

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Peer Support Groups

Starting & Growing Your Group



Support Groups
Queensland

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS: STARTING AND GROWING YOUR GROUP

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Anniversary Edition

Celebrating 40 Years of Support Groups Queensland Inc.

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Foreword

Peer support groups are a beacon of hope for many people in need. They provide a safe space for individuals to share their stories and connect with others who understand and feel supported.

Creating a peer support group can be a rewarding experience, both personally and professionally. Getting a group up and running takes time, energy, and resources, but the rewards are worth it. The benefits of peer support groups are many and varied, and they can change lives.

Thank you for reading this e-book about peer support groups. We hope it is informative and helpful. Remember, if you need help, some people and organisations care and can provide support. You are not alone.

Please do not hesitate to contact Support Groups Queensland. We are always here to help.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

The Team at Support Groups Queensland

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Introduction

The diversity of support groups that connect with us is inspiring and amazing. Support Groups Queensland is connected to more than 1,200 groups. We hope this e-book will inspire you and your group. It may inspire you to start a group. This resource is drawn from our experiences built through supporting groups in Queensland since 1983 and our research evidence collection.

The superpower of peer support groups is to harness the power of togetherness to create a better life for all. But what exactly are peer support groups? They are groups of individuals with something in common, whether an experience, identity, health condition or set of circumstances. Members provide emotional, informational, and social support for one another as they work towards a shared goal. Sometimes, that goal is simply coping as best we can.

The concept of peer support isn't new. Humans have always come together in groups to learn and find collective solutions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in Australia have a strong, ancient tradition of yarning circles. We acknowledge Australia's Traditional Custodians and the value of their collective practice to our work today.

In the self-help movements of the 19th century, individuals banded together to address issues like women's suffrage. In the 20th century, 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) were based on peer support. In the 21st century, the need for people to support each other is still evident. With social isolation and mental health challenges, we must come together and support each other, sharing our experiences and creating a more supportive world for everyone.

Some of the most powerful peer support work has emerged from the mental health field. Peer support groups can be valuable because they provide a judgment-free space for people to come together and share their experiences when discussing their challenges in other settings has been difficult. When people realise they're not alone in their struggles, it can help to break down the barriers that keep them from seeking answers and mutual support.

This e-book is to help you to run or start a support group. You are not alone on this journey. We work across Queensland with people to start groups, and wherever you are, there will be options to get support in different ways. This e-book has been written to be informational and conversational. It will only answer some of your questions, but we hope it will be helpful to you and your support group.

Section 1: The Basics of a Peer Support Group

Support groups are formed to support people facing various health and wellbeing challenges. This includes groups for chronic conditions, grief support, cancer, disability, parenting, mental health, recovery from addiction, loneliness, rare diseases and many more. Each peer support group has different priorities and activities. However, all peer support groups want to provide a safe space for people to share their experiences, feelings and challenges with others going through similar things.

The Aims of a Peer Support Group

The aims of a peer support group vary. However, there are four common aims that all peer support groups share.

1. The first aim is to provide social connections. People meet others who have the same concern. Some groups share deep emotions and need many tissues. Some joke about things they can't share with family. Some don't talk about their illness – as everyone lives it daily. The underlying feeling is a sense of community and belonging.
2. The second aim is to find out new information. Peer support group members can share their experiences and knowledge to help others. This may be a helpful website or a significant discount in town. When everyone wants to know more about the same thing, they may call in a guest speaker or research the topic together.
3. The third aim is to build each other's capacity to manage their health or wellbeing concerns. Peers provide the nuts-and-bolts information for day-to-day living. For many people, the journey toward recovery can be long and difficult. However, peer support groups can offer hope and inspiration and help people see that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes, there is no light at the end of the tunnel, and peer groups can also help people with that.
4. The fourth and final aim is to build everyone's confidence to self-advocate. When you are in other spaces, you feel that you have the group backing you up. You can feel increased confidence to ask questions or explore options with a health professional. Sometimes, groups advocate together and may become a "patient-led organisation."

To summarise, a peer support group can offer social support practical information, promote wellbeing and grow advocacy. These are the four main goals that all peer support groups aim to achieve. Often, support groups tell us that they focus just on

one or two of these aims. However, with more questions, it becomes clear that most groups advance all four of these, even if they haven't formally recognised all they do.

