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Developing peer support in the community: a toolkit



Acknowledgements

A big thank you to our funder the Big Lottery Fund and to all those involved in the Side by Side research and the development of this toolkit:

- The Side by Side evaluation was a co-produced project. By that we mean a lot of people contributed their expertise and shaped the final outputs (see mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results). The development of this toolkit adopted the same co-produced approach. Key contributions were made by: Rose Thompson, Andreja Mesaric, Julie Billsborough, Sarah Gibson, Steve Gillard, Jacob Diggle, Elizabeth Ladimeji and Brigid Morris.
- The toolkit is based upon research undertaken by the Side by Side evaluation partners: St George's, University of London, the McPin Foundation, and the London School of Economics. They were supported by a number of advisors and consultants. In particular, the toolkit draws heavily on the qualitative work undertaken by the McPin Foundation team.
- The Side by Side Research Advisory Group provided expert feedback throughout the development process. Alison Faulkner was also involved in the final drafting process.
- Several peer support projects helped to develop the toolkit by attending workshops and piloting draft versions. They include: African Health Policy Network, Actively Influencing Mental Health Services (AIMHS), Halo, Men Tell Health, Middlesbrough and Stockton Mind, My Space, Pluss, Solent Mind, and Suffolk Mind.
- The interactive tools were designed in collaboration with Humanly, a service design agency.
- Mind staff oversaw the toolkit development process. They contributed content for the toolkit and led the co-production workshops and design process.

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About this toolkit

How was the toolkit developed?

Between September 2014 and December 2016, the Side by Side programme facilitated online peer support with 17,936 people and face-to-face peer support with 3,255 people. The programme was funded by the Big Lottery Fund and delivered by Mind, Bipolar UK, the Depression Alliance and a large number of smaller, grant-funded projects.

Side by Side was evaluated by a research team from St George's, University of London, the McPin Foundation, and the London School of Economics. This team included researchers who had experienced mental health difficulties and had been involved in giving and receiving peer support.

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

The Side by Side research was co-produced, as was this toolkit. This means that a lot of people contributed their expertise and shaped the final outputs – many drawing on their own personal experiences of mental health problems.

Each part of this toolkit is divided into three sections:

- The first section is based directly on the Side by Side research findings¹.
- The second and third sections comprise reflection questions and activities. These were developed alongside more than 10 groups and projects connected to the Side by Side programme, as well as members of the Side by Side Research Advisory Group.

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is for people interested in mental health peer support happening in the community. This includes people who are:

- supporting and being supported through peer support
- setting up and running a peer support group or project
- involved in commissioning peer support projects.

It will be particularly useful for people who want to establish a new peer support project.

This toolkit will:

1. Briefly outline the main approaches to community-based peer support.
2. Outline a core set of values underpinning peer support, discussing the importance of each in turn.
3. Provide you with examples and a set of reflective questions to help you think about how each of those values are best reflected in the peer support that you are involved with.
4. Highlight a number of key decisions about how peer support might be organised.
5. Suggest some interactive activities to help you discuss these issues as a group.
6. Give some guidance on how to better understand and communicate your impact.
7. Offer some troubleshooting tips to help you overcome challenging situations.
8. And finally, provide some links to other useful resources.

¹ For more information on the Side by Side research findings, see mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results.

How to use this toolkit

One of the key characteristics of peer support is that it is shaped by those involved, and adapts to the needs of individuals and the community. There's no single 'right way' to do peer support.

You can use this toolkit like a workbook, going through each section and using the tools to have conversations with other people involved in peer support with you. Or you can dip in and out of the toolkit as you need to, picking the bits that are most helpful to you at the moment.

This toolkit is designed to help you reflect and plan. It can support you to think through important decisions that need to be made. This will be helpful whether you're involved in an established project or just starting out on your journey with peer support. However, there may be sections in this toolkit that are more or less helpful for you, depending on your specific project.

What is peer support?

Peer support happens when people who have similar experiences of something difficult come together to support each other. For the purpose of this toolkit, we are talking about experiences of mental health difficulties, trauma, or other forms of social or emotional distress. However, people involved in peer support will also have other shared characteristics, experiences, and interests.

Peer support differs from other forms of mental health services and support in important ways. Crucially, the people involved play an active role in creating a safe environment for each other. In this space, people can use their shared experiences to give and receive support from each other. Peers make choices about what parts of their personal experiences they talk about, seek support for, and use to support other people.

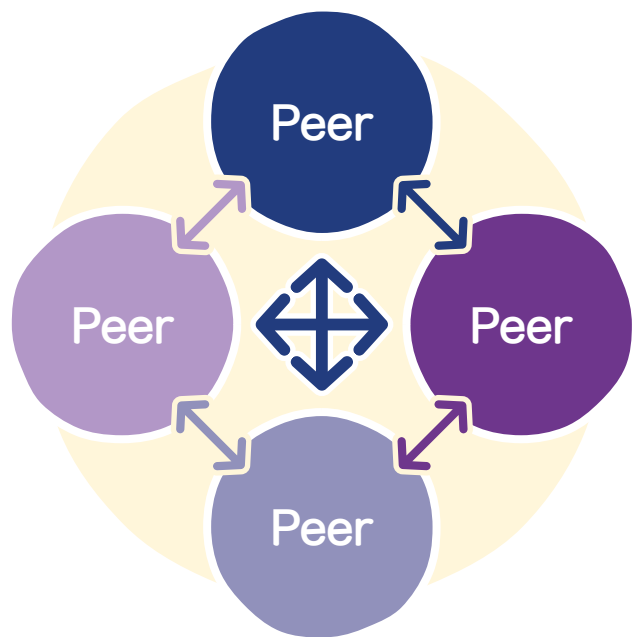
It is through the development of meaningful, two-way relationships that peer support works. People can feel less alone if they talk about their experiences and share coping strategies that work for them. By doing this, peers can help each other learn about how best to manage feelings and experiences that are difficult.

[T]his is what sets peer support apart from any other kind of mental health service I've experienced. It's what makes it different from group therapy. It's what makes it different from counselling or speaking to your doctor or speaking to a parent or a partner... in that it is mutual and everyone there is giving and receiving and sharing experiences...

Types of peer support

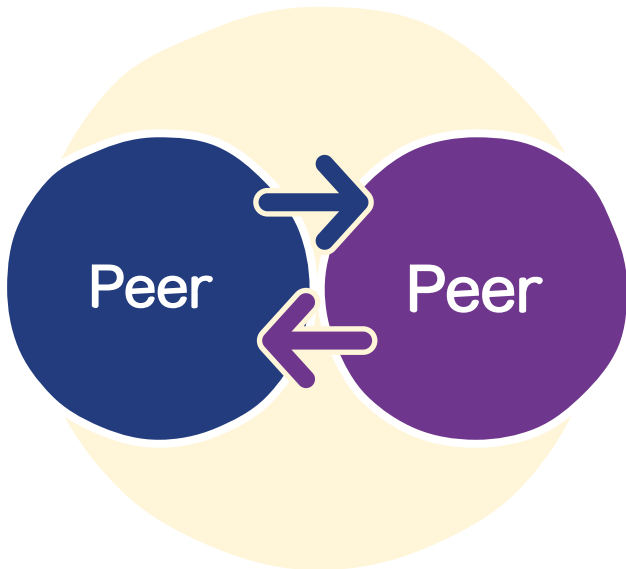
Peer support is very flexible, with people involved in giving, receiving and sharing support in many different ways. This means that it can be tailored to both the people who are part of it and the local community where it takes place. There are many different ways in which peer support is happening across the country. This rich diversity is something to be celebrated. There are three broad approaches to peer support.

Group peer support



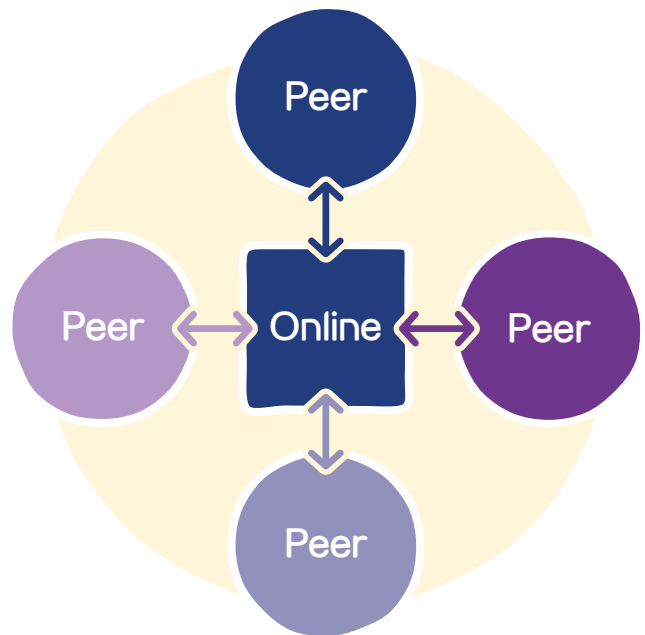
This involves three or more people coming together to support each other. There are many ways of doing this, from groups that allocate a number of official roles and run structured activities, right through to loose, informal gatherings.

One-to-one peer support



This involves two people who support each other. This may be in a very informal context, for example two friends coming together to talk about a shared problem. In some cases of more formally organised one-to-one peer support, one person may have had some training, for example in mentoring skills. One person may also be further along their 'mental health journey'. This may mean that one person may provide more support to the other at times.

Online peer support



People may access peer support online, often through websites that are designed specifically to facilitate mental health peer support. Peers may also use generally available social media forums that are open to anyone.

Online forms of peer support are different from face-to-face approaches because they usually allow people to access support at any time they need, including in the middle of the night, and for as much or as little time as is necessary. They also allow people to remain anonymous if they choose.

You might find that the practical advice in this toolkit can be more easily applied to face-to-face settings than online. However, peers in the process of establishing more informal online peer support might find many of the issues discussed in this toolkit worth thinking about.

Using the toolkit as a group

Peer support is a shared activity and this toolkit will be most helpful if you use it with others.

This toolkit is designed in sections, containing information and activities we hope will be useful to you. It includes a range of tools and questions to help you reflect on current and future ways of working. Many of these are interactive and have been designed to be discussed as a group. This conversation could involve current peer support members, people who are interested in setting up a new group, or just some friends who can help you think through your ideas.

No matter who is involved, thinking and making decisions about the way your peer support works can be hard. If you're setting up peer support for the first time, there are lots of decisions to make and you may come across some unfamiliar ideas. If you're already involved in an established project, it can be hard to see past what is currently happening and reflect on how you would like it to be in the future. This toolkit is here to help you. The research which it's based on might also be useful².

Identifying the skills and resources you already have

In all discussions, people will have different opinions and suggestions for how things can be done. If you're developing your peer support with others, it may be useful to identify the skills, strengths and experiences that each of you bring. People's strengths in your group might include:

- developing new ideas
- practical problem-solving
- attention to detail
- connecting with others easily
- knowing the right people for a specific task
- knowing useful people.

When starting to work together, it might be worth taking some time to discuss and write down what each of you bring to the group. You will likely discover and reconnect with further strengths as your work progresses.

² See [mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results](https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results).

Starting conversations

Starting conversations that allow everyone to feel included can be hard. This can be especially difficult where you don't know each other, for example when you are setting up new peer support.

Icebreaker exercises can sometimes be a helpful way to kick-start conversations and help a group learn about each other. However they are not for everyone and participation

should be voluntary. It can be helpful to offer people the chance to sit out of the activity or write responses rather than speak. Be tactful with icebreakers and do not ask personal questions. Be clear with your group when you introduce these exercises that you do not expect anyone to disclose personal, sensitive or upsetting things about themselves during the exercise.

The icebreaker activities below have been suggested by different peer support groups. You might like to try them in your project.

10 things in common

As a group, find 10 things that you all have in common. These can be anything from foods you like to all living in the same area. Avoid physical attributes, for example, "We all have a mouth". This activity can be done without any specific resources, though it can be helpful to note commonalities as you go through to keep track of them.

Jelly baby roulette

A bag of jelly babies or other coloured sweets is required for this icebreaker.

Assign each colour of jelly baby a topic (for example: red = food). Each member of the group takes a jelly baby at random and then shares their favourite thing in that category (for example: red = food = chocolate cake).

Truth, truth, myth

Each member of the group says two random true stories or facts about themselves and one myth or untruth. The rest of the group then guess which is the myth.

Human bingo

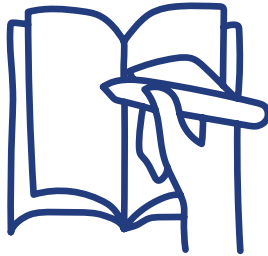
Photocopy the activity on p.10 or develop one with your own categories. Give everyone in the group a bingo card and make sure they have a pen or pencil. Ask the group to speak with others in the room to find people who meet the categories and write down their names in the boxes. The winner is the person who fully completes their card first.

Human bingo

Has a tattoo



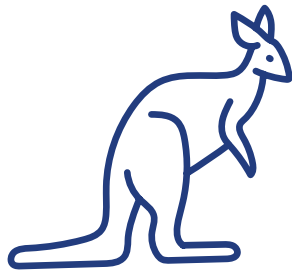
Has written a poem



Enjoys listening to the radio



Has been to Australia



Supports a football team



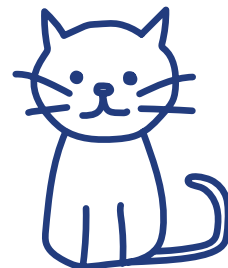
Has experienced mental distress



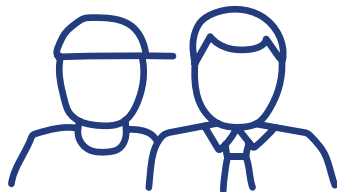
Has had an operation



Owens a cat



Has a brother



Plays a musical instrument



Core values

The Side by Side research identified a set of core values that make peer support different from other forms of mental health support. Many of these values relate to the ways in which people treat each other in peer support relationships.

This toolkit outlines six core values that are essential to any form of peer support (group, one-to-one, online). The values are accompanied by reflection questions and practical activities to help you consider how it relates to your peer support project.

1

Experience in common (p.13). Peers share similar backgrounds, experiences, interests, or goals.

2

Safety (p.18). Peer support has structures in place to create physical and emotional safety.

3

Choice and control (p.23). Peers have choice and control in how they are involved in their peer support.

4

Two-way interactions (p.25). Peers have opportunities to give and receive support.

5

Human connection (p.30). Peers develop meaningful connections with each other.

6

Freedom to be oneself (p.34). Peers feel able to express themselves, and be themselves in peer support.

