

# Side by Side - What we found



The Side by Side programme, funded by the Big Lottery, aimed to improve the lives of people experiencing mental health difficulties by organising peer support in their communities.

The programme was run by Mind in partnership with 48 partner groups and organisations in nine areas across England: Blackpool, Blackburn and Darwen; Coventry and Rugby; Kensington and Chelsea; Leeds; Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees; Northamptonshire; Plymouth; Southampton and New Forest; and Suffolk.

Together we facilitated:

face-to-face peer support with  
**3,255**  
people

online peer support with  
**17,936**  
people



## What did the research involve?

Mind worked with researchers from St George's, University of London and the McPin Foundation to explore what makes community-based peer support unique. These researchers also looked at what difference peer support makes for the people who give and receive it.

The London School of Economics worked with them to look at how peer support affected employment and use of mental health services. Some members of the research team used their own experiences of mental health difficulties and peer support – alongside their research skills – to shape and guide the research.

The researchers interviewed almost 100 people involved with the Side by Side programme and collected questionnaires from over 700 people. About one in three people who took part in the research were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities.

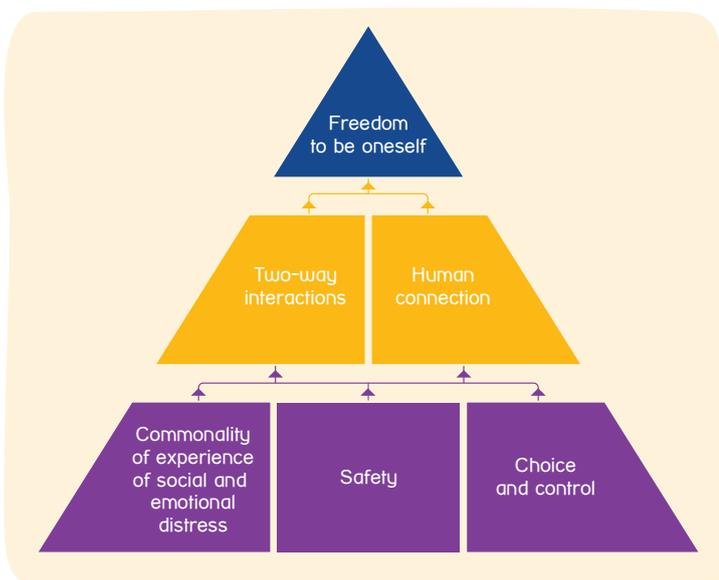
For BAME-specific peer support groups, shared cultural background; experiences of migration; racism; and intersectional experiences were found to be particularly important. Further analysis of the data is needed to improve our understanding of these experiences.

## What makes peer support unique?

The researchers found six core values. These were things that were very important in making peer support different to other types of mental health care.

The bottom three values form a foundation on which the top three rest.

It is important that peers feel they are with other people who have similar experiences, feel safe to express themselves, and have choice and control over whether/when/how they express themselves. Without this, they are unlikely to engage in two-way interactions and develop meaningful connections with other peers. Without the five other values being in place, it is unlikely that peers will feel like they can freely be themselves in peer support.



These values can be seen in all peer support. However, the way that projects work is shaped by their local environment.

To make sure each project best suits the needs of a particular group of people, peer support organisers made the following decisions.

- How much facilitation is needed?
- What type of leadership is needed?
- Is the support focused on a social, educational or other activity?
- What types of membership are needed?
- What kind of organisational support is needed?

The different ways people answered these questions meant that most projects looked quite different to each other and were carefully tailored to local needs.

## What is the impact of Side by Side?

The research found that as people changed the amount of peer support they engaged with, there were changes in the following outcomes:

### Wellbeing

The research suggested that most change took place when there was active giving and sharing of peer support in a two-way interaction.

We found different results when talking with different groups of people. These findings are being looked at in more detail to fully understand what they mean.

Having choice about the kind of peer support to access appears to be very important. The research suggests that people try out different

### Hope for the future

approaches to peer support in order to find out what works best for them. The research found that people reduced the amount of peer support they accessed over time but the impact stayed the same.

These findings provide evidence that people continue to live well in the community whilst accessing less peer support over time. Importantly, there was no evidence that the more peer support that was offered, the more peer support people 'used'. This is unlike the

### Connections to others

usual pattern observed with many traditional mental health services.

The research also found that people taking part in the Side by Side evaluation used fewer health services (for example, hospital visits) while they were involved with peer support. They also depended less on friends and family members to care for them. However, it is not certain whether this is caused by the programme or a mix of other factors.

### Sense of empowerment

ability to make positive changes

For more information about the Side by Side evaluation, see our full early findings report at: [mind.org.uk/sidebyside](http://mind.org.uk/sidebyside)

To find out more about accessing peer support, see: [mind.org.uk/peersupportinfo](http://mind.org.uk/peersupportinfo)



Improving mental health through peer support