

What is Peer Support?

Peer support happens when people who have similar experiences of something difficult such as mental health problems come together to support each other.

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.

Core values

Experience in common - Peers share similar backgrounds, experiences, interests, or goals.

Safety – Peer support has structures in place to create Physical and Emotional Safety.

Creating guidelines or 'ground rules' to address issues such as confidentiality and how peers can behave respectfully towards each other.

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.

Choice and Control – Peers have choice and control in how they are involved in the 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.

Peers are jointly responsible for ground rules to guide behaviour.

Two-way interactions. Peers have opportunities to give and receive support.

Human connection. Peers develop meaningful connections with each other.

Freedom to be oneself. Peers feel able to express themselves, and be themselves in peer support.

A Peer who is new to the group should not feel that they have to say anything at all.

Anyone should be able to leave the group session early if they want to.

Two Way interactions

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.

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.

Human Connection

Peers work together to create a warm friendly, welcoming environment for everyone, and act with intentional kindness towards each other. 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.

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 and 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.

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.

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.

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.

Peer support can help people not feel defined by their mental health experience.

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.

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.

NOTES FROM NATIONAL MIND PUBLICATION – WITH THANKS.

The 'Group Agreement'.

We discussed these questions at the second group in May 2018 and came up with the current "Group Agreement Rules and Guidelines".

We will probably look at these and refresh annually.

What do we need to do to make sure everyone feels safe and comfortable in the group?

How can we make sure people feel comfortable dipping in and out of our group?

What could we use to allow people to feed back without having to speak to the whole group?

What do you understand about "confidentiality"?

What do you understand about "respect for others"?

What do you understand about non-judgemental?

What happens if the rules are broken?

In addition!

Why did you come to the group and what do you hope to get out of coming to it?

Have you any ideas as to what you would like to do at the group?