The Underlying Concepts of a Peer Support Group

Some concepts of human behaviour can assist our understanding of peer support processes.

The Helper Theory Principle

Frank Reissman, from Columbia University, outlined the "helper principle" while studying AA in the 1960s. He found that members actively helping others stay sober were likelier to stay sober themselves. In other words, the act of helping someone else achieve their goal made it more likely that the helper would achieve their own goal.

Reisman theorised that when we help others, we're reminded of our struggles and how far we've come. This reminder strengthens our resolve to stay on track and achieve our goals. Additionally, seeing someone else succeed makes us realise that success is possible and spurs us to achieve our goals.

The Social Comparison Theory

Another principle at work inside peer support groups is the social comparison theory. This theory, first put forward by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, proposes that we humans compare ourselves to others. We do this to determine where we stand in relation to others and assess whether we're doing better or worse than them.

Social comparison theory suggests that seeing other members achieve their goals will motivate us to achieve our own goals. Hearing about another's struggles will remind us of our struggles and how far we've come. This reminder can give us the boost we need to stay on track.

It's important to recognise that people's perceptions of how they are doing compared to others reflect both subjective measurement and their internal state. When we feel "bad", we can perceive ourselves as "worse" than we are. Thus, comparing ourselves to others can have both positive and negative effects. In groups, comparisons must be challenged when they could lead to negative thoughts and feelings. When someone compares themselves to another negatively, it can be a talking point to challenge people's perceptions of themselves and lower the voice of the "inner critic".

The Social Cure Theory

Social supports are emerging as highly protective factors against mortality and ill health. Social prescribing by the health sector is a growing phenomenon. Loneliness is a health risk “comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes daily” (Dr Vivek Murthy, US Surgeon General). Having a regular group where you belong is thus fulfilling a basic human need.

The Values of Support Groups

Support groups often develop their values or underlying ethics as a group process. Sometimes, they use values that have been designed for all groups that are like them. Common themes are respect, safety, listening and confidentiality. One example that we use is the acronym PRICELESS. You will find it at the end of this e-book.

Sometimes, groups start every meeting with a reminder of their values. Some groups explore and confirm/change their values at set times. Some groups only revisit their values when one or some group members feel that the group needs a reminder.

The Mediums of Support Groups

Support groups can meet using many different meeting arrangements. The most popular form (as reported in studies of participants) is still the in-person support group, where members meet up in person to discuss their experiences and provide support to one another.



An in-person group allows for casual conversations, hearing about other local events and visiting co-located services. Occasionally, a conversation in the car park runs longer than the meeting.

With the advent of the internet, there has been a shift towards online support groups. Online support groups have some advantages over in-person groups, such as being more accessible (people can join from both urban and regional areas), being anonymous, and extended availability (sometimes groups have messaging 24/7). Online groups have proved particularly powerful for people with rare conditions, who sometimes have only a handful of peers worldwide. Online also can connect people who face increased health risks from their condition if they participate in person. Some groups started, and remain, a teleconference group – low vision groups find this medium comfortable and practical.

Morning tea (or coffee) is an important sharing ritual.

There are also hybrid support groups, which combine elements of both in-person and online groups. Group members can come in person or online, particularly when ill or facing transport challenges. Some support groups meet in person once a month but also have an active online forum that members can access between meetings.

The golden rule of online meetings is CHECK THE TECH! Start a bit early and make sure you have good technology support. Sometimes, this can be sourced from outside your group. Try to have a way that people with problems connecting can be supported, whether a mobile number or a user guide. Everyone uses different connections and devices, and supporting all variations is challenging. Even with a group of tech-savvy people, technical difficulties still need to improve.

While all groups need deep listening skills, online spaces need work to ensure good communication, as other cues can be missing or hidden. If you speak to a low-vision group as a sighted person, you quickly realise how often you nod or smile.

Consider what medium might work best for your people when starting a group. Where is their comfort zone right now? How could you increase that comfort zone to change the medium?

The Frequency of Peer Support Group Meetings & Check-ins

Peer support groups can meet every day, once a month, once a quarter or at any frequency that works for them. Generally, groups supporting major behavioural change processes need to meet more frequently.

Sometimes, groups have both social get-togethers as well as more formal meetings. Some members might also contact each other via group chat or individually between meetings. This contact needs to manage privacy and be part of a collective agreement about how people will connect. It also may be necessary to involve more support in using phone apps, as there are many ways to set up these options now so individuals can choose when and to whom to connect.

