

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.4 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.

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.5 in [the introduction](#)), 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.

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

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.