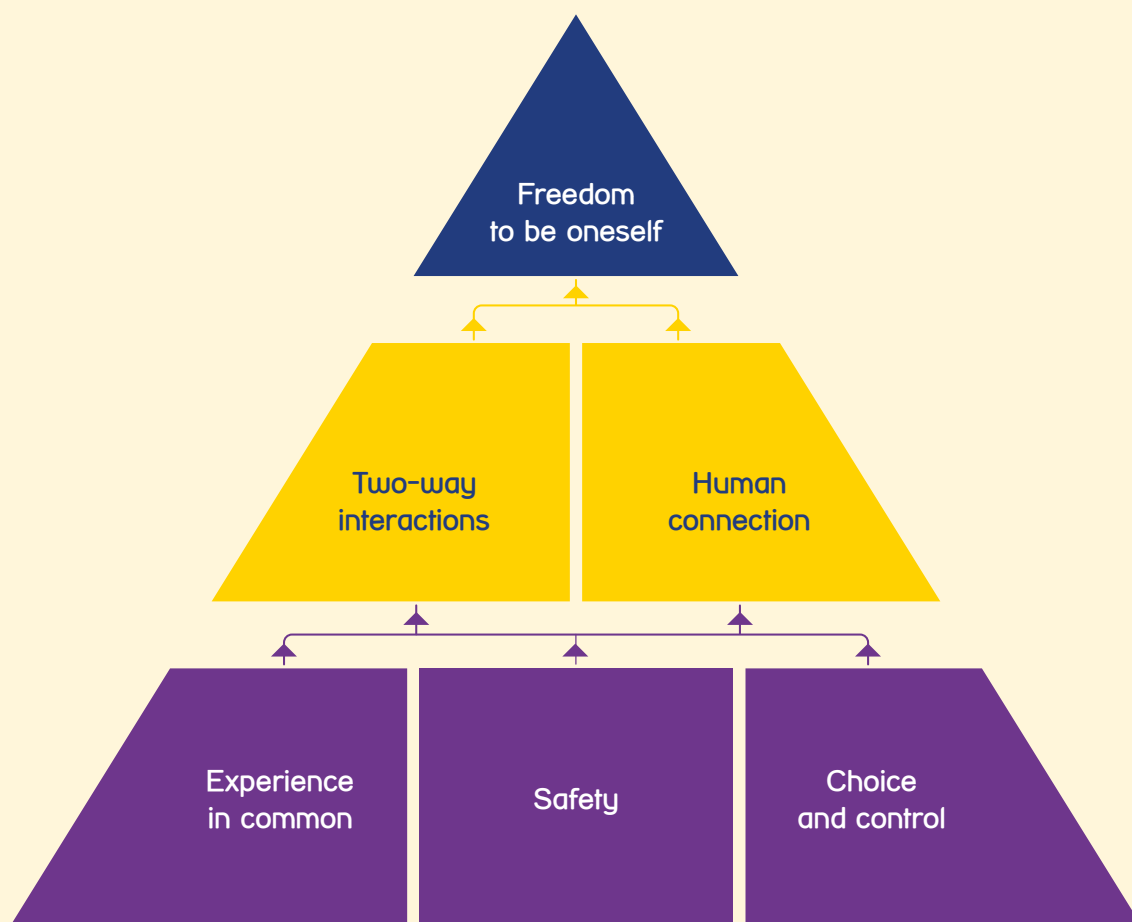
Even if your peer support project is well established, it's important to keep revisiting these values. The way that each value is demonstrated can change over time and new group members need opportunities to contribute.

Importantly, there is no perfect way to apply these values. It's helpful to reflect on how they relate to your peer support and whether they prompt you to do anything differently.

How do core values relate to each other?

The core values are connected with each other. This diagram shows that the foundation values are 'experience in common', 'safety', and 'choice and control'. These values need to be present for people to be able to have 'two-way interactions' with each other and to begin to feel a 'human connection'.

Once all of these things are in place, people may begin to feel comfortable enough to express themselves honestly and authentically, which is described by the value at the top of the pyramid, 'freedom to be oneself'.



Experience in common

What does this mean?

In a mental health context, peers share common experiences of social and emotional distress. This shared experience can help people connect with each other, regardless of how openly they discuss their experiences. These shared experiences can be broadly defined or can be more specifically linked to a particular mental health diagnosis or experience, for example, hospitalisation.

Peers may also connect over other kinds of experience. Specific aspects of people's identity – including gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, disability and migration status – may be critical to people recognising each other as peers. Crucially, people have control over how they identify themselves and who they identify as peers.

...[I]t's comforting to know that all those people are going through the same thing, just like a little group community. [There's a] comfort of knowing that these people are feeling the same way you are.

When you've got racism as the base of your issue, you are more than likely going to find solutions that are race-specific or that have got a racial dimension. So that's how we end up being of a particular racial group; because the root of our problem, we believe, [is] racialisation.

Why is it important?

When people come to peer support, it's important that they feel comfortable enough to talk about difficult issues. This is easier if peers know that they've been through similar things.

Many peers talk about the relief of feeling that they're 'not the only one'. This can be comforting and reassuring, especially if someone has been struggling alone for a long time. The feeling of being together with other people who understand what it's like to experience social or emotional distress makes it easier to open up and help one another.

When talking with each other, knowing that someone may have been through similar problems can help people to feel empathy with each other. For some, it's liberating not having to explain themselves again and again, because in peer support other people 'get it'. Where people are able to feel empathy and mutual understanding, they are able to build trust with each other.

I'm less isolated. I have options... I know that I'm understood tacitly because everyone's in the same boat... I can be with people without having to explain myself, or justify why I'm there.

It's important to understand that while people accessing peer support may have had many similar experiences, these experiences will not be exactly the same. Recognising, respecting, and valuing those differences alongside the things that people have in common is important.

What can it look like in practice?

Peer support is often organised for particular groups of people. This means people may have at least one thing in common, but may have experienced a number of things that make their situation relatively distinct. For example:

- peer support for people who have been migrants or refugees, some of whom may have experienced trauma
- women-only peer support, including common experiences of domestic violence

- peer support for people from the LGBTQ+ community
- peer support for people with learning difficulties.

Peer support doesn't have to be focused on particular groups of people. It can be open to anyone who has experiences of emotional distress. However, there has to be experience in common that people clearly share – and that the people involved are aware of – in order for peer support relationships to form.

Reflection questions



- Who is giving and receiving peer support? What are our shared experiences?
- Do people who join have more than one kind of experience in common? Which experiences?
- What are the challenges, if any, of focusing on our shared experiences in peer support?
- Are there people who might not find this peer support helpful? Are there people who might not be able to contribute appropriately?
- If there are people who don't fit the peer support criteria at the current time, how would we tell them this, and how might we help them look for relevant support?
- Are there any practical or cultural barriers to people joining? Is our peer support unintentionally excluding people, for example, by not having disabled access or failing to use diverse images of people in our publicity materials?

Activity 1: Group membership



This is a suggested activity to help you think about who your group is for, and what you would like members to have in common. You can adapt or create your own activity so that it suits your group's needs best.

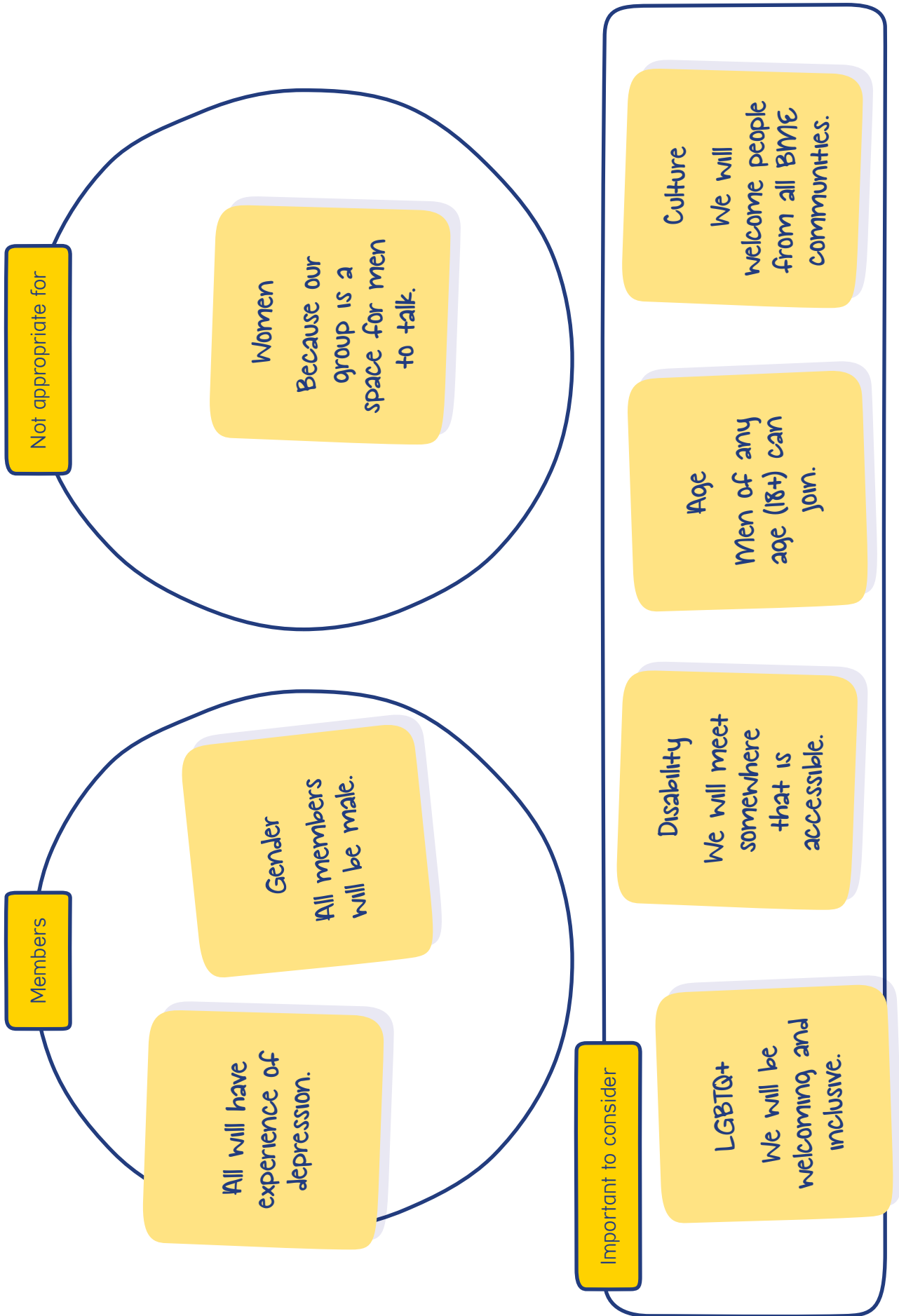
1. Print or draw the circles and box on p.17.
2. Think about things you want your group members to have in common. Add these characteristics to the 'members' circle.
3. Think about characteristics that you can't include in your group. Add these to the 'not appropriate for' circle.
4. Discuss other characteristics that aren't essential to join your group but are important to think about. Put these in the 'important to consider' box. Examples include: age, gender, people in crisis, carers, disability, LGBTQ+ and language. You can use this space to explore any barriers that people may have to taking part.

The activity can be printed and written on, or drawn out to a size that works for you. You could use sticky notes so characteristics can be easily moved as you discuss them.

See p.16 for an example of how this might look for a men's group.

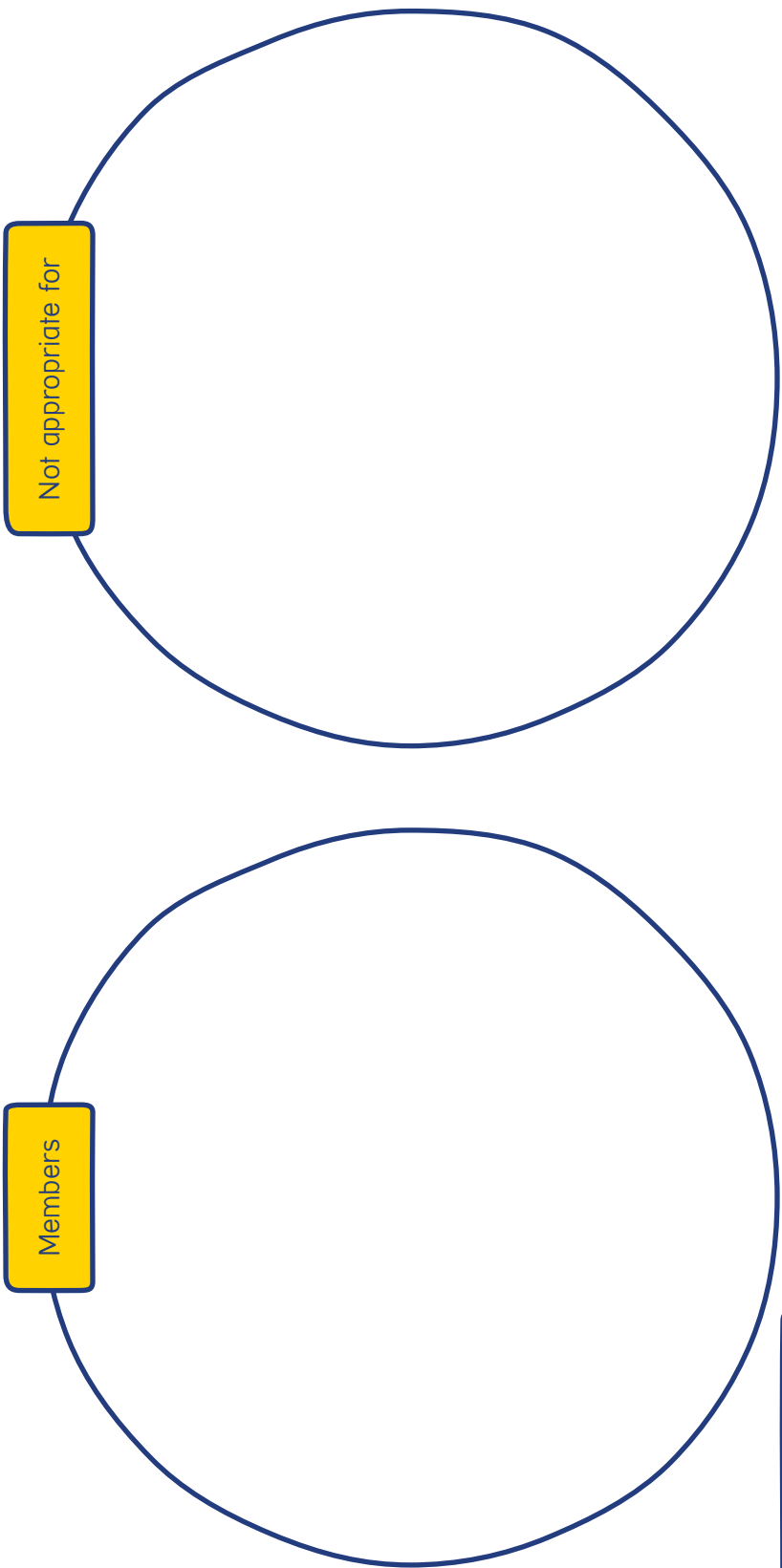


Name of your group..... **Mens' group**



Activity 1: Group membership

Name of your group.....



Important to consider

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a blue border, intended for notes or additional information. A yellow label with the text "Important to consider" is attached to the left side of the box.

Safety

What does this mean?

The aim of peer support is to create physically and emotionally safe spaces. Ways of doing this can include:

- creating guidelines or 'ground rules' to address issues such as confidentiality and how peers can behave respectfully towards each other
- reviewing meeting locations for privacy and accessibility
- role modelling the way peers can share (or not share), and finding clarity over how peers may discuss particular topics (for example, the level of detail peers give about self-harm may be limited).