Some of our support groups schedule other check-ins, members with each other, a phone tree, or members with other external health supports. Some groups have a roster of support for when a member is hospitalised. Some groups stay completely anonymous. There is no one way, but all group members must understand when, how, and why their group connects.

The Membership of a Support Group

The makeup of a peer support group will vary depending on the type of group it is. For example, parent support groups have members who are all parents, while cancer support groups will have members who are all cancer survivors or currently undergoing treatment. Some groups welcome carers, family, and the person with the health concern, but others prefer to be on their own.

The group should make this decision about membership. The formats have different possibilities. For example, if a person wants to share their worry about being a burden to a family member, it will be a different conversation if the person is present or absent. Both conversations could be powerful but are likely to be different.

The Size of a Support Group

Peer support groups can be any size, from a few people to large patient-led organisations of thousands. The average size of a peer support group is usually around 4-12 people.

There is no right size for a support group. However, as groups grow, group dynamics become more complex, and the group may require more formal processes to work effectively. There are limits to the number of relationships our human brain can manage; [refer to Dunbar's number](#).

The best patient-led organisations demonstrate a strong commitment to forming small groups of mutual support led by people with health issues. One critical consideration an organisation needs is: Who will be available after the workers go home?

Another consideration is power. A large organisation has expert power and the power to control many group elements. With peer groups, shared and equal power is an important principle. However, having a home base and being supported by professionals can provide strong resources for a group. Large organisations can have concerns about quality control and risk. However, all humans face risks every day – driving, social media and many more. Administrative controls should not be an excuse to limit the agency of people facing their issues together. Risks can be discussed and recognised as a joint learning experience.

The Leadership of a Peer Support Group

Today's society often describes Leadership as a ONE-person identity: the Captain, the Chairperson, the Founder, and the Conductor. However, a group is, by definition, more than one person. Some support groups operate entirely by consensus and actively avoid having one person take the lead. Others have a set moderator or sometimes pay for a facilitator, but they have set out together what the group will do before this. Some groups rotate the roles amongst the members.

Sometimes, a single person has emerged as coordinating and leading the group. We have worked with some amazing people in this role. However, the weakness of this approach is that the group might not survive if this person needs to disengage. Another weakness is that one person can quickly become overloaded when the group has high needs.

We encourage sharing and backing up all group roles, including the duties usually grouped as a leader does. Often, in support groups, a person taking the lead is still on their recovery journey. One check-in question we ask of group "leaders" is: How is your *health going? Are you improving/stable?*

Often, the idea that a group needs a "strong leader" is based on experiences at work or other formal settings. However, a support group can be much more collective, and everyone in the group needs to take some leadership responsibility for the processes of the group. Group members can all contribute based on their skills, based on challenging themselves in new ways and their capacity.

Everyone in a group particularly needs to take responsibility for time management, not just the facilitator. Don't turn your group leader into "the bossy one" who always asks people to stop talking. It is also important that the leader is not viewed as the person with all the answers; tap into the full power of all the group members' knowledge.



Safety for a support group – creating a "safe space".

This can be a difficult process to unpack and achieve. Many services use the word "safe", but we cannot determine that for another person. Everyone feels safe in their way.

*Safety is an ongoing process.
Reflect and spend time and effort
to try to create the safest place
that you can.*

In 2023, Support Groups Queensland has done a significant review of how to be trauma-informed in group settings. We particularly acknowledge the wisdom of [The Seedling Group](#), many trauma specialists and the funding of Brisbane South PHN in this work.

We need to support our groups with the understanding that everyone is likely to have experienced trauma. The human responses to a threat are Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Befriend (Fawn). It is normal for someone to respond in one of these ways when they feel in danger, and the danger can be honest, remembered, or perceived.

Just a few processes to think about are:

- Remember the stress of being the “new person” in your experience. How can you ease someone into your space? Ask your group for their ideas.
- People need to feel safe both to share or not to share. How can this happen in your group?
- What do you do to assist someone through a threat response? Do you use breathing, grounding, or check-in exercises? Do you have a space for people to step out and be supported?

Safety is an ongoing process; reflect and spend time and effort trying to create the safest place. This is rewarding. Imagine you see someone enter with tense body language and agitation, and then once the group gets going, their shoulders have dropped, and you can see the change. We have witnessed this on many occasions.

