performance.

However, as our understanding of work expands to include overall employee well-being alongside productivity, support that comes from people who share similar backgrounds or experiences is becoming more important (MacNaughton & Frey, 2010). Peer support, where individuals reciprocally assist one another based on shared experiences, appears particularly salient for outcomes involving behavioural change and psychological well-being.

The interconnections between the various types of support are represented in a schematic diagram below (Figure 2). The diagram illustrates the most commonly investigated outcome variables for co-worker support (Box 1) and a combination of co-worker and supervisor support (Box 2). Coworker support is linked positively with job satisfaction and has a negative impact on emotional exhaustion, job stress, and burnout. When this concept is combined with supervisor support, it further strengthens the positive outcomes, specifically by promoting higher levels of work engagement. Together, these forms of support (coworker and supervisor) create a more resilient and motivated workforce.

Outcomes most frequently linked to Peer support at the workplace are listed separately (Box 3). The diagram allows for the visualization of common (indicated in black) and distinct outcomes (shown in red) for each type of support. Peer support has a positive relationship with job satisfaction and shows a negative association with emotional exhaustion, job stress, and burnout. In addition to the common outcomes (indicated in black), peer support has also been positively linked with training transfer, which means that employees who receive support and encouragement from their peers are more likely to apply what they have learned in training; this reinforces both learning and performance at the job (Salamon et al., 2022). Moreover, it is indicated that a high level of peer support is associated with a lower level of addictive behaviours. This explains that employees, when supported by their peers through active listening, shared understanding and encouragement, are less likely to engage in harmful coping mechanisms (Tracy & Wallace, 2016).

Given that this study aims to investigate whether peer support has been systematically studied in management literature, we do not comment upon the findings regarding the impact of specific dimensions of co-worker or supervisor support. Instead, we have organized our findings to illustrate that social support is the larger umbrella term that subsumes organizational support (House 1981 as cited in Kossek et al., 2012) and that peer support may exist both within and outside the organization. This visualization shows that formal peer support programs – that draw upon co-worker support, supervisor support and organizational support – have been linked to positive outcomes (Box 4). The employees are more likely to seek help or use mental health services (like counselling) when they are in an environment where peer support is strong. Additionally, it helps reduce stigma, which refers to the negative judgments, embarrassment or shame people might feel about seeking help. As a result, PSP makes it easier and more acceptable to seek help and reduces the fear of being misunderstood.