The knowledge that 'what is shared in peer support, remains in peer support' helps to create trust that allows people to express themselves without fear of judgement. In some forms of peer support, the responsibility for ensuring ground rules are followed may rest with online moderators, group facilitators, or supervisors. In other forms of peer support, everyone collectively takes responsibility for creating a safe space.

I think it's important that everyone is able to trust one another and confidentiality is not broken. Sometimes you can say things that you wouldn't want the wider community to know about... In this group, I think people can say what they want without the fear of that coming out.

Why is it important?

We know that feeling safe within peer support is vital. Without the feeling of safety, peers will be unable to share their experiences and engage with the support others can offer. If people don't feel safe in peer support, they will not use it.

We can think about safety in two parts:

- **Being safe.** Practical things that are designed to ensure the safety of everyone involved with peer support. These may include:
 - decisions about where peer support happens
 - decisions about when peer support happens
 - a code of conduct around how peers behave towards each other
 - guidelines to allow people to share their experiences safely.
- **Feeling safe.** How people feel when they're taking part in peer support. This may include:
 - feeling physically safe in the place where peer support happens
 - feeling safe to talk about difficult experiences or emotions.

When enough thought goes into how peer support can be made safe, most people will eventually feel safe. However, there may be some people who never feel safe, and people involved in organising peer support should be sensitive to this.

What can it look like in practice?

- Peer support for women who have experienced abuse from men, taking place in a women's centre where men are not allowed, or have restricted access.
- Peer support for people who have struggled with alcohol, taking place in a venue where there is no access to alcohol, and which is not located close to a pub or bar.
- Peers holding a meeting to create clear ground rules on how their peer support will be conducted and how people will talk with

each other. This could include an agreement on who will be responsible for upholding ground rules (everybody) and what should happen if one of those ground rules is either broken, or it turns out not to work in practice.

- Clear rules on an online forum against posting graphic pictures or text about self-harm.
- Introductions and expectation setting when somebody joins for the first time, to ensure that they feel welcome.

Reflection questions



Venues – being safe

- Is the venue easy to get to and find?
- Can we get there using public transport?
- Is there parking available close by?
- Who else uses the venue? Will people feel comfortable with other people in the venue?
- Is it private enough?
- Is it large enough?
- Is it free or affordable?
- Is it provided by a trusted organisation (for example, in a local mental health organisation or women's centre)?
- Is the venue accessible? For example, is there level access for people with disabilities? Are there accessible toilets?
- Is the venue staffed by people who could assist if there is a difficulty?

Venues – feeling safe

- Does the venue feel welcoming?
- Does the venue feel too clinical?
- Do peers have any individual problems or issues with the venue?
- Is there access to a kitchen or refreshments?

- Is there space for people to take time out if they are finding things tough?

Are there ground rules?

- Yes:
 - Who wrote them?
 - Have all current peers agreed to them, or had an opportunity to talk about them?
 - How often are they revisited?
 - What happens if someone breaks one of the ground rules?
 - Do any of the ground rules need revising? Are they all working as intended?
- No:
 - Do we want or need ground rules for our peer support?
 - What are the advantages of having or not having them?
 - Who should be involved in writing them?
 - How will we communicate our ground rules to everyone who needs to know about them?
 - What will we do if someone breaks the ground rules?

Activity 2: Mapping your venue

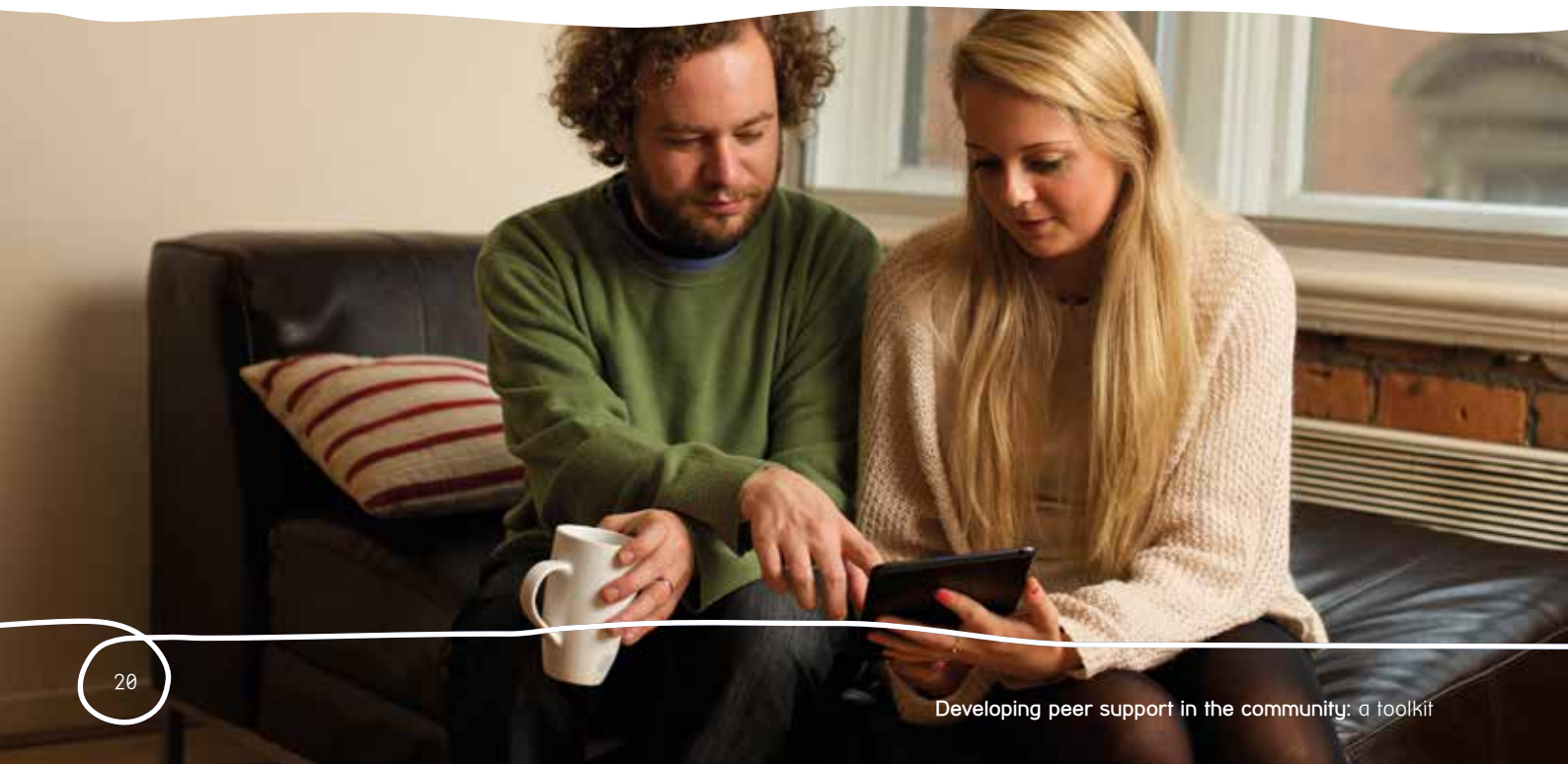


The aim of this activity is to help you establish if your venue is practically suitable for your group and to create a detailed map that you can send to new members.

If you don't wish to draw your venue, you could carry out this exercise by writing a list of relevant features.

Ideally, you will need to be at your venue to complete this exercise.

1. Arrive at your venue and enter as you would if you were visiting for the first time. As you go around, check the boxes on the next page to see whether the venue has these features. Other aspects of the building that you may like to consider are access to a telephone and whether you need to undertake a risk assessment of the venue. Is the venue staffed by people who could help in an emergency? Are there any other considerations you need to make for your group?
2. Draw a map of the venue, using the template on p.22 or in a way that suits your group (see the example on the next page).
3. Mark the following on your map:
 - where in the building the group meets
 - spaces in the building that are in use when your group meets – include details of who uses them and what for if possible
 - any available quiet spaces
 - bathrooms
 - facilities such as a kitchen, or tea and coffee making facilities
 - fire exits, fire extinguishers and first aid kits.



Activity 2: Mapping your venue

Venue name:

My peer support venue

Contact details of venue

Address:

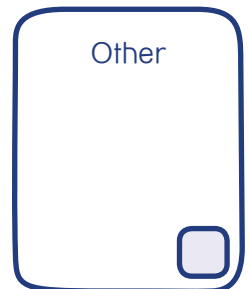
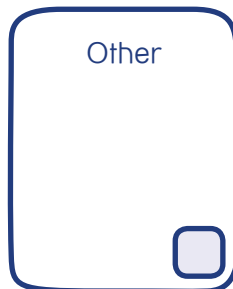
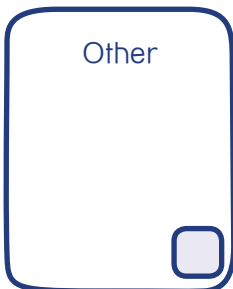
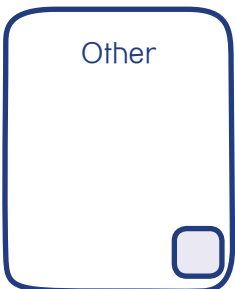
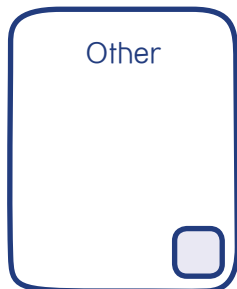
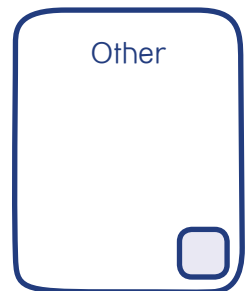
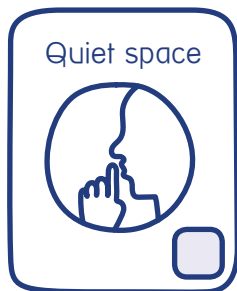
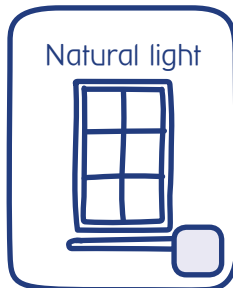
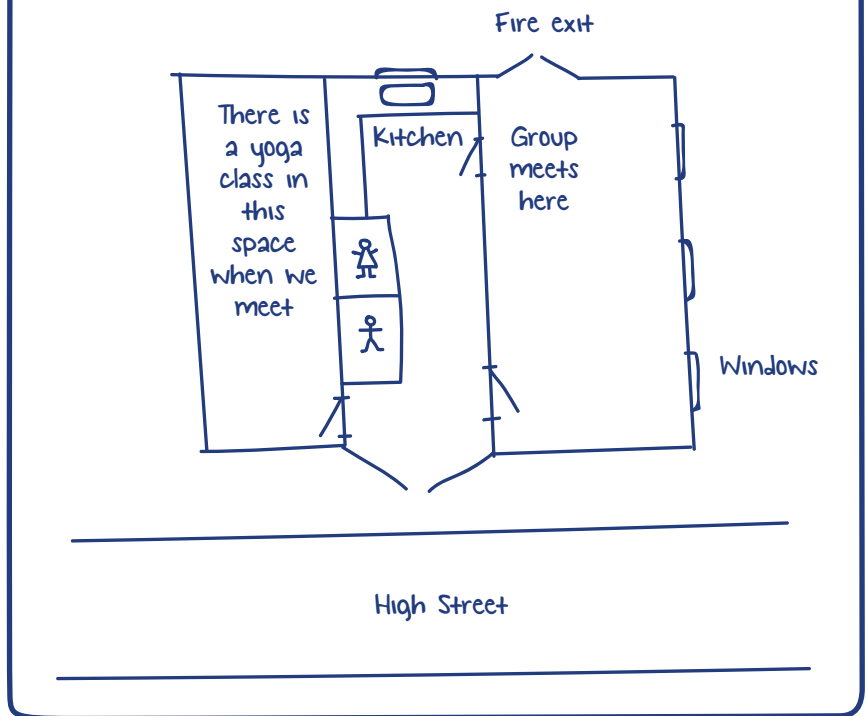
Phone number:

Buses to venue:

Trains to venue:

Parking at the venue:

Draw your map here



Activity 2: Mapping your venue

Venue name:

.....

Contact details of venue

Address:

.....

Phone number:

.....

Buses to venue:

.....

Trains to venue:

.....

Parking at the venue:

.....

Draw your map here

Choice and control

What does this mean?

People must be able to choose whether and how they participate in peer support. This includes control over:

- when they attend or take part
- how often they attend
- what they choose to share
- what support they want to try
- what role they take in a group or an interaction
- how long they stay in peer support.

Peers need to be able to withdraw from peer support for a period of time and return to it later, as well as be able to miss meetings or leave a session early. It's vital that they can do this without being penalised or fearing disapproval.

It's just as important that [participants] choose not to attend a group, as it is to attend a group... If people don't want to turn up, they don't have to... In the past, I've had people who have turned up, and halfway through a meeting, [they've] decided to leave... because, actually, they have got what they wanted from the meeting.

I just kept it as a trial and error kind of thing, so I tried it and if I didn't like it then I wouldn't continue with it. But I do like it, so I've carried on with it.

Why is it important?

Many people who choose to access peer support have had previous experiences where they were not in control of what happened to them. Some have experienced other forms of mental health services in which they felt under pressure to talk about difficult or painful experiences, or attend a service regularly. Sometimes their own preferences about the type of care they received were not listened to or taken seriously.

For many people, this may make them reluctant to take part in any form of support where they feel they won't have control over what happens to them, or what they're expected to share about themselves. If peers don't feel in control over what's happening to them, they may feel unsafe and withdraw from peer support. Having choice and control over support can make people feel empowered.

Peers want to have control in how they engage with peer support. It should be up to the individual to decide whether they are comfortable with:

- actively seeking support
- actively sharing their experiences
- actively offering support to others
- being present to listen to others
- choosing what coping strategies to use and what to ignore.

People should be helped to feel a sense of ownership over their peer support by ensuring that all members can be involved in important decisions. For example:

- being jointly responsible for ground rules to guide behaviour
- deciding if the time or venue should change.

What can it look like in practice?

- Being able to talk online with someone late at night on an online form of peer support, when other support would not be available.
- A peer who is new to a group not feeling that they have to say anything at all, while they get a sense of how everything works.
- Somebody deciding to go home early from their peer support as they don't feel well, rather than struggling through to the end.
- A group discussing what activities they would like to continue or develop before putting in a new grant application.
- Someone deciding to leave the group, to find one that suits them better.

Reflection questions



- How comfortable do people feel to dip in and out of peer support?
- Is it generally okay not to say anything?
- Are peers able to decide how the peer support is run?
- Are there ways to provide feedback either anonymously, or in a way that doesn't require talking with the whole group? For example, a suggestion box or talking one-to-one with the facilitator.
- Do we need training or discussion to consider our boundaries (what we feel comfortable sharing, and what we don't, at the present moment in time)?



Activity 3: Group agreement



This task will help you address key issues in both the earlier 'feeling safe' section, as well as in this 'choice and control' section.

1

For people to feel comfortable and safe, it is helpful to develop an agreement together.

Ask the group members what they need to do to make sure everyone feels safe and comfortable in the group.