Trauma-Informed Practice

Health practitioners play a critical role in supporting individuals who have experienced trauma. These are a few ways we can add the values of trauma-informed care into our daily practice.

- Consider how the space you work in could be more private, hospitable and comfortable
- Check-in on how your client feels, and check in on yourself too.
- Display trauma-informed resources.

Safety



- Communicate clearly what to expect from their time with you before the appointment.
- Be consistent and reliable.
- Be aware of implicit bias and non-verbal communication. It is important to present a non-judgemental attitude.

Trust



Choice



- Provide clear information on the risks and benefits of the options presented.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all solutions. Engage in learning that diversifies your interventions.
- Share resources like available social support groups, coping strategies and helpful links.

Empower

- Identify the individual's strengths when listening to them.
- Focus on what they *can* do and keep them informed on appropriate ways to recover, cope or manage.
- Provide psychoeducation
- Acknowledge and respond gently to their feelings and concerns.

Cultural Safety

- Recognise and respect that people have distinct values, beliefs, customs, and communication styles. Ensure that culturally appropriate support services like interpreters are available.
- Be aware of systemic barriers. Check with the individual that the interventions suggested are accessible and sustainable for them.
- When seeking more information. Try keeping questions open-ended and non-judgemental.

Section 2: Setting Up a Support Group

The support groups we see around us today are one of many options for people seeking peer support. Other types of peer processes and recovery tools aim to support people through their health journey. This chapter will explore the steps necessary to start a peer support group from scratch, but sometimes, we advise people that a support group may not be the best answer for them.

Weighing the Options: New vs. Existing Groups

When people think about starting a peer support group, they often assume they need to start from scratch. However, this is only sometimes the case. In some instances, joining an existing group or revitalising a group that has become inactive may be more feasible.

It can also be possible to boost an existing group when new but related health conditions emerge. It is possible to join a group with a broad mission, such as a disability, rather than start a specialised group. Test out some groups so that you know what the options are.

Before making a decision, it's important to weigh the pros and cons of each option. For example, starting a new group will allow you to tailor the group to meet your specific needs. However, getting a new group off the ground can be time-consuming and challenging. An existing group may connect you to a great network. Ensuring the existing group is a good fit for your needs is important.

In either case, there's a responsibility of belonging. Change can be challenging, but when everyone is treated respectfully, we can all take on new ways of doing things.

Identifying the Need

As soon as you find a few people with the exact needs, you can start to meet and support each other like any friendship group. However, you may start to feel that you want to find more people to join you. There may be a larger need to explore with your community.

Once you ask people what they need, consider that they might be thinking differently than you about a group. How are you going to manage this? People get excited about the possibilities by asking about their interest in starting or running a group. Can you manage their expectations?

Some options to explore what people need are:

Conducting a Needs Assessment - A needs assessment is a systematic process for gathering and analysing information to identify unmet needs within a community. There are many ways to conduct a needs assessment, but all will involve some elements of surveys, interviews, focus groups, and/or data collection.

Surveying the Community - This can be done through paper surveys that are distributed in a place where your target people go or through online platforms such as Survey Monkey or Facebook. Surveys are a great way to get a snapshot of people's thinking, but they have limitations. For example, people may not be willing to answer specific questions truthfully or know enough about the topic to give an informed answer.

Focus Groups - A focus group is an interview involving a small group of people (usually 6-10) who are brought together to discuss a particular topic. Focus groups can be moderated by a trained facilitator and usually last for 1-2 hours. Focus groups are a great way to get rich, detailed information about people's thoughts and feelings on a particular topic. They are also helpful for exploring sensitive topics that people may not be comfortable discussing in one-on-one interviews.

Strategising and Planning

Once the data from the needs assessment has been collected and analysed, it's time to start planning the peer support group. This is where you'll need to decide on the group's purpose, who will be eligible to participate, how often the group will meet, and what format the meetings will take.

The most common way to do this is to form a steering committee. This group of people will be responsible for planning and organising the peer support group. The steering committee may include representatives from the community, local service providers or other interested people who may be involved with the group. However, people with lived experience should make up the core development group.

