

April and Sharon - Adding Lived Experience to the Resume

Aviva's specialist peer support service graduates are the embodiment of the courage and resilience of those who have overcome family violence, and examples of the ability to create a different, safer future.

The course uses an intentional peer support (IPS) model and provides personal development opportunities, as well as a focus on family violence and healthy relationships. IPS training strengthens participants' understanding of themselves and provides the framework for them to develop the skills to support others.

The development of a family violence focussed Peer Support service is unique in New Zealand. Another unique aspect of this Aviva service is its return-to-work aspect for women who have been socially isolated and financially excluded by family violence – an all-too-common occurrence. In January 2014 two peer graduates - April Green and Sharon Kerr - joined the Aviva team as part of this initiative. Thanks to a financial contribution from Work and Income, as well as sponsorship from a local business keen to support opportunities for graduates to transition into work, Aviva was able to offer both Sharon and April six-month work placements as peers. Together they are strengthening the voice of service users in Aviva's work, supporting other women who are overcoming family violence and who need ongoing support, assisting with the IPS training course and also running a peer support group for women who have experienced family violence.

For April the chance to work as a peer was a step to further her intended studies towards a degree in social work, a passion she developed thanks to her own past experiences and the support she received. She believes peer support training and experience will enhance her ability to support others. "Peer support training teaches you to look at the person, not the problem, and to accept your own participation in how you got here. No-one fixed me – I fixed myself, and that's why our team (peer support) is so important. Only when you do that can you move on and put the baggage behind you.

"What I've learned can be applied anywhere in my life. It's already helped my personal communication with my daughter and my mother through being aware of self-care, boundaries and where other people are at. Now I can use my experiences to support other people examine their lives and the problems in them. I thought the lack of formal qualification would hold me back, but my life experience has got me here. Now I can support other women. It feels so good to see the switch flick for another woman – that she doesn't have to put up with how she is being treated. My goal is support women so that they never need to go into the Safe House, like I did. I don't want it to get that bad for them."

Sharon was led to the training through her involvement with other agencies and networks. "I was looking to arrive but didn't know where" she says, "but I've learnt the benefit of seeing an open door and taking a look. The peer support training reinforced a lot of what I had learnt and I also learned new ways of doing things. It helped me progress to the next level."

Sharon has continued with further studies focussed on peer support in the alcohol, drug and mental health fields. The work opportunity at Aviva came just the right time as it provides her with an opportunity to put into practice all she has learned, and will contribute to the certificate she is completing. "The experience at Aviva is helping me to reach my full potential. Being part of this network related to alcohol and drugs, family violence, dysfunction – it's what I've known – and so I can use my experiences in a different way now. What I love about peer support is the therapeutic value of one human-being being with another while they discover their journey. I want to fan people's hope. When a person is experiencing multiple problems, one's internal flame gets quite low because it's hard work using services – it is a full-time job just meeting everyone's requirements. I want to help others be free of that. Maybe I can help that one person to change their world."