2

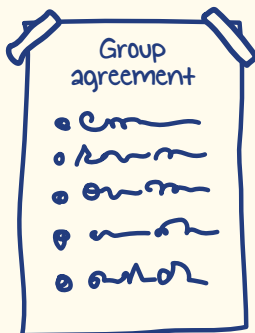
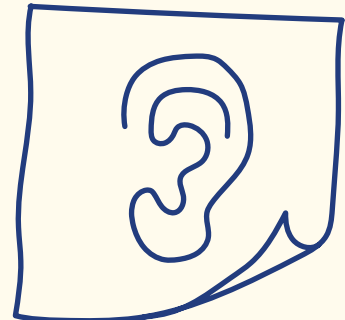
Ask the following questions to prompt ideas about how people can feel like they have choice and control.

- How can we make sure people feel comfortable dipping in and out of our group?
- Is what you discuss confidential, and what does that mean?
- What could we use to allow people to feed back without having to speak to the whole group?

3

As people make suggestions, write or draw them down, or ask people to write their suggestions on a sticky note. This way, people can contribute in the way that they prefer. For example, if someone says they need to listen to each other, you could draw an ear.

Once you have collected all the suggestions, read the list back to the group and agree which should become rules.



4

Put the agreement on the wall and tell the group that these are now the rules or norms of our safe space.

Ask the group: what happens if the rules are broken? Agree on these as a group.

Display the agreement at every meeting as a reminder and to promote their use.

5

Review and refresh the rules regularly to make sure they stay up to date.

Go through the rules with new members so that they're familiar with them and can contribute to them or raise any concerns.

Example agreement:

- Please don't talk about me outside the group.
- If something isn't working, say so.
- Be non-judgemental and respectful of each other.

See p.60 for another example of a group agreement.

Two-way interactions

What does this mean?

Peer support is something that people do together. The interaction is two-way and involves both people learning from each other and from their relationship. Sometimes one person might feel like they're giving or sharing with their peer, and on another occasion they might feel like they're being supported by them. But it is the reciprocity or mutuality in the relationship – the sense of 'doing peer support together' – that people find rewarding. Interactions between people in peer support always have the potential for both giving and receiving.

I like the fact that we're all helping each other... I think if you're signing up to do peer support... you do need to recognise that it is giving, and receiving, support.

...[Peer support] means being supported by equals, people like you. And by support I mean... having somebody with you who can make you feel better, feel like a proper human being, because there is somebody like you... [I]t's equal, so I might be supporting them and they might be supporting me. It's a mutual, equitable relationship.

Why is it important?

At the heart of peer support is a two-way commitment to share time together in the same space (physical or virtual). Peer support relationships operate in both directions and at any one time. This involves people sharing their own life experiences, and listening to others sharing theirs. When people feel able to share personal experiences with each other, they are able to build trust over time and feel valued. These supportive, trusting relationships form the basis of the human connections that people are able to make with each other in peer support. Equally, being listened to with care and attention can be a powerful experience for some peers.

It is the two-way interactions that make peer support different from other forms of mental health support. Where people have the potential to both be helped, and to help, it's possible to reduce the power differences that can occur. In helping other people, peers may be able to feel a sense of purpose while gaining some support for their own difficulties.

This value strongly depends on peers feeling safe, and having choice and control over how they participate. Peers should not feel that they are obliged to share or listen to anything that they find too difficult or upsetting on a given day. The way in which peers support, or are supported by, others will ebb and flow over time. Peers may not be engaged in two-way interactions all the time – what is important is that the environment is supportive of two-way interactions where peers want to have them.

What can it look like in practice?

There are many ways in which these interactions may be present in peer support:

- Sharing experiences and listening to other people's experiences.
- Sharing coping strategies and learning coping strategies from other peers.
- Listening carefully to people who may be speaking about difficult experiences.
- Performing simple gestures of kindness such as making a cup of tea for someone or sending a supportive message.
- Expressing patience, ensuring that people don't feel under pressure to share when they're not ready.
- Helping each other in practical ways, for example, helping each other fill in difficult forms.

Reflection questions



- What opportunities are there for everyone to share?
- How can people contribute if they don't feel comfortable talking in a group?
- How can we ensure that new members feel comfortable enough to contribute?
- How can we best work with each other to identify and develop our skills, strengths and interests?
- How often do people interrupt each other when speaking? How do people react when this happens?
- Are there facilities for peers to make each other tea or share refreshments?
- Do we need some training or discussion to help develop our listening skills?
- Do we need some training or discussion to help us share our views and experiences with others, in a way that is safe for us and helpful for others?

Activity 4: My portrait



The aim of this activity is to help groups get to know each other better and explore what group members would like to offer or share.

The best format for this activity will vary between different sets of people. Some may like to discuss it as a group but others may prefer to complete it on their own.

If you choose to complete this activity, discuss whether you want to keep the completed profiles or dispose of them.

1. Use the template on p.29 or your own format, in a group or in pairs, to help people ask others about their strengths, skills and interests.
2. If people are comfortable doing so, you could share these with one another.
3. Also talk about gestures that members would appreciate. This could be something someone could do to show that they care, or how members would like to be treated in certain situations.

Add an image that's important to you



Name

Jan

Skills, hobbies or things I like

I love reading detective novels.

I find listening to classic FM on the radio very relaxing.

I like baking cakes.

Skills I'd like to share

I would like to lead a walking session.

Simple gestures that Jan appreciates

A cup of tea - don't forget the 2 sugars!

Help with the internet.

If I am looking a bit fed up, ask me about my cats.

Activity 4: My portrait

Add an image that's important to you



Name

Kwame

Skills, hobbies or things I like

I enjoy gardening and being outside.
I like listening to the sport on radio 5 live.
I like dancing.

Skills I'd like to share

Making window boxes.

Simple gestures that Kwame appreciates

A cup of coffee (1 sugar no milk).

If I'm doodling, it doesn't mean I'm not listening.

If I am sitting on my own with my headphones on, leave me in peace. If I'm not wearing them though I like a chat.

Add an image that's important to you

Skills, hobbies or things I like

Name

Skills I'd like to share

Simple gestures that appreciates

Human connection

What does this mean?

People involved in peer support actively acknowledge that they have a specific connection with each other based on their shared experiences. These common experiences may help peers feel that they understand each other better than other people in their lives. Previous negative experiences can be put to a positive use through this connection.

Peers work together to create a warm, friendly, welcoming environment for everyone, and act with intentional kindness towards each other online or face-to-face. Peers understand, emotionally support, and care for each other. This generates a culture of companionship and belonging. Through their connection with each other, people may come to feel less isolated and that they are part of a supportive community.

If it's not caring and warm then people aren't going to come; or if they do, you're going to lose them straightaway. It's hard sometimes to keep people coming because their lives are quite rocky at the time. So we want it to be somewhere they can come and actually feel, "Well I go there, I get support. I feel better once I've been and that enables me to carry on living my life the best I can".

I don't really have, in the real world, anyone who can empathise with me... I've got no one in the same position as me, that is close to me, who understands. For me, that's a big part of [why I use online forums]...

Why is it important?

The human connection people may find through peer support is important for a number of reasons. Many people experiencing mental health problems may feel isolated in their day-to-day lives. The sense of connection, empathy, and understanding found through peer support can ease that sense of isolation. Over time, these connections may develop into a sense of community that may be missing in other parts of a person's life. This can help them feel like they're no longer alone with their difficulties.

Human connections are built in an environment where peers feel safe and have choice and control over what happens to them. Over time, peers who interact with each other in an equal and two directional way will develop genuine human connections with each other.

For many people, the relationships they develop within peer support feel genuine and authentic. Where peers express care or empathy for each other, these feelings are genuine, and for some people this may be one of the things that makes peer support effective. Because peers have experienced similar things, they feel they are understood when they speak and do not need to justify their feelings or experiences.

For some peers, this is a contrast to experiences they may have had in clinical environments, where the relationships are often conducted within rigid professional boundaries. In these clinical situations, some people find it difficult to fully explain their experiences, or may feel that they are not listened to carefully, understood, or taken seriously.

Relationships may develop into genuine friendships, which may involve people socialising outside the boundaries of the peer support space and exchanging personal details. Where this happens, it is important that there are guidelines about what peer friends may discuss outside of peer support, in order to remain safe and respect the privacy and confidentiality of other peers.

What can it look like in practice?

Peer support thrives in environments that are warm, friendly, and supportive. This does not happen by accident and is a great achievement by the people involved. It is often based on lots of little actions, such as:

- welcoming each other as they arrive
- making each other tea or sitting with each other over refreshments
- being kind to each other (and to themselves)

- being patient when someone is having difficulty expressing themselves
- offering each other practical help or support
- having everyday conversations about things that aren't necessarily peer support-related, where appropriate
- sharing jokes and funny stories
- getting to know each other's hobbies and interests.

Reflection questions



- Does everyone feel respected when they take part in peer support?
- How do relationships with other members change over time?
- What support is available to help people share difficult experiences, if they want to?
- Do people feel comfortable saying no?
- How can members show that they understand or are inspired when someone is sharing their experiences?
- Do we need training or discussion to develop our skills in helping others to speak openly and listen fully?

Activity 5: How we connect



The aim of this activity is to explore what behaviours or actions your group feel are appropriate in peer support, in a friendship, or never.

1. Use the cards on p.32, or write on sticky notes, to discuss different behaviours or actions. In which circumstances are these appropriate? In peer support, in friendships outside of peer support, or never?
2. Draw your own interlinking circles or use the template on p.33 to place the behaviours and actions into the three different categories.
3. By the end of the activity, you should be clearer about which behaviours and actions you feel are appropriate in a peer support setting and will support human connection in your group.

Activity 5: How we connect

Sharing jokes

Phone

Text

Talking about another member of the group

Email

Too much information (for example self-harm)

Sharing personal contact details

Connecting on social media

Lending money

Telling funny stories

Hug

Being kind

Making tea or coffee for each other

Getting to know each other's hobbies

Kiss on cheek

Other

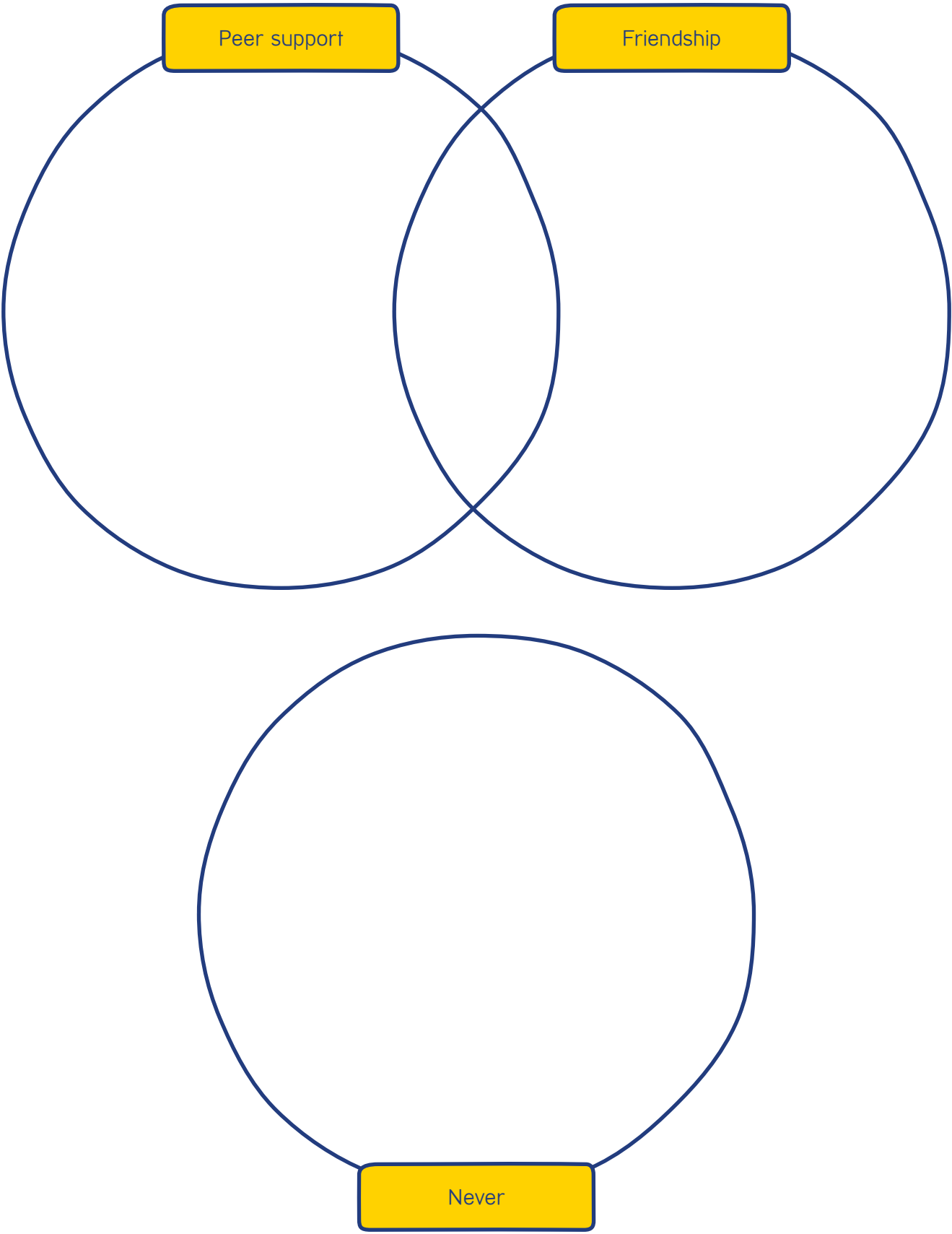
Other

Other

Other

Other

Activity 5: How we connect



Freedom to be oneself

What does this mean?

It's impossible to artificially generate a sense of freedom, but you can create the environment in which it can flourish. The ability to express ourselves freely, without fear of judgement, is necessary for people to be able to share difficult experiences. Not all of these discussions will directly relate to social and emotional distress.

The experience of feeling heard and understood in peer support is powerful. For this to happen, peers need a space in which it is okay to be vulnerable and talk about difficult experiences. Structures need to be in place to create this safe space, and this often involves ground rules that address the way peers behave towards each other.

For many people, peer support allows them to feel normal and accepted. This often contrasts to feeling different, stigmatised, or excluded in other aspects of life.

Peer support is good like that because you feel, once you get to know people, you can let your guard down a bit, which is lovely... It's probably the one place where you feel you can [do that]. So that's why I went to it and thought it was good.

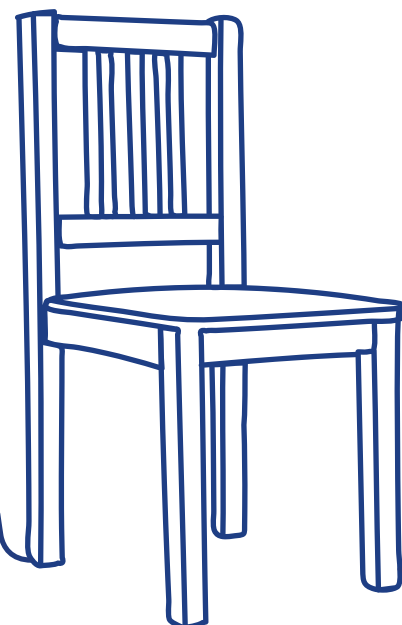
We can talk about any subject whatsoever. Nobody thinks you're odd, you're just you.