This is a formal style, but three people around a kitchen table are still a group. Another process would be to start informally and grow organically, but it is important to keep checking that you all want the same thing. Sometimes, groups split into different groups when this happens. This can be a positive thing with good communication for different priorities to be a focus rather than an adversarial move. It is known as a closed group when people don't reach out and invite others into a

group. We know of many successful closed groups, and this form of group may be the one you choose.

Reaching Out for Local Support

The involvement of the community can be a wonderful resource for your group. Therefore, it's important to reach out to local organisations and individuals to help plan and organise the group. This may include asking for meeting space, promotion, fund-raising, subject expertise, and back-up on topics outside the group's purpose.

Some organisations that may be willing to help include local businesses, faith-based organisations, neighbourhood centres, libraries, schools, or health centres. Local support has many benefits. It helps with the logistics of getting the group off the ground, sends a message to the community that there is a need for this type of support, and builds word-of-mouth marketing about your group.

Planning the First Meeting

The first peer support group meeting is an opportunity to set the tone for the group and get people engaged and excited about participating. Therefore, it's important to put some thought into planning the meeting.

You'll need to consider the venue, the lead person or people, the promotion of your meeting, the format and scheduling. Let's look at each of these in a little more detail.

The meeting venue is important because it will set the tone for the group. For example, if you plan on having a small, intimate group, you may want to hold the meeting in a coffee shop or a local park. If you're expecting a large turnout, you'll need to find a space to accommodate everyone. An accessible, right-sized public space can be difficult to secure but creates a good first impression. It can be good to meet where people are already there, for example, a hospital meeting room. However, this might also be a space people want to avoid. People might want to meet somewhere where no one will know why they are going, or they might want to meet somewhere where their group and purpose are visible.

Who and how to lead the meeting is also an important consideration. If you are the main person wanting to start the group, you might want to manage the agenda. Alternatively, it may be better to have someone else lead the meeting so you can engage in the content like other people attending. This will depend on the size and structure of the group – more people often mean more formal processes.

Promoting the meeting is also crucial to its success, but you might want to start small and not promote your group too quickly. It is OK to start small and to stay

small. Some ways to promote the meeting include posting flyers in local businesses, putting an announcement in the local newspaper, online using social media and via spaces where your health challenge is a visible issue.

There are a few different format options you can choose from. For example, you can have a panel discussion, a guest speaker, an open forum, or freestyle storytelling. You can have a very set agenda or keep it open. The format you choose will depend on your health challenge, the type of group you're planning, and the available resources.

Finally, you'll need to consider how scheduling and time management will be done. This is especially important if you're expecting a large turnout. Some things to consider include:

1. When will the meeting be held?
2. How long will it last?
3. What is the agenda for the meeting?
4. Who will be responsible for keeping track of time?

By planning the first meeting carefully, you can set the stage for a successful and engaging peer support group.

Section 3: Running a Support Group

Once the support group is set up, the real challenge begins with regular gatherings. It's important to have systems and processes in place to ensure things run smoothly. Some support groups need a strong structure because of the health condition of their members; other groups can be very informal and variable.

Anatomy of a Support Group Meeting

We call this topic the anatomy of a meeting rather than "an agenda". A support group is not a work meeting with a "stick to the agenda" focus. Many groups work best with a flexible and adaptable style. All support groups have their flavour, but most meetings have this basic anatomy:

1. Welcome
2. Check-in or catch-up processes
3. An activity discussion or topic
4. A mid-way break.
5. Reflection or check-out
6. Plan the next time.
7. Close.

As a respectful and important tradition, all meetings in Australia should include an Acknowledgment of Country in their welcome. There is no specific wording, which can be done in many ways. The key principles are sincerity and respect.

Sometimes, the meeting welcomes new people, or everyone says their names, or sometimes we have icebreaker games or warm-up activities. Some groups link the warm-up activity to the main meeting event to keep a theme going across the meeting.

You may have to arrange the chairs or put out signs in different spaces. It is important to have some group members agree that they will do these jobs. A rotating roster is not always the best option. Sometimes, one person likes to be early and wants to be this person. When you have someone who finds it hard to get to the meeting at the start, ask them to do another job that plays to their strengths rather than press them to be the early bird.

Check-ins can be short or be a major part of the meeting. If there are many people, there is the option of one-word check-ins or splitting into small groups so that each person gets more time to share. A check-in can be with yourself and silent, using

mindfulness drawing or breathing. It can be different, rotated around the group or the same every time.

