Last weekend four Bristol PASS leaders and Peer Mentors headed down to the University of Southampton for a one day conference about Peer Support. We wanted to summarise what we learnt and how we think you can benefit from ideas we talked about there.

Keynote Speech:
The opening speech was given by Dr Rob Grieve, a senior lecturer in Physiotherapy at UWE and a trustee of the British Stammering Association, who discussed public speaking and his ‘Stand Up and Be Heard’ workshops which help students who have a fear of public speaking. He talked about how public speaking is one of the main aspects of university life that students worry about and the importance of supporting students with this worry.

Sessions:

Thinking about Thinking: This session was run by Paula Green from the University of Winchester and focused on ‘meta-cognition’, the process of thinking about thinking, i.e. making decision making and thinking an active process and not running on autopilot. This can be particularly useful for Peer Mentors and PASS leaders – we discussed how it’s important to make people actually think about things such as their work or stress coping mechanisms and then come up with an action plan to deal with difficult situations or challenges.

Teamwork makes the Dream Work: This session was run by two PASS leaders/peer mentors from the University of Bristol, collaborating with two PASS leaders from UWE. The session focused on how to effectively work within a team by identifying your own or others learning styles (are you a reflector, theorist, activist or pragmatist?) and thinking about how you can adapt your peer mentoring style or PASS sessions to make sure all types of learners are benefiting. We also examined the different ways in which people deal with conflict, which could be particularly useful for peer mentors and PASS leaders helping students deal with difficult or tense situations. Search ‘Honey and Mumford learning styles test’ to find out what type of learner you are.

Reflective Listening Skills and Empathy: This workshop was run by Carolyn Gentle, PALS (PASS equivalent) Coordinator from the University of Plymouth and focused on the importance of empathy when working in a peer support role. There were two role play activities where we considered how to use reflective listening skills such as different questioning techniques and appropriate body language to encourage conversation. At the end, we agreed that nodding, mirroring, and clarification questions are effective listening strategies. To conclude, this workshop was a great opportunity to apply and improve our empathy and listening skills. It is clear that these are essential attributes in our roles. Hence, the importance of this session is relevant to everyone working in the peer support scheme.
Peer Today, What Tomorrow?: This session, run by Michael Knight (Education Development Tutor, Bournemouth University), was a great opportunity to reflect on the skills gained in our peer support roles and to explore different options to move our career forward. Through different activities, it also reassured the fact that listening skills play a crucial role in communication, especially in the context of peer support. The activities involved role playing (a speaker and a listener) where the speakers were invited to talk about a particular topic (peer support skills and future plans in this case) and the listeners provided a comfortable environment to keep the conversation flowing. Importantly, we learned and applied three useful questions: “What would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?”, “What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?”. Overall, this workshop provided a nice environment to apply reflective listening skills, and to consider future career options. The significance of this workshop is relevant to Peer Mentors, PASS Leaders, and to everyone else.

Lightning Talks:
These short talks focused on a variety of different aspects, and they left us with the following questions, which we thought we would share with you:

- Where do we draw the line between being professionals and being students. (Think: what would you do if you saw one of the first years on a night out?)
- How can attendance be improved in PASS sessions? Would it be possible to ask departmental staff to help with the promotion of the sessions?

What did we get out of it?
- The conference was a fun and really useful day for all of us - we feel we gained important skills in communication, strategizing and identifying our own and others’ strengths and weaknesses.

Staff and delegates from the University of Bristol
How can what we learnt help other PASS leaders/Peer Mentors?

From the *Thinking about Thinking* session the following questions are useful to consider when faced with a challenge:

- **Before:**
  - Is this similar to a previous task?
  - What do I want to achieve?
  - What should I do first?

- **During:**
  - Am I on the right track?
  - What can I do differently?
  - Who can I ask for help?

- **After:**
  - What worked well?
  - What could I have done better?
  - Can I apply this to other sessions?

As a PASS leader and/or Peer Mentor you can play a significant role in the before and after stages: facilitating students in thinking about the challenge they have (whether academic or not) and giving them the opportunity to reflect afterwards.

From the *Reflective Listening Skills and Empathy* workshop, these are effective listening strategies and body language tips.

- **Nodding:** Nodding when appropriate, shows the speaker that you are engaged in the conversation. It helps to keep the conversation flow without interrupting the speaker.

- **Mirroring:** As the name implies, mirroring means imitating the posture, gestures and body language of the speaker (like a mirror). In the workshop, we agreed that this resulted in a much more comfortable conversation.

- **Clarification questions:** Asking clarification questions (“you mean …”, “in other words, you want to … “) when appropriate shows the speaker interest and engagement in the conversation. (be careful to not overuse them!)

- **Eye contact:** This shows that you are listening, interested and engaged.

From the *Teamwork Makes the Dream Work* workshop, it is important to consider the difference in the ways that peer mentees and PASS students learn and handle conflict. Some questions that can help us think about this include:

- How do I learn best? Am I a reflector, activist, theorist or pragmatist?
- How can I make sure my PASS sessions engage all types of learners?
- How can the conflict resolution methods I use when issues arise in PASS, or with peer mentors, be improved?
- Should I use different conflict resolution methods depending on how the people involved react to conflict to best diffuse the situation?

From the *Peer Today, What Tomorrow* session, the following reflective questions are relevant to consider future career plans:

- What skills have I gained from my peer support role?
- How can I apply these skills in my future career plans?

We hope sharing our experiences and what we learnt at the conference with you will help you with your own peer mentoring/PASS sessions and give you some thinks to think about and reflect on over the holidays!