Why is it important?

Within the supportive environment of peer support, people may feel that they don't have to pretend that they're okay, or that things are better than they really are. It can be a great relief for some to be able to say that they're not coping, and know that they're in a supportive environment with others who know how that feels.

'Freedom to be oneself' is at the top of the values pyramid. It is unlikely that people will feel like they can truly be themselves in peer support if any of the other values are not in place. However, where peers feel understood, safe, and in control, they are likely to develop nurturing human connections through two-way interactions with their peers. This may enable them to feel like they can truly express themselves.

For this reason, it's important to think carefully about how you create safety and encourage people to feel that they have control over their own participation in peer support.



What can it look like in practice?

There are a number of factors that can enable peers to feel like they can express themselves freely:

- Being with peers who listen to them and respect their experiences.
- Being with peers who don't judge them for their mental health or for things that have happened in the past.
- Feeling like their experiences or difficult feelings are respected.
- Not feeling defined by their mental health experiences.
- Not being judged if some of the things they do are unusual or different.

Reflection questions



- How do we build trust between peers in our project?
- How do we show other people that they are respected and valued?
- How can we balance individual expression and the wishes or preferences of others?
- Are our activities culturally appropriate and accessible?
- What do we do to discuss and celebrate our uniqueness?

Activity 6: Barriers to being yourself



The aim of this activity is to identify what barriers there might be for people attending your group, and how they might be overcome.

1. Write barriers on sticky notes. These could be personal barriers or barriers that you think other people may experience.
2. Share these barriers by sticking them on a wall in a vertical row.
3. Work as a group to identify ways in which these barriers could be overcome. Write these ideas on sticky notes and stick them next to the barrier.

See p.35 for an example of this activity.

Activity 6: Barriers to being yourself

Barriers

Too many
people in the
room

Assumptions
about gender/
sexuality

First time
attending

Physical
barriers

How to overcome

Quiet/
separate
space

Discussion
about
language

'Buddy'

Make venue
accessible

Activity 7: How we act



The aim of this activity is to explore how our behaviours and interactions change in different situations and how group members would like to be able to behave at your peer support group.

1. In the boxes below, or in the format that works best for you, describe how you behave in the different situations. You can do this by drawing or writing, or you could script a conversation.
2. You may want to think about how you act when you are around different groups of people. When are you more or less comfortable? Do you talk to different people in different ways?
3. The final box is to explore how you would like to be able to act when you are taking part in peer support.
4. Use this to discuss how people can feel comfortable in the group and feel free to be themselves.

Relaxing with friends

Visiting the GP

On public transport

How I would like to be at peer support

Key decisions

When developing a new peer support project, a number of key decisions need to be made about how things will be organised. These decisions shape how peer support works and is experienced on the ground. This means that making different choices results in peer support projects that look quite different from each other but are still united by a common set of values.

This section explores the key decisions that peer support projects make. It will be helpful for people who are developing a new project but will also be useful for those with established projects to reflect on what they do. Some decisions may be made spontaneously, without much obvious 'planning' or 'deciding', and will seem natural. Others may need more careful consideration and discussion with peers.

Key decisions do not always have 'right' answers, rather they are about making the best choices for a project in a particular context. What is best will vary depending on the content, purpose and stage of development of your peer support group.

It is important to regularly revisit these decisions, even for well-established projects.

1

Facilitation and coordination (p.39). Will our peer support have a facilitator or coordinators? Who? Why? What kind of role?

.....

2

Type of leadership and decision-making (p.42). Are the people making decisions peers? Are people in leadership roles paid?

.....

3

Focus of peer support (p.46). Do we do activities? Do we invite people to talk to us about mental health or other topics of interest?

.....

4

Membership type (p.50). Who is our peer support for? How are people included?

.....

5

Organisational support (p.53). What kind of support do we have, or want?

Facilitation and coordination

Peer support projects range from those with an official facilitator or facilitators, to those which deliberately do not have a facilitator role.

In facilitated projects, a named person leads activities and is responsible for maintaining the safety of peers. This person can be a peer or non-peer, however it's important that peers are provided with opportunities to develop relevant skills and experience, so that they can take on these roles or aspects of these roles.

Facilitators can emerge from peer support activity as time goes on and people feel confident to undertake the role. The facilitator role can be a paid or a voluntary position – this is explored further in the section on types of leadership (p.42).

Responsibilities of the facilitator or facilitators may include:

- practical running of the project, such as booking venues, sending out meeting reminders, and organising refreshments
- facilitating activities and discussions happening within sessions – this includes ensuring that all peers feel included and that no one is dominating the conversation
- upholding safety guidelines and resolving any potential disagreements among peers
- information sharing and signposting to other available support.

In projects without facilitation, different people within the project may take on various organisational roles, so that facilitating and coordinating peer support becomes a collective responsibility.

There are benefits and drawbacks to including an official facilitator in your peer support project. Some peers may feel that assigning someone to take on this role goes against the ethos of peer support as a space where equals come together. Other peers may feel that a facilitator or coordinator can uphold safety guidelines and respond to any breaches of the group agreement, and this can help make peer support feel safer.

The decision of whether or not to have a facilitator will also depend on the shape and focus of your peer support. You might be running a more structured form of peer support – for example, where peers share their experiences through a system of speaking in rounds, or some kind of educational course. In these situations, there may be a greater need for a named facilitator to ensure the smooth running of the sessions, compared to peer support groups with a more social focus.

...[E]verybody is supposed to go there on an equal footing. There aren't any leaders. We all have to organise stuff and sort things out ourselves.

I think it's good [having a] facilitator to organise a date and put the dates in a diary, send the emails out and have a contact number that other members are aware of; just so [members] can ring or text that person to say "When is the next meeting?" or "Where is the next meeting?" From that point of view, I think it's just the logistics of the organisation.

Reflection questions



- What type of activities will we be running?
- What practical tasks will be involved?
- How much time will be taken up by weekly or monthly planning and organisational tasks?
- How willing and able are peers to share the organisational responsibilities among each other?
- What processes do we have in place to support the safety of peers? Do we need a nominated individual to uphold them?
- How will people taking on organisational roles or responsibilities be supported? For example, will they be supported by each other as a team, through links with other groups or facilitators, or by an umbrella organisation?
- What makes a good facilitator for our peer support?

Activity 8: Good facilitation

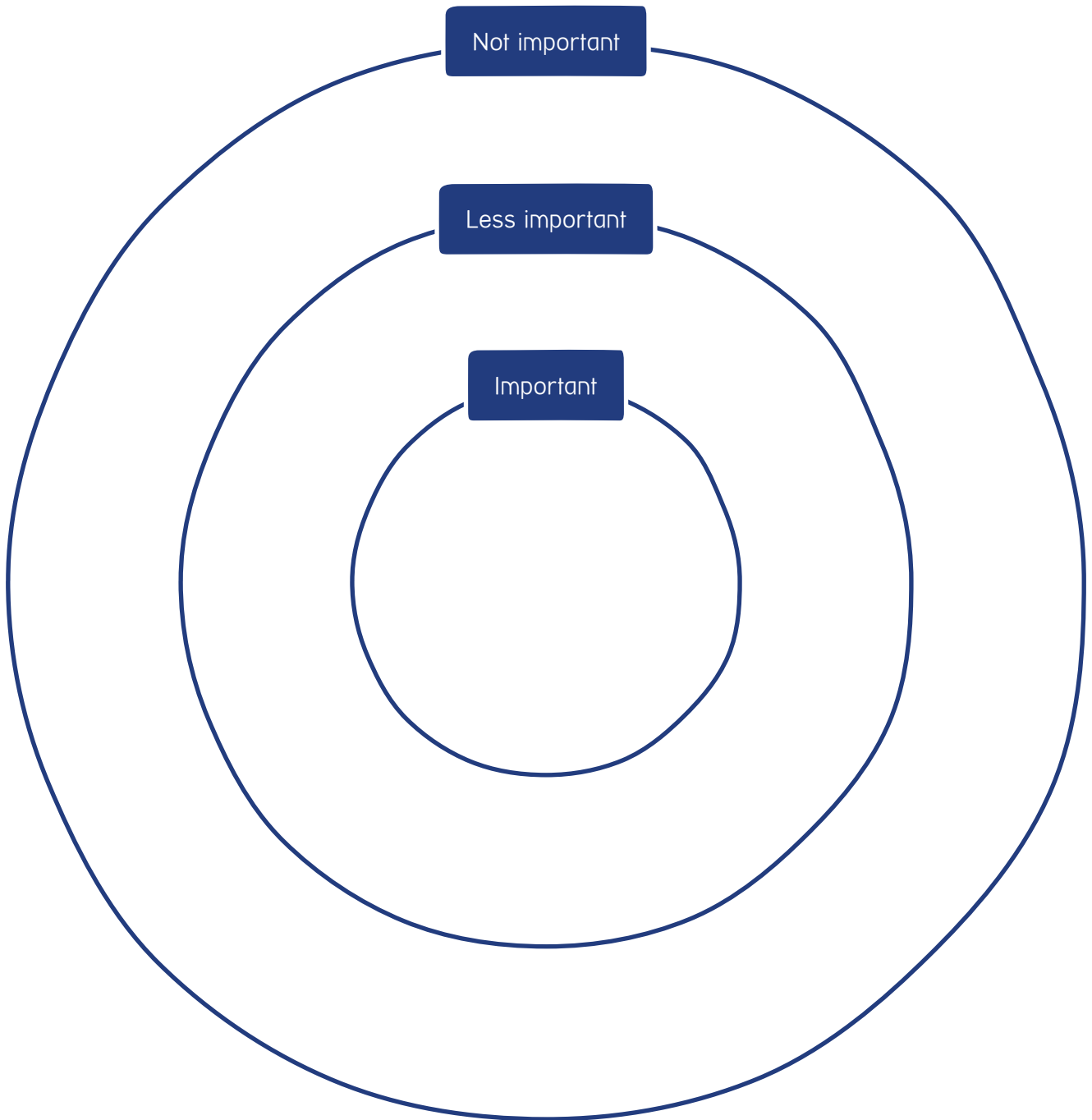


This activity is for people who have decided to have specific facilitator roles in their peer support. The aim of this activity is to explore what types of facilitation you need.

1. Using the diagram on the next page, describe the qualities that your group need, or would like, from facilitation. These should be placed in the 'not important', 'less important', and 'important' circles. You can use this diagram or draw it on a larger piece of paper. You could write the qualities directly onto the diagram or write them on sticky notes then stick them on.
2. You can use this completed diagram to help you with the next activity about types of leadership.

Activity 8: Good facilitation

What makes good facilitation?



Type of leadership and decision-making

Peer support can be organised around different types of leadership. If decisions about facilitation relate to the process of how peer support is run, leadership decisions relate to who makes the decisions and undertakes key roles and what characteristics they need to have. Leadership roles include facilitators but also other positions of responsibility, such as peer mentors, coordinators and managers.

...I think it's really important that, wherever possible, people who have been members of the group are coming through to lead the group because they'll have all the lived experience that you might look for in a facilitator. [What's important is] that experience of being part of the group and not just someone coming in and saying, "Well I'm going to lead it now because I'm paid to do it." ...That doesn't make you more qualified.

So I trained to be a facilitator as well, which was something that I wanted to do to help me give something back. I've been doing facilitating and also helping out at [name of organisation], working on the reception, working with the admin team to prepare packs for peer support groups and also taking part myself on an ongoing basis.

Designated leader or collective leadership?

You might decide that what works best for your particular peer support project is to not have a formal leadership structure. You could run your peer support using informal systems of leadership, where the majority of activities are performed on a collective basis. Everyone involved may receive some form of training in order to do this or you might decide that some basic guidelines, without formal training, are enough to ensure the smooth running of your peer support. Different choices will be better suited to different situations.

Peer or non-peer leadership?

When group members view those in leadership positions as peers, this can diminish barriers. Peer leaders' shared experiences of social and emotional distress can help build trust and emotional safety. Peer leaders can also role model active sharing of their mental health experiences for the wider group, which can give confidence to others to share.

On the other hand, peers might feel that peer support projects run by professional members of staff are 'safer'. For example, they might view professional staff as more reliable and accountable than peer leaders.

You might also decide that what is best suited to your peer support is a tiered leadership structure, where some of the leadership roles are taken on by peers while others are undertaken by non-peers.

Training or no training?

Training can make people in leadership positions better prepared for their role in peer support and equipped to handle any issues that might come up. Knowing that people in leadership positions have been trained for their role can also inspire confidence in peers. They might feel safer with leaders who know how to respond in difficult situations.

On the other hand, prolonged training can be expensive and delay the start of a peer support project or a leader taking on their role. An extensive training period can also limit access to leadership positions to those who have the time and capacity to take part in comprehensive training programmes, potentially excluding those in full-time employment and those with caring responsibilities.

Paid or voluntary?

This will depend on the financial resources you have available, but it should also reflect the nature of your peer support and type of leadership roles it involves.

People involved in one-to-one peer support might appreciate being supported by people who volunteer to spend time with them, rather than someone doing a job because they are being paid for it.

On the other hand, being over-reliant on volunteers to keep peer support going might make it less sustainable, as volunteers may move on to other opportunities, paid employment, or have other commitments. Having a group with both paid and voluntary roles may help to sustain peer support long term.





Designated leader or collective leadership?

- Does our peer support need designated leadership roles or could leadership responsibilities be taken on collectively by all peers?
- How will the roles and responsibilities be shared out? How will we decide who does what?
- What kind of leadership roles does our peer support need? For example, facilitators, mentors, befrienders?

Peer or non-peer leadership?

- Are there peers who are willing and able to take on leadership roles?
- Will the peers in our group respond better to a peer or non-peer leader?

Training or no training?

- What kind of skills are required to carry out the leadership roles?
- Do people in leadership positions already have some of those skills?
- Can we train existing leaders and peers aspiring to become leaders, or do we recruit leaders who already have the necessary skills?
- What resources can we put into training? This includes financial resources as well as skills and capacity to deliver training in-house.
- How much time can people in leadership positions commit to training?
- Who might be able to offer us this training or support?
- Do any organisations offer this training for free?

Paid or voluntary?

- What financial resources do we have for staff salaries and volunteer expenses?
- What type of leadership roles do we have in our peer support?
- How much responsibility are we asking people in leadership roles to take on?
- How much time are we expecting people to invest?
- How are the peers in our peer support likely to perceive people in leadership roles who are paid compared to those who volunteer?
- How will people in leadership roles be supported?

Activity 9: Leadership



The aim of this activity is to think a little further about the leadership required in your project. It will be easier if you have completed the diagram in activity 8 (pp.40–41), as your previous answers will help you with the four following questions. Discuss each question, writing down your thoughts if you wish to.

Types of leadership

1. Designated leader or collective leadership?

Do you feel the qualities you have identified can be found in one person, or would it be more useful to share out the roles needed? Are there roles that you could give to people who wish to develop their confidence and skills?