There is a difference between checking in (how are you feeling right now in your mind and body) and catching up (what has happened for you this week). Both are useful processes; consider how your work matches the group's main purpose.

The activity will reflect the core purpose of the group. It might be a discussion or not involve talking at all. Singing, meditation, games, craft ... there are many different options.



Some ways, we've engaged in the arts,

A midway break for people to stretch and move about is important in all settings. The break can be long, short or more than one, depending upon the group context.

Reflection is a process of thinking back about the content, your feelings, energy, or learnings of the meeting. It can be simple – *I felt happy to see everyone again today* - or a more detailed and intensive process. Still, when a group consciously makes the time to review itself, it can create more impact to carry forward and lead to an early warning if something is getting off track.

Announcements for the next meeting are a great way of preparing in advance. Sometimes jobs are allocated, people are excited to see a plan coming together, sometimes they choose not to come, and some invite an extra person. All these outcomes are helpful for the group.

Some groups have a special way to close their meeting every time, which becomes a ritual. Other times, it can be that *we're finishing now; the room is booked but stay and talk outside if you want to.*

A food and drink option can be at the beginning, middle or end. Or not at all. Or all of these. All options have different strengths and weaknesses. Starting around the

kitchen can create a more informal and gentle start. Or it can relax people after a focused activity. Or it allows people to chat for as long as they like. Think carefully about these arrangements. For example, one group decided that a healthy shared lunch after the meeting was critical for their people. Another decided that their people can't manage long concentration times and have several breaks of different kinds. There are also catering, dietary requirements, food safety and other triggers involved in this option. All can be managed but need several supports to be in place.

Roles & Responsibilities

Everyone should have a clear understanding of the jobs that the group needs to be done and understand how they are shared.

The team jobs may include:

1. A treasurer who manages the group's finances (even if this is just a gold coin)
2. A secretary who keeps records (a clear and confidential contact list is important)
3. A minute taker who records the actions of the meeting
4. A person who is the contact person for new people to join or ask questions about the group.
5. A person or roster of people to check in with members.
6. A person to organise the refreshments.
7. A person to administer any social media.
8. A liaison person with the venue or other outside contacts.
9. A person/people to set up and set down.

Assistance with the formal roles in running a group is available in Queensland from [Community Door](#). Some support groups are incorporated associations, which have ongoing set roles. There is a lot of community training available for these roles. There is also training, such as Emotional CPR, if people need more support to communicate well.

Guidelines for Conducting Meetings

A thought-through set of guidelines for conducting meetings will make sure everyone is on the same page and knows what to expect. Guidelines need to be aligned with the values of the group and its purpose.

Possible operational guidelines may include:

- We will make decisions about the group by ...
- Only one person should speak at a time.
- The second meeting of the month will usually have a guest speaker.
- Everyone will support the meeting to start and end on time.

Managing Difficult Situations

Difficult situations will arise from time to time. It's the responsibility of the whole group to handle these situations professionally and sensitively.

Some difficult situations that may arise include:

- The sharing of triggering or graphic content
- Someone is upset, angry or withdrawn.
- Confidentiality being broken.
- A medical emergency
- Time frames of the meeting being hard to manage.

If a difficult situation does arise, the group should deal with it in a time-sensitive way. It may be important to talk to the person privately to address behavioural challenges, but it may be best to remind the whole group of respectful behaviours in others. If possible, deepen the understanding of the whole group of the situation involved. For example, a person who talks a lot can do this for many reasons. If we work to unpack this, a few possible actions might be taken to ease this situation.

Conflict Resolution

No group of people will agree on everything all the time. One sign of a healthy group is the ability to argue and resolve disagreements successfully. If your group is not a place where people can argue peacefully, some possible options are:

- Get more help or training with facilitation or communication.
- Engage in activities that are less about talking.
- Seek out exercises that build the skills of the whole group, such as respectful communication, Emotional CPR, Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP)
- Revisit the group's values, which should include respect.

Unhealthy conflict is behaviours like name-calling, blaming, shouting and abuse. If your group is experiencing this, seek external help urgently (including calling 000 if the behaviour is extreme), ask the person(s) to leave and stop the meeting. In our

experience, these kinds of events are rare, but knowing what you will do is like having a fire evacuation plan.

