

PEER SUPPORT FACILITATOR GUIDE

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UNDERSTANDING PEER SUPPORT FACILITATION



UNDERSTANDING PEER SUPPORT FACILITATION

WHY PEER SUPPORT?

Research shows peer support:

Increases hope, control and ability to effect changes in life¹

Decreases levels of depression and distressing and unusual experiences of reality¹

Increases self-care, sense of community belonging and satisfaction among various life domains¹

Improves confidence, self-awareness, and self-esteem⁴

“Presence of support has repeatedly been linked to good long-term health outcomes based on demonstrations of better immune function, lower blood pressures, and reducing mortality (among others).”²

“Peer support can have multiple benefits, not only for the recipient and the giver of support, but also for organizations and systems within which the peer support is delivered.”³

Peer support is an incredible exchange of experiences, ideas and support. It is a two way street where facilitators and group members learn from each other!

¹Davidson, L., Bellamy, C., Guy, K. & Miller, R. (2012). Peer support among persons with severe mental illnesses: a review of evidence and experience. *World Psychiatry*, 11(2): 123-8.

²Hogan, B. E., Linden, W. & Najarian, B. (2001). Social Support Interventions Do They Work? *Clinical Psychology Review*, 22: 381-440.

³Woodhouse, A. (2013). Peer Support in Long Term Conditions: The Basics. Mental Health Foundations. www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/peer_support_the_basics.pdf

⁴Swartz, E. C. (1999). Helping others helps oneself: response shift effects in peer support. *Social Science & Medicine*, 48(11): 1563-75.



UNDERSTANDING PEER SUPPORT FACILITATION

HISTORY OF PEER SUPPORT & RECOVERY MOVEMENT

The Mental Patient Liberation Movement (now known as the Consumer Survivor Ex-patient Movement) arose from civil and political rights struggles in the 1960s & 70s and was influenced by the following forces; self-help, de-institutionalization, and counter-culture.

This new social movement was spearheaded by the Mental Patients' Liberation Front, co-founded by Judi Chamberlain. Judi's 1978 text "On Our Own: Patient Controlled Alternatives to the Mental Health System", was instrumental in the development of the survivor movement.

In 1988, the Support Coalition International was formed to focus on human rights issues in the mental health system. It is now known as Mind Freedom International.

Peer support for mental health recovery continued to evolve into some of the workshops, support groups, programs, and initiatives in existence today such as:

- **Wellness Recovery Action Plan**
Mary Ellen Copeland
- **Pathways to Recovery**
University of Kansas
- **Gaining Autonomy with Medication**
Celine Cyr
- **Intentional Peer Support**
Shery Mead's
- **Peer Zone**
Mary O'Hagan
- **Mad Pride Movement**
- **Laughing Like Crazy**
- **and many more.**

David Reville, professor of Mad People's History at Ryerson University, presents on the Consumer / Survivor / Ex-patient movement:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uTbEBPkAAk

Mental Patients' Liberation Front
www.mplf.org

Mind Freedom International
www.mindfreedom.org



UNDERSTANDING PEER SUPPORT FACILITATION

EMPOWERING PERSPECTIVES

Use a Strengths Approach

Contrary to the dominant perspective in health care, the strengths approach does not focus on symptoms, problems or diagnoses. It amplifies the “WELL” in each person and our potential for human growth, healing and wholeness.

Worldview is Powerful

The illness worldview or perspective still dominates but we can change it to a Wellness Worldview by being intentional with our language.

Words we use can have many meanings and negative connotations. Be aware of the **power of language**. It can provide hope and empowerment but can also stigmatize and pathologize.

Labeling people by diagnosis or personality type can be problematic. Most people change from day to day, moment to moment and from situation to situation and don't fit into one category at all times. Try to understand the bigger picture and get to know different personal styles without limiting yourself or others.

Become aware of limitations of different perspectives and how you can expand your worldview. Challenge yourself by holding multiple perspectives at once (even if they seem contradictory).

Along with shifting language and perspective, there are many different paths people find for building a hopeful and empowering perspective, like seeking out positive relationships, setting attainable

goals and celebrating those successes, finding successful role models, developing spirituality to enhance interconnection, expressing gratitude, and much more.

Whatever path you find, remember to breathe!