2. Peer or non-peer leadership?

Is it essential for the person or people in the leadership roles to also have shared experience of mental health difficulties? If so, why?

3. Training or no training?

What training might the people in leadership roles require?

4. Paid or voluntary?

Which roles should be paid and which voluntary? Why?

Focus of peer support

Peer support can take many different forms. What peer support sessions look like in practice can vary greatly depending on the project and the setting.

For example, the following forms of peer support will look very different:

- Meeting together to socialise in a public café.
- Meeting in a confidential space to actively share mental health experiences.
- Meeting to do an activity together, such as cooking or gardening.

The term 'focus' describes the primary activity of a peer support project. It refers to what people actually do when they come to peer support.

The focus of your project will depend on your specific aims and what suits the peers in your project best. You can choose to build your peer support around one particular area of activity; for example, by running a gardening group that meets once a week.

You can also have multiple focuses at the same time. You could:

- rotate what happens in your peer support from week to week (for example, knitting one week and an educational workshop the next), or
- set up peer support that includes different types of activities within the same overarching peer support project (for example, a gardening group, a social group, and an educational course happening on different days of the week).

...[T]here are different types of peer support; you have got your activity groups, the ongoing support groups and the social groups. These are more chances to check in every week with the same group of people to see how you are getting on; whereas the courses and workshops are more about something looked at by one group for an amount of time.

Social focus

Peer support with a social focus has an emphasis on informal socialising among peers, such as having a chat over a cup of tea. It allows people to come together with others who have similar experiences of mental health difficulties or social and emotional distress, without emphasising the active sharing of those experiences.

Mental health might come up as a topic of conversation from time to time, but the peer support sessions are not structured around discussing mental health. Some peers might prefer the informal and non-structured nature of this type of peer support, which can reduce isolation and provide an opportunity for meeting other peers without the pressure of having to share.

Some types of peer support with a social focus may avoid using mental health language completely, although they can still provide an opportunity for peers to talk about their experiences of social and emotional distress using other language, for example that of 'stress'.

Activity focus

Peer support with an activity focus brings peers together by involving them in an activity they can do together. This can include a wide range of activities such as:

- gardening
- running
- walking
- cooking
- knitting
- poetry
- painting
- different outings (for example, going to the cinema).

Activity-based peer support provides a similar non-pressurised environment for sharing personal experience of social and emotional distress. In contrast to peer support that focuses on socialising, activity-based peer support allows peers to focus on doing an activity and can reduce anxiety about having conversations with people they may not know well. This can be especially helpful for new members just joining peer support.

Activities can also provide an incentive for peers who might be anxious about getting involved, but may be attracted to peer support that includes their hobbies and interests.

Focus on sharing experiences of mental health

This type of peer support has a focus on peers coming together to share their experiences of social and emotional distress, normally by explicitly using mental health language rather than speaking about wellbeing or stress.

This can include discussion of:

- specific diagnoses
- effects of medication
- experiences of using services
- tips and coping mechanisms.

Peer support with this focus is usually run in a structured way – such as speaking one by one around the circle in the case of groups or allowing peer support pairs equal amounts of time to speak. This supports a balance between more vocal and less vocal members, and helps to ensure peers have equal opportunities to give and receive peer support.

Educational focus

Peer support with an educational focus has an emphasis on giving peers knowledge and information about mental health and a range of other issues that may impact on their wellbeing. A peer support project can have an educational focus as its primary aim or it can include occasional educational sessions within a broader framework of peer support.

You could develop a structured course with a designated number of sessions focused on particular mental health issues or particular skills related to managing social and emotional distress (for example, a course on managing anxiety). Alternatively, you could include one-off educational sessions on mental health in your peer support. Peer support with an educational focus can also address other issues that have an impact on the wellbeing of peers, such as physical health or benefits advice.

Reflection questions



- What are the aims of our peer support? For example, reducing social isolation, increasing peers' understanding of mental health difficulties, giving peers an opportunity to openly discuss their experiences?
- How do we communicate the aims of our peer support to others?
- How comfortable do peers feel about openly discussing their mental health with others? What would make people feel more comfortable doing this?
- Do peers share any common interests?
- Do we have the skills needed for running a particular type of peer support?
 - Can anyone within our organisational or peer team deliver educational courses, run particular activities, or facilitate discussions where peers may be discussing distressing experiences?
 - How can we help people share their talents?
 - Do we have resources to upskill people to be able to do this?
- What kind of venues do we have access to? Are these appropriate for the activities we want to do? For example, peer support with a focus on sharing mental health experiences will require a more confidential space than a social group.
- What is our budget? Can we link up with other groups to get access to venues, activities or expertise for free?

Activity 10: Common interests



The aim of this activity is to consider new activities for your peer support. You could do this activity individually then feed back together, or you could complete it together as a group.

On the next page, write down the things that you do in a week that you enjoy, what you don't enjoy and what's missing. 'What's missing' could be something you already do but would like to do more of, or something you don't currently get to do.

Finally as a group, consider whether you might bring the activities that you like or that are missing into your peer support in the future.

Activity 10: Common interests

Thursday
.....
What I enjoy

.....
What I don't enjoy

Wednesday
.....
What I enjoy

.....
What I don't enjoy

Tuesday
.....
What I enjoy

.....
What I don't enjoy

Monday
.....
What I enjoy

.....
What I don't enjoy

What's missing?

Sunday
.....
What I enjoy

.....
What I don't enjoy

Saturday
.....
What I enjoy

.....
What I don't enjoy

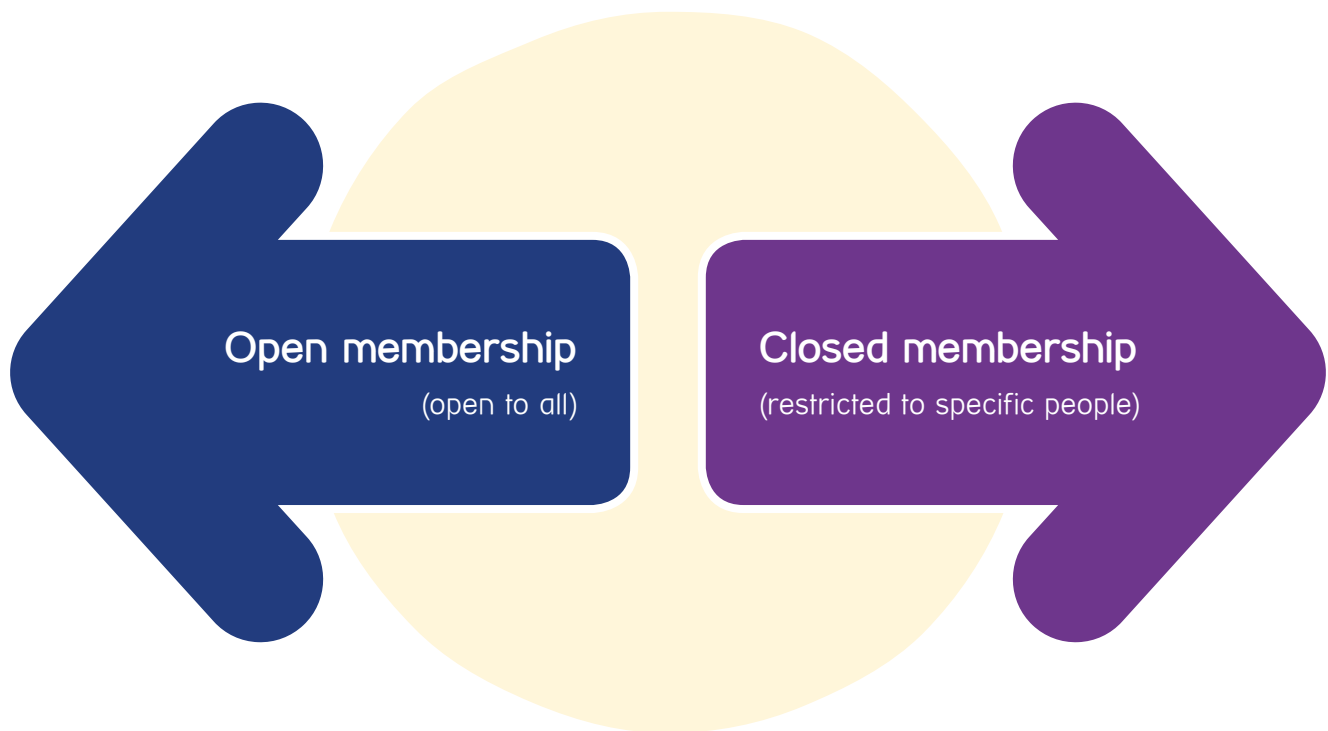
Friday
.....
What I enjoy

.....
What I don't enjoy

Membership type

Another decision you'll need to make is whether your peer support will be open to anyone experiencing social and emotional distress or whether you will restrict membership to particular groups of people. These criteria can specifically refer to mental health or include peers' other characteristics such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, migration status, and disability.

This decision is important because it will influence the form of your peer support and might also shape the content of activities. For example, peer support aimed at people with a particular mental health diagnosis might focus on openly discussing peers' experiences relating to that diagnosis, while a project restricting membership to refugees and migrants might have an emphasis on navigating UK government systems and discussing experiences of discrimination.



The poetry group... is a social group as well because it's open to anybody that wants to come in, [and] maybe dip in and dip out. And that's really helpful especially if there are some people who are feeling a bit down... [T]hey might bring poems that inspire them or help them get through the day even...

...[As] LGBT asylum seekers from repressive, homophobic countries, we are alone... Even our family can't help. The Government is the worst. So, here, knowing that [you are] an LGBT asylum seeker like them can help. [It's] therapy.

Type of mental health issue

You may decide to make your peer support available to anyone experiencing social and emotional distress or you might decide to set up peer support for people experiencing particular types of mental health issues (for example, people with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder).

This decision is about finding your balance between making your peer support open to a wide range of people and creating a space targeted to particular mental health issues. People with diagnoses that are commonly misunderstood might find it difficult to openly share their experiences in general mental health peer support, where not many others share those experiences.

Inclusion of carers

Some peer support projects might decide that they will allow carers (friends and family) to join their peer support. Some peers might find it helpful to be able to bring along their close ones.

On the other hand, peers might feel that including carers who don't have personal experience of social and emotional distress changes the nature of peer support and might make them feel less safe to share. If there are carers with experience of mental health difficulties, it might be worthwhile considering helping them to set up their own peer support group.

Identities and characteristics

This set of criteria relates to additional layers of common experience shaped by a person's identity and life circumstances, including gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity and migration status. You might decide you want to design peer support for people experiencing social and emotional distress who also identify with one or more of those identity aspects.

Sometimes this might be a practical decision, such as running a peer support group in people's native language if they have limited English language skills. Having clearly defined membership criteria may build trust among peers, making peer support feel more relevant and safe. However, defining your membership criteria based on different aspects of people's identity cannot guarantee that they will share common experiences.

Stage of recovery

Some peer support projects might decide to only accept members that have reached a certain stage of recovery if they want to ensure that peers are ready to engage productively with peer support. This might be especially important if you decide that your peer support will make use of a flat leadership structure, where all members are equally responsible for running the project.

This decision can also reflect concerns about the kinds of issues the group will realistically be able to deal with. For example, a peer support project may decide not to accept members who are currently in crisis, because it would not be able to support them appropriately.

Reflection questions



- Do we want to open up to as many people as possible or limit our peer support to particular people? What benefits and challenges might come with each of these decisions?
 - Are we able to support people with any experience, or only experience of specific types of issues?
 - How can we support people who do not fit these criteria?
 - How can we make new members feel welcome and get to know them better?
 - Would people find it helpful to bring carers along? What kind of tensions might this create? How would we manage these?
 - Do we want to address issues that are of particular relevance to men or women, LGBTQ+ people, people from minority ethnic communities, refugees and migrants, or people with disabilities? What do we need to do to address this?
- Do we want to make sure that people with limited English language skills are included? What skills and resources do we already have that can help with this?
 - Are there ways in which we are unintentionally excluding certain groups or communities? For example, what images are we using to promote our peer support?
 - Have we made it clear in our group agreement that we will treat all people with respect, even if we have different lives or backgrounds?
 - Does the setup of our peer support require training for peers to engage in it fully?
 - Do we need some outside support to help us think about these issues? Who could help us with this?

Activity 11: Group membership



If you have not already completed it, take a look at the membership activity on pp.15–17. This will help you think through who can take part in your peer support, who it isn't appropriate for and whether there are any people who may need extra support to take part.

Use this with the reflection questions to discuss how the group would like membership to work. Record the outcome of the discussion in the way that works best for the group.

It will be particularly important to ensure that you are all clear on why specific people are or aren't able to take part in the peer support, if this is the case.

Organisational support

Organisational support describes the extent to which peer support receives assistance from a lead organisation or runs independently of a lead organisation. Lead organisations can be national organisations, such as Mind or Bipolar UK, or smaller local or regional organisations, not necessarily specialising in mental health.

Peer support projects can be organised in different ways. Some work under the name of an umbrella organisation to which they are only loosely linked. Others are fully incorporated into an organisation and form part of its service delivery. This has an impact on the level of organisational involvement and support that they receive.

Decisions about organisational support can be approached from two perspectives. You'll be faced with making a different set of decisions depending on whether you are:

- **an existing organisation, such as a charity, looking to develop a peer support project.** In this situation, you might need to assess what resources you can put into developing a new peer support project and how much say you want to have in determining its structure.
- **an individual or group of people with lived experience of mental health difficulties looking for organisations who could support the setup of a peer support group.** Here, you may want to think about balancing the resources and support you gain against the degree of ownership you want to retain over your peer support.

I am pretty sure peer support happens out there, away from [the organisation], away from staff, and that people aren't aware sometimes about peer support. If there's a good circle of friends, or a choir group or whatever, I'm sure there are elements of that happening... Because this is specific for mental health, and it's set up as somewhere to go, it needs to have that structure... I'm not sure what the success would be without it.

...I don't think the meetings would be as structured... [We] wouldn't have the formal communication that goes out in the monthly newsletters, have that contact phone number to ring or text someone to find out if we are meeting or if the meeting's been cancelled, or if it's been moved. So yes, I think it's quite important to have that structure.

Infrastructure support

Lead organisations can provide practical support required for running a project that includes material resources and staff time. This includes:

- providing access to free venues
- providing activity resources (for example, art materials, gardening tools)
- coordinating communication (for example, sending reminders about meetings, advertising events in newsletters).

This type of practical support can allow peers to develop their own initiatives, when they might not otherwise be in a position to do so. Peer support strongly linked to lead organisations might also increase peers' access to other services such as an advice service or employment projects. On the other hand, peers might feel that a structure imposed by a lead organisation limits the extent to which they can adapt peer support to meet their needs and compromises peer ownership.