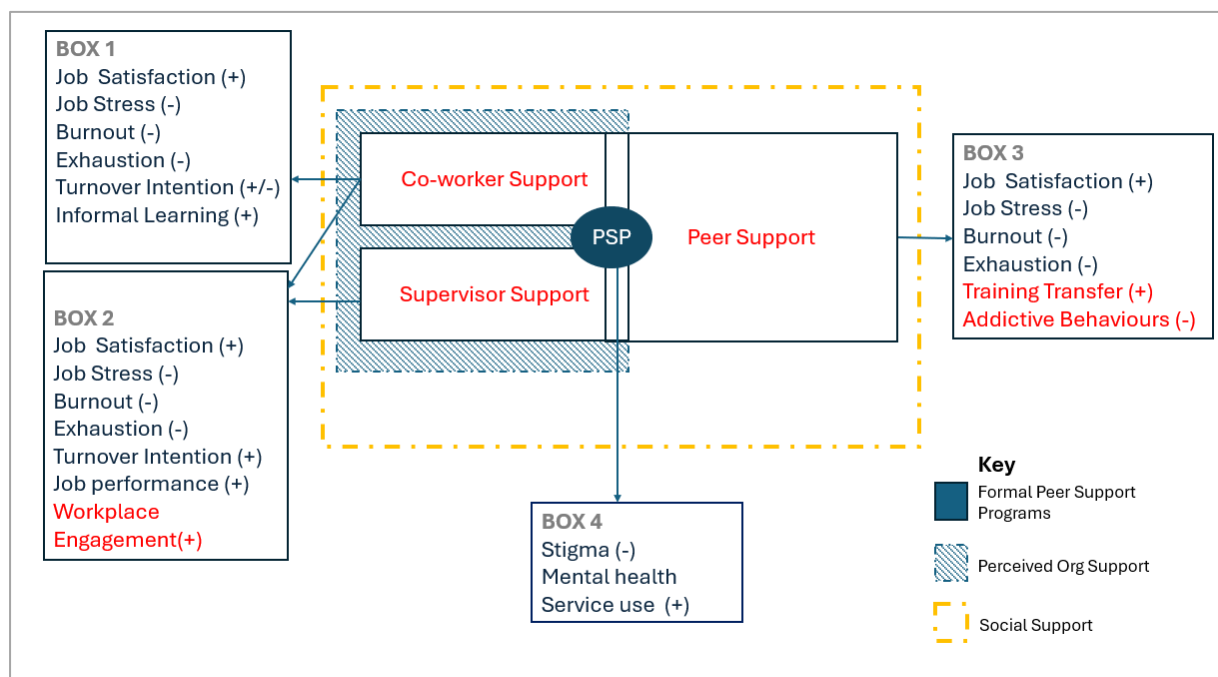


Figure 2: Schematic representation of linkages between co-worker/supervisor/peer support with commonly investigated outcomes

Organizations, as complex social systems, possess the potential to cultivate effective peer support programs (PSPs) if they can strategically leverage existing employee clusters. This requires identifying and facilitating connections between employees best positioned to support one another and establishing mechanisms for employees to identify, reach out to, and build relationships with colleagues who share similar lived experiences.

While management literature acknowledges the positive link between co-worker support and positive organizational outcomes, it is crucial to differentiate between the two constructs, namely, co-worker support and peer support. Although related, they possess distinct dimensions. Coworker support often refers to instrumental or task-related assistance within a work context. Peer support, in contrast, emphasizes shared lived experience and understanding, creating a unique bond of empathy and reciprocity. This shared understanding allows for deeper emotional connection and more targeted support, specifically addressing the challenges and stressors related to the shared experience.

Both coworker and peer support significantly contribute to employee well-being, job satisfaction, and workplace engagement, though they differ in their specific impacts. Both forms of support are strongly associated with reducing burnout and stress, improving job satisfaction, enhancing life satisfaction, and lowering turnover intention. They also contribute to workplace learning, with coworker support facilitating informal learning while peer support plays a crucial role in motivating employees to transfer training. Similarly, both support types could enhance workplace engagement. Coworker support is particularly effective in stress relief and burnout reduction, whereas peer support more directly benefits mental well-being. A key distinction is that peer support networks foster psychological safety, whereas this is less commonly associated with coworker support. This nuanced distinction is critical, as the unique characteristics of peer support may be particularly effective in enhancing holistic employee well-being, encompassing emotional, social, and professional aspects.

While a number of studies use these terms interchangeably, this conflation may obscure important conceptual nuances (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Eisenberger et al., 2002). Coworker support, referring to support exchanged among employees who share the same tasks or professional environment, is typically limited to the workplace context. In comparison, peer support encompasses support grounded in shared lived experiences, which may or may not be directly work-related, and places greater emphasis on mutual empathy, reciprocity, and voluntary engagement (Repper & Carter, 2011). This distinction is essential while examining outcomes such as psychosocial well-being, where the depth of connection and similarity of experiences in peer support may offer unique benefits that go beyond the task-focused nature of coworker support. As such, clarifying this distinction enables a more precise understanding of the concept and impact of peer relationships in organizational contexts.

By making this distinction explicit, this literature review contributes to conceptual clarity and paves the way for future empirical work that can compare and contrast the relative contributions of coworker versus peer support across various outcomes. This differentiation also supports the development of focused programs that can tap into the deeper psychological and emotional benefits that come from peer-based engagement.