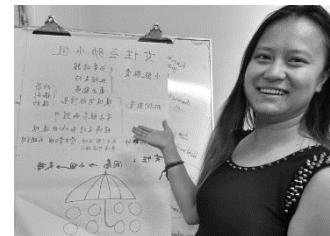
Mediation is a process to resolve a dispute between two parties fairly and unbiasedly. An outline of the process is to speak to the two people separately and identify the source of the conflict and what they both think needs to happen to be resolved. Then, there is a communication process to help the members understand each other's points of view and come to a resolution. If the conflict cannot be resolved between the members, the group may need to decide, based on how the group has agreed to make decisions and who must be involved. Some specialists work in mediation, so ask for assistance if needed. The key is to maintain a positive and supportive environment for all members.

Tips to Facilitate a Meeting

If you are the facilitator of a meeting, there are many ways to work on being the best you can. The following list may help you for your next support group meeting.

1. *Create a safe and welcoming environment.* It is important that everyone feels comfortable participating in the meeting. This includes ensuring everyone feels respected, and their opinions are valued.
2. *Share the jobs around.* You don't have to do everything. You can ask someone to time-keep, or you can ask someone to run an exercise or conversation.
3. *Be aware of your own biases and hidden differences.* It is important to be aware of your hot buttons to avoid letting them influence the meeting, i.e., Is being precisely on time more important to you than to others? Are you aware of the evidence that men are more likely than women to talk over others?
4. *Be flexible.* Things don't always go as planned. Be prepared to change course if necessary. Have two warm-up exercises ready, one to calm down and one to energise, and use the one you think is needed.
5. *Review the goals and objectives of the meeting.* Ensure you are clear on what needs to be accomplished during the meeting. This will help keep you focused and on track.
6. *Make a list of topics to be covered during the meeting.* This will help you stay organised and ensure you remember important topics.
7. *Prepare a meeting agenda.* This will help keep the meeting running smoothly and avoid tangents.
8. *Choose a meeting format that will work best for the group.* Some options include discussion-based, presentation-based, or question-and-answer.

9. *Know your audience.* Make sure you understand the needs of the group you will be facilitating. This will help you tailor the content of the meeting to their needs.
10. *List the names.* Make yourself a map and write down people's names where they are so you can check if you can't remember on the spot.
11. *Be patient.* Some people may need more time to process information or share their thoughts. Allow for pauses and silences throughout the meeting.
12. *Use joining words and gentle language.* There is usually no need to close someone's idea. If "but" and "however" are in play, try using "And, we could..." or "Yes, and I was thinking".
13. *Thank and encourage.* Find your "go-to" words to respond positively and personally. Everyone has their style, but we can all find ways to acknowledge the sharing.
14. *End on a positive note.* Make sure to end the meeting on a positive note. This will leave participants feeling good about the experience and eager to return for future meetings.



Confidentiality

It's important to maintain confidentiality within a peer support group. This means that what is said in the group stays in the group. This is mainly concerned with any disclosures about an individual's situation. It is up to everyone to respect the confidentiality of others.

The knowledge we gain at a meeting can be shared carefully without identifying a person. For example, *I found out about the X service today*. This is very different from saying *Anne told me that she ...*

There are some situations where confidentiality may need to be broken. These include:

- If there is suspicion of abuse or neglect
- If someone is at risk of harming themselves or others
- If there is a legal obligation to disclose information.

If you are ever in doubt about whether to break confidentiality, it's best to err on the side of caution and seek professional advice.

Review and Reflection

Reviewing what we have done and if we want to change anything builds a cycle of improvement. It helps to identify what is working well and what can be improved. It also allows group members to give feedback about their experiences.

There are a few different ways to evaluate a support group. One option is to ask participants to respond to key questions at the end of each meeting. Another option is to hold a debriefing session at the end of the program where participants can share their thoughts and suggestions. Another is to measure everyone's wellbeing before they came to the group compared to how they are now.

Whatever method you choose, allow enough time and process for participants to provide honest and constructive feedback. This will help you make improvements for future sessions.

SUPPORT GROUPS

CHECKLIST

PURPOSE OF YOUR GROUP

Sit down and work on a mission statement of 1-2 sentences to understand your actual goal for the group.

VENUES AND LOCATION

Is the venue within a short driving distance for most people? Is there accessible parking and facilities? Is it accessible via public transport? Are online meetings something to consider?