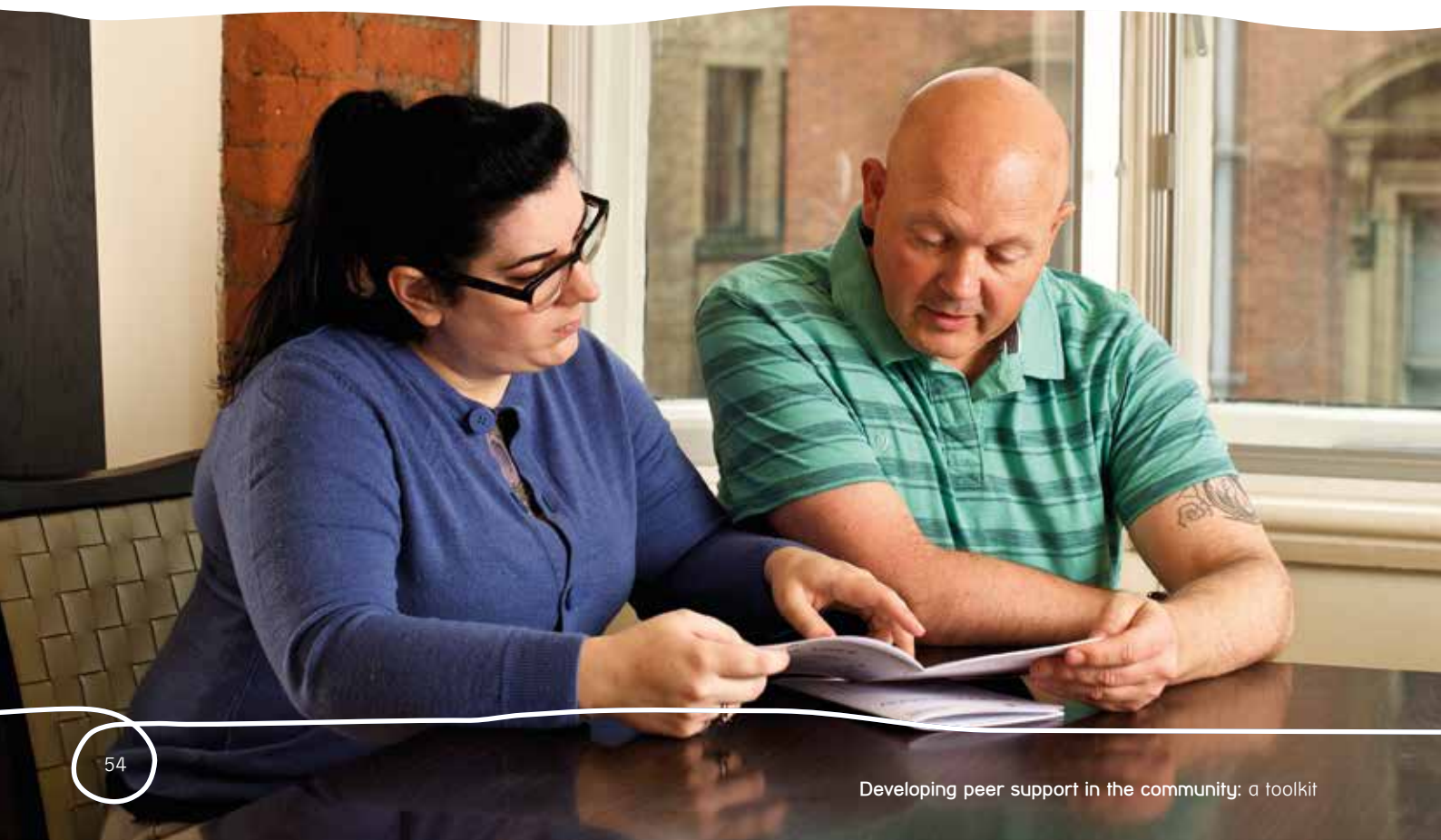
Safety structures

Being part of a wider organisational structure can provide peer support projects with clear lines of accountability and procedures relating to safety. This can include a list of safety guidelines developed by the lead organisation for all peer support projects connected with the organisation. Peers can find it reassuring to know who to turn to when they have concerns about another peer's safety or if they want to refer someone to additional support.

Training and supervision for peer leaders

An important element of organisational support is providing training and supervision to peers who are taking on leadership roles. This can include training peer leaders in facilitation techniques that will support the core values of peer support, such as safety, two-way relationship, and choice and control.

Supervision, which can take the form of one-to-one meetings with a manager in the lead organisation or facilitated group supervision meetings, allows peer leaders to discuss issues or concerns that might arise during their work as peer supporters.





What type of organisational support can our organisation offer?

- What kind of resources (financial, material, human) do we have available to invest into peer support?
- Do we want to develop our own project as part of our service delivery or do we want to support independent peer support initiatives?
- How much input do we want to have in the structure and content of projects we're supporting? For example, membership criteria, focus of peer support sessions, who fills leadership positions.
- What kind of training and supervision arrangements should we put in place?
- What kind of safety structures should we put in place?
- Who are our allies and partners who can help provide or share some of these organisational resources?

What type of organisational support does our peer support need?

- What benefits might affiliation with a lead organisation bring?
- How might affiliation with a lead organisation limit what we want to do?
- What type of support are we seeking? For example, financial and material resources (like free use of venues), safety guidelines, provision of training?
- Which type of lead organisation will fit best with our peer support? For example, a national mental health organisation, a local mental health organisation or a local organisation with a primary focus on other issues such as migration, disability or domestic violence? This will depend on how we define who our peer support is for.

Activity 12: Mapping your partners and resources



Think about the individuals, groups or organisations that have been helpful to your peer support in the past or could be helpful to you in the future. Discuss how each person or organisation could support your group. Use the cards on p.57, sticky notes, or write directly onto the circles on p.58. You might find it helpful to draw the circles on a large piece of paper.

These partners and resources will be different for every group or project. However, examples could include:

- your best friend
- your local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS)
- your library
- your council
- cafés nearby
- your local Mind or other local mental health organisations
- other peer support projects
- your funder at the local authority
- other local community and voluntary sector groups and organisations
- national organisations and websites that provide information and advice.

Once you have identified these resources and partners, consider:

- Which ones have been the most helpful?
- Which may be missing from the list?
- Which do you want to have a discussion with?

Activity 12: Mapping your partners and resources

<p>Example Local library</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Notice boards, meeting rooms, café</p>	<p>Example Local CVS</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Advice on developing a constitution, access to training, room hire, promote project</p>	<p>Example Other peer support project</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Advice, support, supervision from an experienced worker, share challenges</p>	<p>Example Local café</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Space to meet, access to tea and coffee</p>
<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>
<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>
<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>

Activity 12: Mapping your partners and resources

Potential future funders
and commissioners

Existing funders and commissioners

Existing partners

Carers, families and friends

Your group

Potential future partners

Troubleshooting - dealing with challenges

There are a number of things that can happen in peer support that can present a challenge to working together well and maintaining the core values. Here we list some of the problems we've thought about and some suggested solutions for them. We encourage you to add your own solutions as well.

Working with groups

The group agreement or ground rules can help manage many difficulties, if used well.

This means spending a session drawing it up, making sure that the whole group is involved in agreeing to it and giving everyone ownership of it. We recommend that you review it on a regular basis to keep it 'alive' and relevant, and to ensure that new members understand it. You can use the opportunity to ask if people would like to make changes.

We've included an example of a group agreement on p.60 to give you some things to think about. However it's essential that your group agreement is developed and owned by your peer support group.



Group agreement

What will help us work together?

Confidentiality

- Only share what you personally feel comfortable sharing.
- Don't share personal information about others discussed within the group without permission.

Communication

- Actively work to understand the perspective and experiences of others in the group.
- Allow for everyone to have their say.
- Humour – as long as it doesn't offend others.
- Try not to monopolise the discussion. Stay focused.
- Listen carefully to what others have to say.
- Everyone should be able to express how they feel without judgement.
- Respect other viewpoints and avoid dismissive and negative language.
- Be careful in the words that you choose. Avoid making personal attacks and using disrespectful language.
- Bounce and share ideas with each other.
- Don't use acronyms or abbreviations without explaining them.
- Take time to make sure you have the means and time for online communications.

Respect

- Challenge the view, not the person.
- Respect individual boundaries.
- Promote a relaxed feeling in the group.
- Allow individuality and value diversity.

Conduct

- Take time out if you need it – allow people to leave the group.
- Challenge discriminatory or oppressive behaviour.
- Come up with a way to challenge disruptive behaviour.
- Resolve disagreements within the group.
- Timekeeping – be punctual when joining online meetings.

With thanks to NSUN (National Survivor User Network).

nsun.org.uk

Finding a space for everyone to speak

There should be an opportunity for everyone to feel that they are heard or listened to.

You can achieve some aspects of this by providing activities designed to give everyone an opportunity to speak. You can use an icebreaker (see some examples on p.9), or you could start or finish a group with an opportunity for everyone to say how they're feeling.

Other methods which allow people to feel that they are being listened to are the use of a comments box, or a meeting feedback form.

If someone is silent in a group, it may be that they are simply listening and learning, waiting for a time when they feel safe enough to speak.

Where there are group members who tend to dominate conversations, it can be useful to remind them to allow others to have an opportunity to speak, referring to the group agreement to reinforce the request. There are other simple tactics for a facilitator to adopt in this situation, such as making no eye contact with the person who is dominating the group and moving the conversation on to another person or topic.

However, if it becomes very difficult to change this behaviour within the group, it may be helpful to take the person to one side outside of the group to find out what is troubling them and encourage them to listen to others.

Another method is to use a kind of game: introduce an item such as a shell into the group, with the rule that only the person holding the shell can speak. This can be fun if introduced occasionally and can alter the dynamics in a group.

Giving advice or being too directive

On occasion, people may become too directive with their peers and imply that they know what their peers should do in a particular situation.

Suggesting and sharing strategies is an important element of peer support, but it can cross a boundary and become too directive.

This should be discouraged as it may not be welcomed and is not in line with the ethos of peer support.

You can point to the values of peer support and encourage people to understand the need for everyone to retain choice and control and to reach their own decisions.

Breaches of confidentiality

Confidentiality is one of the most common ground rules for group work. It is also one that is often unintentionally broken by people who know each other and talk outside of the group. The use of a comment or suggestion box can help to identify this problem (and others).

Dealing with it is not so easy. You can of course point to the group agreement and remind people periodically of what they've all agreed to. It may also be useful to have a specific group discussion about what confidentiality means to everyone: people may have different understandings of what it means and how to make it work.

Aggressive behaviour

Some people may become aggressive during group discussions, perhaps when they are expressing strong feelings or in disagreement with another group member. Expressing anger can be entirely understandable and appropriate in some circumstances, but it is not acceptable for someone to become aggressive towards others as it could destroy the safety of the group.

Aggressive behaviour needs to be challenged. If it isn't, people may not feel safe to return to that peer support space. This is where it's really helpful to be able to refer to the group agreement and see if it covers this situation. If it doesn't, then it's time for the group to talk about what they consider to be appropriate behaviour and come to an agreement about what will happen if someone breaks the ground rules. It's important to be clear with everyone about what is not acceptable behaviour and agree to the sanctions together.

De-escalation training can be accessed online. Some simple de-escalation techniques include the following:

- Appear calm: adopt a neutral facial expression, avoid eye contact.
- Allow space around the person who is being aggressive: do not get too close.
- Control your breathing, lower your voice and keep an even tone.
- Try distraction strategies: engage the person in thinking about a solution.
- Acknowledge their feelings.
- Use words and phrases that de-escalate, such as: “I wonder if...”, “Let’s try...”, “It seems like...”, “Maybe we can...”
- Tell the person what you want them to do (making a positive statement), rather than what you don’t want them to do. For example, “Please sit down” rather than “Stop arguing with me”.
- Avoid backing them into a corner, either verbally or physically.

Remember: in order to maintain the safety of the peer support space, it’s more important that you are seen to address the situation than to ‘win’ an argument.

Responsibility for decision-making in groups

It can be difficult to encourage peers to participate in the shared decision-making of the group. Some people may feel that they have something important to contribute, but find it difficult to do so. Others may feel reluctant to take responsibility for the decisions of the group. This may make it difficult to make and implement important decisions.

If this becomes a problem, it may be helpful to discuss with peers how they would like decisions to be made (for example, voting or delegating different things to different people). As with most things, this should be reviewed from time to time as the group itself changes.

Lack of understanding around some difficulties or experiences

There are limits to how well people will understand each other’s difficulties. The fact that people share similar experiences does not mean that they share the same experiences. There will be a diversity of experience within a single group, even a group aimed at one particular mental health diagnosis. This may lead to people unintentionally saying things that are insensitive or demonstrate that they have not understood, which can be upsetting.

One way of addressing this is to run a discussion session around a particular topic, and invite a member of the group to contribute to this. This will help peers learn about issues they may not be familiar with.

Critical, judgmental or insensitive comments and lack of respect for differences

On occasion, peers may say things that are directly offensive, insensitive, critical or which demonstrate a lack of respect for other people in that peer support space. People may express racist, homophobic or other discriminatory views. This runs directly counter to several of the important values of peer support and is likely to severely compromise the safety of the peer support environment, particularly for members of marginalised communities.

It is vital that offensive or discriminatory views are challenged – and it may be that other members of the group will take part in challenging them. Your group agreement should refer to some of the values that will help with this such as: the need to be inclusive and non-discriminatory.

If this does not work, try talking to individuals outside the group to establish if their remarks are a result of a misunderstanding of the purpose of the group or of certain issues. You may need to consider whether this peer support is right for this individual if they continue to do this.

Peers looking after themselves

Everyone needs to both give and receive support within the peer support space, as this is the essence of peer support. But it may be difficult sometimes for people to get the balance right.

Giving too much support and not seeking support

Some people may find that they naturally take on a supporting role but have difficulty asking for support when they need it. This could lead to them feeling burnt out and unsupported.

It may be helpful to talk on a regular basis within the group about what everyone likes to do to look after themselves. You could encourage the group to think about what it means to take responsibility for our own wellbeing, how to ask for support when we need it and what that may look like in practice. It may be that there are some people who need occasional one-to-one support.

Sharing too much information too soon

Some people may feel pressure to talk about personal experiences before they are ready. Equally, some might find themselves oversharing due to the novelty of being in a group of people who are listening. Either way, it's possible for people to feel uncomfortable, distressed or exposed after doing this.

The group agreement and the peer support values can help with this. One of your ground rules could reflect the 'choice and control' value, making it clear that no one needs to share anything they don't want to. If someone has shared a lot about their personal experiences during a session, it can help to take them to one side afterwards and check if they're okay.

Hearing about difficult experiences can be upsetting

Some people may find that listening to the difficult experiences of others leads them to become distressed themselves – particularly if they share some things in common. This is an important part of the safety of peer support spaces. Feeling upset is understandable and an appropriate response to many situations. However, there can be times when it's difficult to hear certain things or to contain the feelings that arise.

It's helpful to have a few ideas for things to do in this situation. These might include:

- distraction exercises (whether physical or mental)
- inviting the group to think of strategies
- taking a break for a cup of tea.

It can help to be flexible about your finish time – booking the room for an hour longer than you need and being prepared to stay and talk to someone who is distressed. This may have financial implications.

Another issue to think about is that someone may wish to talk about feeling suicidal or wishing to self-harm. You might want to think about this in advance and agree as a group on how to deal with this situation should it arise. You may wish to put certain boundaries to this kind of conversation; for example, deciding that talking about methods of suicide or self-harm may not be appropriate in this environment.