Taken together, this study employs a systematic literature review to address three key points regarding peer support in the workplace. First, it demonstrates a significant gap in existing research, revealing that peer support, despite its acknowledged importance in management literature, has not been systematically investigated. Second, the review highlights the limited prevalence of formal peer support programs or at least a lack of rigorous empirical evaluation of their effectiveness. Finally, by comparing and contrasting co-worker support and peer support, the authors argue that the latter is qualitatively distinct and, when effectively implemented, can be effectively utilized to enhance employee well-being.

Further progression:

Moving forward, there are three focus areas for the completion of this paper.

Firstly, we are conducting a more in-depth systematic literature review to refine our understanding of the distinctions between coworker support and peer support in workplace contexts. This will involve analyzing recent empirical studies that explore the mechanisms through which peer support contributes to employee well-being, psychological safety, and organizational outcomes.

Secondly, we are synthesizing and structuring the findings from our systematic review to address key gaps in the literature. This includes mapping the relationships between coworker support, supervisor support, organizational support, and peer support, as well as identifying the specific ways in which peer support programs (PSPs) can be effectively designed and implemented within workplaces.

Lastly, we have commenced drafting the full paper, ensuring that our discussion integrates both conceptual insights and practical implications for organizations looking to harness the benefits of peer support. We are confident that our research will contribute to ongoing discussions on workplace well-being and support systems.

References

- Adams J. M. (2019). The Value of Worker Well-Being. *Public health reports (Washington, D.C.: 1974)*, 134(6), 583–586. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354919878434>
- Agarwal, B., Brooks, S. K., & Greenberg, N. (2020). The role of peer support in managing occupational stress: a qualitative study of the sustaining resilience at work intervention. *Workplace health & safety*, 68(2), 57-64.
- American Psychological Association. (2022). Workers appreciate and seek mental health support in the workplace. *American Psychological Association*.
- Carvello, M., Zanotti, F., Rubbi, I., Bacchetti, S., Artioli, G., & Bonacaro, A. (2019). Peer-support: a coping strategy for nurses working at the Emergency Ambulance Service. *Acta Bio Medica: Atenei Parmensis*, 90(Suppl 11), 29.
- Chanchlani, S., Chang, D., Ong, J. S., & Anwar, A. (2018). The value of peer mentoring for the psychosocial wellbeing of junior doctors: a randomised controlled study. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 209(9), 401-405.
- Chiaburu, D. S., & Harrison, D. A. (2008). Do peers make the place? Conceptual synthesis and meta-analysis of coworker effects on perceptions, attitudes, OCBs, and performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(5), 1082-1103.
- Cohen, S. and Wills, T.A., 1985. Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), p.310.
- Colbert, A. E., Bono, J. E., & Purvanova, R. K. (2016). Flourishing via workplace relationships: Moving beyond instrumental support. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(4), 1199-1223.
- Connors, C. A., Dukhanin, V., March, A. L., Parks, J. A., Norvell, M., & Wu, A. W. (2020). Peer support for nurses as second victims: Resilience, burnout, and job satisfaction. *Journal of Patient Safety and Risk Management*, 25(1), 22-28.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Dennis, C. L. (2003). Peer support within a health care context: a concept analysis. *International journal of nursing studies*, 40(3), 321-332.