DISCUSS FREQUENCY OF GROUP

Consider the schedules of the participants. Would you rather have 70% show up once per month or 30% twice per month?

ATTENDANCE: OPEN OR CLOSED?

Is anyone welcome at any time? Are new members welcome during a specific period? Is membership from another organization required?

PRIVACY

Do group members want their address, phone and/or emails distributed to other members as a directory? Who will be responsible for contacting members about upcoming meetings and how?

COST AND FEES

How do you plan to cover expenses for things like room rental, snacks, etc.? Are people comfortable with a donation jar or a membership fee? Is there another way to raise funds without asking your members?

ASSISTANCE

Who will be helping you? Who can assist you in setting up, running errands, and making phone calls? Don't plan on taking on all of the responsibilities yourself. Instead, ask for help from a suitable organisation and members.

COMMUNICATION

Reflect and plan how you may handle conflict in the group and remind attendees to maintain respectful, non-judgemental communication with each other.

DISCLOSURE

Prepare an essential contact list for anyone who discloses something you're not equipped to take on and encourage them to seek appropriate help.

Section 4: Our Top Tips and Parting Words

Get Some Help

Running a support group can be much work; don't try to do it all yourself. Don't be afraid to ask for help from others - delegate tasks to members, reach out to organisations that can help, and use online tools (such as social media groups) to lighten the load.

Keep It Fresh

If your support group is starting to feel a bit stale, you can do plenty of things to mix things up. Plan fun social events, start new initiatives, and encourage members to get involved differently. Sometimes, all it takes is a fresh perspective to breathe new life into an old group.

Be Willing to Change

No matter how well you plan, there will always be times when things don't go according to plan. When this happens, be flexible and willing to make changes - after all, the most important thing is that your group can support its members in the best way possible.

Making It Sustainable

One of the most important things to consider when running a support group is how to make it sustainable in the long term. This means having enough members to keep things going, having a steady resource base, a solid home base and having dedicated people committed to making the group a success. If you can tick all these boxes, you're well on your way to running a successful and sustainable support group.

TIPS

FOR NEW SUPPORT GROUPS

There are no fixed rules about how a group should operate. This is something that members will have to discuss and decide. The group should determine their purpose, how it will work and how decisions are made.

Some groups prefer to keep their roles relatively informal, with members taking on various responsibilities as they arise. Other groups may wish to be more formal in structure by assigning specific roles for each task to a different group member.



Everyone should have an opportunity to speak without interruption, and talking over people should be discouraged. Instead, ensure that all voices are valued and heard.

Everyone should feel safe to express emotions. Unfortunately, many people stop themselves from showing emotion in public. All group members need to know – and understand – that it is normal to experience feeling in many forms. It is acceptable to show emotions within the group.

Members should have the opportunity to share personal experiences. When a member shares their experience, others should listen attentively and with an open mind.

Sometimes, people feel that they should follow some “normal” recovery progression. Experience suggests that people develop their time frame for healing and recovery. Expecting someone with lived experience to meet someone else’s time frame may lead to unnecessary pressure and problems.

The facilitator should remain impartial and allow discussion to flow as much as possible. However, a facilitator may intervene if there are factual mistakes, if group principles or rules have been violated or if disagreements become disruptive.

Support Groups are

PRICELESS

- Our group is **PRIVATE**. What is said about who we are and our experiences remain in the room. General information, like a website or mobility aid, may be shared with others outside the room.
- We **RESPECT** ourselves and each other. We show this respect by our actions, for example, not interrupting, silencing mobile phones, welcoming new people, and taking a break when we need one.
- “**I**” statements – we use I statements to discuss our experiences.
- **CARING:** We care about each other. People often meet or support each other outside the group, but that remains a personal decision for each person.
- **EQUAL:** We value everyone present and work towards everyone being able to contribute.
- We **LISTEN** more than we talk. Listening is not waiting to talk. We listen deeply. We listen for the person’s words and their emotions. We let others know that we are listening closely.
- We value lived **EXPERIENCE**. We know that everyone is an expert in their own life.
- We **SHARE** our ideas of what we find helpful but don’t offer medical advice or tell others what to do.
- Our group is **SAFE**. If we want to be quiet, we can just listen. It’s OK to keep our thoughts private. No one needs to feel anxious or responsible to break the silence.



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