As a project, you will also need to have a safeguarding approach in place for dealing with situations where there is risk of suicide, self-harm or harm to someone else. The facilitator or group members will also need to have access to support for debriefing after a session in which difficult issues are discussed, and to have someone to check out their assessment of the risk.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding means protecting people's health, wellbeing and human rights, and enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect.

There may be times where you are not sure what action you should take or you may need support and guidance about keeping everybody safe. For guidance and support, first contact your supervisor, line manager or relevant local organisation for advice. You can contact your local authority Safeguarding Adults Board, which is the local lead for safeguarding arrangements for adults with care and support needs.

Project logistics

Groups getting too big

The size of a group or project can be challenging where groups become too big. It may lead to group dynamics that are difficult to manage. People may find it hard to talk in front of too many people, and it may be hard for everyone to be heard in a large group.

It's important to engage the group in finding solutions. To some extent, your response to this will depend on resources. For example, you could:

- split the group into smaller groups during the same session, with volunteer facilitators
- offer peer support at different times in the week so that some peers may choose an alternative day.

Stigma of attending a 'mental health' group

If you're having trouble recruiting particular groups of people to your peer support project, it may be that some are finding the prospect of attending a 'mental health' peer support group to be off-putting.

It may help to publicise it as providing support with wellbeing or to address loneliness rather than as a 'mental health' project. Equally, online forums may be less stigmatising and more accessible for some people.

Top tips

1. Spend a session working together on your group agreement so that everyone feels that they own it. Don't be afraid to change it. Keep it alive and relevant by reviewing it regularly.
2. If you can, be flexible with timing your room bookings so that you have time to deal with any difficult situations that arise.
3. Work with the group to reach solutions wherever possible. This is what peer support is all about!
4. Welcome and engage new people with the group agreement so that they feel like they're fully part of the group.
5. Ensure that the facilitator (if there is one) has access to someone for debriefing after a session if difficult issues arise.
6. Try using a comments or suggestion box for people to raise issues anonymously.
7. Identify useful training resources that will help with difficult issues, such as dealing with aggression or safeguarding.

Understanding your impact

It's worth considering evaluating your project. Research has shown that peer support can improve many areas of people's lives.

However, people have different ideas about what the most important changes are – someone involved in giving and receiving peer support might have different ideas to someone

who is providing funding. This means that it can be difficult to know what to measure and how. However, it's useful to understand the impact of what you do, as this will help you make improvements and share your successes.

This does not need to take a lot of time or resources. This section talks you through the five key steps.

Step		Summary
1	What are you trying to achieve?	What difference would you like your activity to make?
2	What tools will you use?	How will you measure the change you want to see? Are there existing tools or questionnaires that might be useful?
3	How will you collect your information?	Who do you need to take part? When are you going to collect information from them? Who will be responsible?
4	How will you interpret what you've found?	Once you've collected your information, what are you going to do with it? How will you know what it's telling you?
5	How will you share your learning with others?	How are you going to share your learning with others who might be interested (your participants, your funder, other local Minds, etc.)?

Step 1: What are you trying to achieve?

Output: What are the things we'll do?

Outcome: What do we expect to change as a result of our work?

Most projects will achieve two different things: outputs and outcomes.

- Outputs describe the things you do.
- Outcomes are the things that change as a result of those activities.

It's important to collect and measure both of these things.

Output data is the simplest kind of data that can be collected. It's useful for understanding the progress and reach of your project (for example, how many people you've supported). However, output data does not provide direct evidence that anything has actually changed or whether you have been successful.

Your project may have an impact on different areas of a person's life. For example, an employment skills peer support group might help to improve participants' wellbeing, strengthen their social connections, improve their confidence, and help some to find new work. However, it's important to prioritise what you measure so that participants don't have to complete too many questions. You should also ensure that you don't measure things that are unlikely to change.

Example outputs	Example outcomes
Number of peer support sessions held	People have improved wellbeing
Number of group members	People have stronger social connections

Step 2: What tools will you use?

In the Side by Side research³, the following areas of change were found to be significant for people taking part in peer support:

- wellbeing
- hope for the future
- connections with others
- ability to make positive changes.

It might be worth considering measuring some of these areas in your evaluation.

It might be easiest to design your own questions to measure the impact of your project. You could ask participants to rate an aspect of their progress (for example, being more connected or more able to look after their own mental wellbeing) on a scale of one to five.

However, you may wish to use formal outcome tools or questionnaires that have been carefully developed and tested to reliably capture change for particular outcomes. They have the added benefit of producing results that are comparable with other projects that have also used the same questionnaire.

³ See [mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results](https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results).

These tools often have names that sound like jargon, but their questions have been specifically tested to make them easy to understand for participants. The following links take you to some of the most widely used (free) tools for measuring outcomes relevant to peer support:

Self-esteem	Social connection	Wellbeing
Rosenberg self-esteem scale yorku.ca/rokada/psycetest/rosenbrg.pdf	Multidimensional scale of perceived social support yorku.ca/rokada/psycetest/socsupp.pdf	The Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/1467-WEMWBS%20scale.pdf

You don't need to ask people to complete lots of questions, or do any statistical analysis. Simply collect the average of people's scores when they first started coming to your project, and then the average at a later point when there has been time for peer support to have an effect (for example, three or six months later). Then look to see whether the average has increased or decreased.

You may also want to ask questions about people's experience of peer support, as well as changes in how they're feeling. This feedback can help to improve the support on offer. You can ask these questions face-to-face, individually or in a group, or through a paper-based or online survey.

You can also add some quotes from this feedback to a report to a funder as a way of bringing your outputs and outcomes data to life. However it's important to make sure people have agreed that their words can be used, and be careful not to include any information that could identify someone without their explicit agreement.

Some example questions could include:

- Why did you choose to come to peer support?
- How would you describe the group to someone who has never been before?
- Would you recommend this group to someone who was feeling the same as you?
- What do you like best about this peer support group?
- If you could change one thing about the peer support group, what would it be?

Alongside statistical data, funders are often interested in learning about a project's impact through case studies. You can tell the story of the group or one or more individuals, with people being identifiable or anonymous as they choose. These stories can powerfully illustrate changes in people's lives in a way which is relatable to the audience.

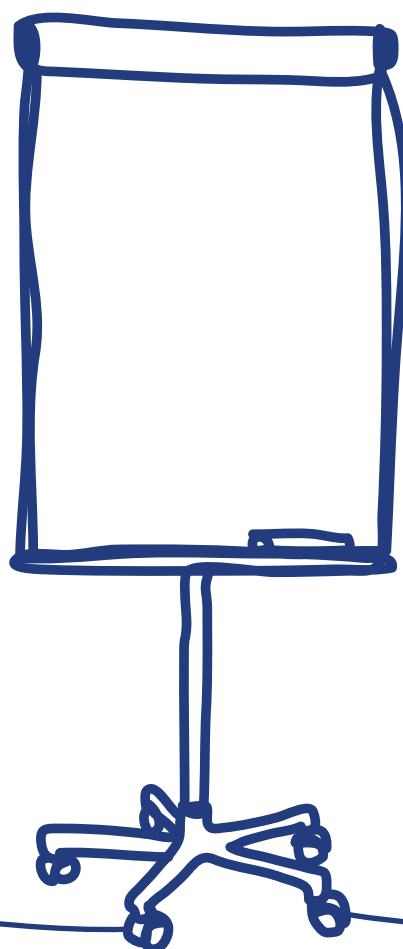
Step 3: How will you collect your information?

When you're measuring your impact, it's important to carefully plan your approach from the beginning of the project. Work out the simplest and most practical way to collect that information before your project begins, so you're not struggling to collect information once things have already started.

Here are some important factors to consider:

- **Why you're going to measure.** It's important to gain buy-in for measuring your impact from the group members at an early stage. Being clear about how you intend to use the evidence you collect will help with this. Also, it's a great way for people taking part in peer support to see potential gains made in their own health and wellbeing. Before collecting data, you'll need to get all participants' permission.
- **When you're going to measure.** Measuring before and after an activity will give you strong evidence of change, but it's not always possible. Instead, you could ask people at the end to reflect on whether something has changed.
- **How you're going to measure.** You need to think about how you're going to contact people, get the questionnaire to them, and make sure they return it. It's often easiest to get people to complete questionnaires while they're taking part in an activity, but this could be disruptive or time-consuming. If you're holding an individual or group discussion, how will you ask people to take part?
- **How much measurement you need to do.** How many different outcomes can you realistically measure? Do you need to include everybody involved in an activity? If you're working with a small number of people, you should try to involve them all. If you're working with a large number, you may want to select a sample.

- **Who is going to do the measurement.** Will it be the person running the activity, another team member, or an independent person? Make sure the person you choose has the time and skills. It's also important that they are trusted by your participants.
- **How the information will be stored.** Where will you store the information that you collect? Remember to take particular care about data protection, particularly as rules will be tightening from May 2018 (General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR). If you're collecting questionnaires on paper, will you need to enter this information into a computer? Who will do this and how long will it take?



Step 4: How will you interpret what you've found?

To understand what your data shows and learn from it, you'll need to interpret it. All analysis – no matter how complex or simple – is about looking for patterns.

For instance, you might look at the percentage of people who have shown an improvement as well as the average improvement shown. You may also want to compare data from different groups to see if you're having a different impact on different groups – such as men and women or those who started early in the project compared to those who joined later.

Don't be disappointed if you can't see a big improvement in scores. Lots of things are happening in people's lives aside from your project that can impact on their mental health, wellbeing, social connectedness or empowerment.

Interpreting your information does not need to be difficult, but it does take time. You must ensure that the time and resources needed for analysis are included in your project planning. You might be able to get help with this from universities, local voluntary sector organisations or other peer support groups who have experience of this.

Step 5: How will you share your learning with others?

One of the key benefits of measuring your impact is improving the work that you do. However, there will be others who will be interested in the things you have learnt. These will include your participants, your funder, other mental health organisations, etc.

Participants give their time to share their thoughts and experiences with you. It's important to feed back the things you've learnt and how you will act on the results. This doesn't have to be in the form of a written report. Some projects use coffee mornings or end of project celebration events to share their findings. These events can also be a good way of collecting ideas from participants about how to make further improvements.

Your impact measurement can play a key role in securing sustainable funding for your project. Therefore, it's helpful to plan to produce some early findings before the end of your project. You can use these to show the value of the work you're doing and help secure more resources.

Advice for funders and commissioners

The diversity of peer support is its strength, but it can also make it challenging to fund and commission. Our research⁴ has identified a number of important lessons to ensure that peer support is commissioned effectively.

- **Peer support improves people's sense of wellbeing, their ability to connect with others, increases their sense of hope and improves their ability to make decisions and take action.** Continue to support the voluntary sector to deliver peer support projects for people with mental health problems across age, gender, sexuality and ethnic background, meeting a vast range of needs and experiences.
- **Peer support services should be integrated into or offered alongside all mental health services across England and Wales.** Adequate resources are required to support these projects to continue being of high quality and sustainable long-term.
- **Our research has identified clear, evidence-based values underpinning successful community-based peer support.** We recommend that organisers, service providers and commissioners use these values to develop and commission peer support. These values reinforce those found in previous research and work carried out by groups and organisations leading peer support. This toolkit provides more practical resources to show how they can be put into practice.

- **Despite evidence that peer support is cost-effective, it is not cost-free.** Peer support can reduce healthcare costs. Individuals, groups and organisations can also benefit from coming together to share skills, experience and resources, offer mutual support, and collaborate. Financial resources are required to support this.
- **A range of peer support options should be provided, including projects for and by marginalised communities.** Our research has shown that marginalised communities benefit from projects where there are people with similar experiences, including shared cultural background (for example, experience of migration and racism).
- **All peer support should offer a range of opportunities and support to give people choice about the type of support they do and don't access.** This helps to increase people's sense of agency, and provides opportunities for people to develop, grow and gain confidence.
- **Peer support should be co-produced.** It's vital that people with lived experience of mental health problems lead or are fully involved in decision-making in all aspects of peer support project design and delivery. As well as developing projects that meet people's needs more directly, it's essential that people have opportunities to develop and grow.

⁴ A copy of our research can be found at [mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results](https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results).

Useful resources

There are many resources available to help your project. This section provides links to useful support, as well as space for you to record any other resources you might come across.

Background to peer support

You can read the research that was used to develop this toolkit on Mind's website. It includes detailed information about the impact of peer support, the values that make it unique, and the best ways to increase its availability at a local level.

mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/side-by-side/the-results

The 'Piecing Together the Jigsaw' report (2013) reviewed peer support practice across England and helped to shape the Side by Side programme.

mind.org.uk/media/418953/Peer-Support-Report-Peerfest-2013.pdf

Together for Mental Wellbeing has developed a Peer Support Charter that sets out some of the essential characteristics of peer support.

together-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2016/03/Peer-Support-Charter-FINAL.pdf

Together for Mental Wellbeing has also commissioned a number of useful peer support research reports.

together-uk.org/peer-support

Peer Fest is an annual celebration event that brings together a diverse range of people involved in peer support to share ideas, recognise success, and support one another.

mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/peerfest

The Health Foundation Q Improvement Labs are looking at ways to make peer support available to all.

health.org.uk/blog/q-lab-exploring-ways-make-peer-support-available-all

National Voices and Nesta report that peer support can help people feel more knowledgeable, confident and happy.

nationalvoices.org.uk/publications/our-publications/peer-support

The 'National Standards for Peer Support in HIV' report aims to create a benchmark for the HIV community in the delivery of peer support.

hivpeersupport.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/national_standards_final_web.pdf

Peer support in your area

You can find out what peer support is already happening near you using Mind's peer support directory.

mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/peer-support-directory

There are some regional groupings of peer support projects. For example, Teesside by Side offers networking and skills sharing opportunities for peer support projects in the North East.

teessidebyside.com

A number of online peer support communities are accessible 24/7. Mind's Elefriends community is one of the largest.

elefriends.org.uk

Getting started

Suffolk Mind has published a guide for new projects called 'Simple steps to start your own peer support group'.

mind.org.uk/media/4208527/9-peer-hub-tool-kit-leaflet-feb-16-pdf.pdf

Time to Change has produced a number of resources to help lived experience-led mental health projects get off the ground. This includes helpful films and case studies.

time-to-change.org.uk/resources/guides-and-toolkits/speak-out

Practical guidance

NCVO has shared almost 400 how-to guides which provide step-by-step guidance on a wide range of topics, including influencing local funders and commissioners. Their resources are free and you can even edit them, if you have a better idea to share.

knowhownonprofit.org/how-to

The Small Charities Coalition has developed lots of resources about finance, insurance, fundraising, marketing, venues, and much more.

smallcharities.org.uk/resources

Each local area will have different organisations and support available. Most local libraries, councils, and Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) keep great records about what is available in your area.

findmylibrary.co.uk

Funding and commissioning

Mind has a short guide to influencing local funders and commissioners.

mind.org.uk/media/4229238/influencing-commissioners.pdf

Regional Voices offers detailed guidance on voluntary organisations working with local health commissioners (clinical commissioning groups, or CCGs).

compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/engaging_with_clinical_commissioning_groups.pdf

Demonstrating your impact

The Inspiring Impact project provides helpful guides and example questionnaires to help small organisations measure their impact.

inspiringimpact.org

Your contacts

Resource	Contact details	Notes

Your notes

Notes

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Notes (cont.)

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