- Eddie, D., Hoffman, L., Vilsaint, C., Abry, A., Bergman, B., Hoepfner, B., ... & Kelly, J. F. (2019). Lived experience in new models of care for substance use disorder: a systematic review of peer recovery support services and recovery coaching. *Frontiers in psychology, 10*, 1052.
- Eisenberger, R., Stinglhamber, F., Vandenberghe, C., Sucharski, I.L. and Rhoades, L., 2002. Perceived supervisor support: contributions to perceived organizational support and employee retention. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*(3), p.565.
- Fallon, P., Jaegers, L. A., Zhang, Y., Dugan, A. G., Cherniack, M., & El Ghaziri, M. (2023). Peer support programs to reduce organizational stress and trauma for public safety workers: a scoping review. *Workplace Health & Safety, 71*(11), 523-535.
- Ferraro, C. (2024). *The Impact of Peer Support on Perceived Stress, PTSD Symptoms, and Attitudes Towards Seeking Mental Help in Police Officers* (Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University).
- Festinger, L., 1957. Social comparison theory. *Selective Exposure Theory, 16*(401), p.3.
- Fortuna, K. L., Solomon, P., & Rivera, J. (2022). An update of peer support/peer provided services underlying processes, benefits, and critical ingredients. *Psychiatric Quarterly, 93*(2), 571-586.
- Horne, I. M. T., Veggeland, F., Bååthe, F., Drewes, C., & Rø, K. I. (2023). Understanding peer support: a qualitative interview study of doctors one year after seeking support. *BMC Health Services Research, 23*(1), 324.
- House, J.S. (1981). *Work Stress and Social Support*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- John, N. M., Page, O., Martin, S. C., & Whittaker, P. (2018). Impact of peer support on student mental wellbeing: a systematic review. *MedEdPublish, 7*, 170.
- Kossek, E. E., Pichler, S., Bodner, T., & Hammer, L. B. (2011). Workplace Social Support And Work-Family Conflict: A Meta-Analysis Clarifying The Influence Of General And Work-Family-Specific Supervisor And Organizational Support. *Personnel Psychology, 64*(2), 289–313.
- MacNaughton, G., & Frey, D. F. (2010). Decent work for all: a holistic human rights approach. *Am. U. Int'l L. Rev., 26*, 441.
- Milliard, B. (2020). Utilization and impact of peer-support programs on police officers' mental health. *Frontiers in psychology, 11*, 1686.

- Nyberg, A. J., Shaw, J. D., & Zhu, J. (2021). The people still make the (remote work-) place: Lessons from a pandemic. *Journal of management*, 47(8), 1967-1976.
- Peterson, A., & Monaghan, H. (2019). Near-peer mentorship: a pilot programme to improve support for new doctors. *BMJ Leader*, leader-2018.
- Repper, J., & Carter, T. (2011). A review of the literature on peer support in mental health services. *Journal of Mental Health*, 20(4), 392–411.
- Robinson, M., Raine, G., Robertson, S., Steen, M., & Day, R. (2015). Peer support as a resilience building practice with men. *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 14(4), 196-204.
- Salamon, J., Blume, B.D., Orosz, G. and Nagy, T., 2022. The moderating effect of coworkers' training participation on the influence of peer support in the transfer process. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 47(10), pp.15-36.
- Smit, D., Miguel, C., Vrijzen, J. N., Groeneweg, B., Spijker, J., & Cuijpers, P. (2023). The effectiveness of peer support for individuals with mental illness: systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Medicine*, 53(11), 5332-5341.
- Stringer, H. (2023). Worker well-being is in demand as organizational culture shifts. *Monitor on Psychology*, 54(1), 58.
- Tracy, K., & Wallace, S. P. (2016). Benefits of peer support groups in the treatment of addiction. *Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation*, 7, 143–154.
- Wallace, J. R. (2016). Field test of a peer support pilot project serving federal employees deployed to a major disaster. *Soc. Work Christ.* 43, 127–141.
- Wasilewski, M. B., Rios, J., Simpson, R., Hitzig, S. L., Gotlib Conn, L., MacKay, C., ... & Robinson, L. R. (2023). Peer support for traumatic injury survivors: a scoping review. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 45(13), 2199-2232.
- Watson, A. L., Young, C., Whitham, A., Prescott, S., & Flynn, E. J. (2024). Enhancing Nursing Practice Through Peer Support: Strategies for Engagement in the Nursing Workforce. *Journal of Radiology Nursing*.
- Whybrow D., Jones N., Greenberg N. (2015). Promoting organizational well-being: A comprehensive review of Trauma Risk Management. *Occupational Medicine*, 65, 331-336.
- World Health Organization. (2022). *WHO guidelines on mental health at work*. World Health Organization.