“If you treat an individual as he is, he will stay as he is, but if you treat him as if he were what he ought to be and could be, he will become what he ought to be and could be.” ~**Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe**



UNDERSTANDING PEER SUPPORT FACILITATION

INTENTIONAL PEER SUPPORT

Intentional Peer Support (IPS) is a method for creating personal and social change by focusing on what we want to create rather than giving up all of our valuable energy to something we don't want. It was developed by Shery Mead and she articulated the following principles of this approach:

IPS doesn't start with the assumption of a problem. Each of us pays attention to how we have learned to make sense of our experiences, then uses the relationship to create new ways of seeing, thinking, and doing.

IPS promotes a trauma-informed way of relating. Instead of asking "What's wrong?" we learn to ask "What happened?"

IPS examines our lives in the context of mutually accountable relationships and communities – looking beyond the mere notion of individual responsibility for change.

IPS relationships are viewed as partnerships that invite and inspire both parties to learn and grow, rather than as one person needing to 'help' another.

IPS encourages us to increasingly live and move towards what we want instead of focusing on what we need to stop or avoid doing.

Learn more at:
www.intentionalpeersupport.org/

"There's two of us involved in this, we're sharing this relationship.

I want to learn and build a connection, let's take some time for reflection.

About what's happened to you, where you've come from your worldview.

I'll share back so we understand. A relationship where we both know where we stand.

Moving towards fostering hope. Rather than moving away from what's causing us not to cope."

~By Megan Powell
IPS Core Class Melbourne, Australia 2014



UNDERSTANDING PEER SUPPORT FACILITATION

ROLE OF THE PEER FACILITATOR

1. Enhances the facilitator role by understanding and empathizing with group members.
2. Provides supportive listening and validation of other's experiences.
3. Accepts participants where they are at.
4. Only shares what they feel comfortable sharing and are mindful of what details may or may not be helpful.
5. Shares "what worked for them" rather than gives advice or tells others what to do.
6. Asks permission to give advice and makes sure the receiver knows they can take what resonates with them and leave the rest.
7. Creates an environment of comfort and ease to talk and share experiences.
8. Uses a comfort agreement, recovery values and strengths-based approach.
9. Uses boundaries and self-care. Is self-aware and self-reflective.
10. Knows their strengths and is open and honest with the group.
11. Leads by example (not as the "boss"). Facilitators model healthy and respectful behaviours.
12. Observes the group atmosphere, helps to move things along, clarifies ideas, and ensures everyone feels included.
13. Makes sure group members know it is okay to pass.
14. Finds out what the group wants and helps gain access to information, ideas, resources, support, etc.
15. Supports participants in reaching the goals of the group.
16. Reinforces that the group 'belongs' to the members.
17. Goes to the group for answers and input. Facilitators are not expected to have all the answers.
18. Embraces the Spirit of:
 - Autonomy (vs. Authority)
 - Evocation (vs. Education)
 - Collaboration (vs. Confrontation)

"When I give up trying to impress the group, I become very impressive. Let go in order to achieve. The wise facilitator speaks rarely and briefly, teaching more through being than doing." ~The Tao Te Ching



UNDERSTANDING PEER SUPPORT FACILITATION

FACILITATING MEANS

- Being early, prepared, organized, flexible and reliable.
- Knowing your participants and the facility where the group is held.
- Multi-tasking: monitoring time while listening and being aware of participation.
- Providing and directing agenda topics.
- Adapting workshops to the group.
- Encouraging respectful and constructive challenging within the group.
- Providing leadership, mentorship and mediation.
- Empowering participants and supporting a sense of equality.
- Using check-ins, ice breakers, debriefs, and check-outs.
- Helping things run smoothly by directing order of speaking and keeping on topic.
- Providing up-to-date resources.
- Being knowledgeable and bringing awareness to issues.
- Sharing your own knowledge and facilitating the sharing and expression of participants.
- Making learning accessible to everyone.
- Having awareness around language and different perspectives.
- Stimulating conversation and asking questions. Being aware of eye contact and body language.
- Reading participants, reflecting back, and checking comprehension accuracy.
- Having available contact info for participants and a plan in case of an emergency.
- Being able to think on the spot and handle the unexpected.
- Using materials to record insights and expressions.
- Using a “parking lot” and following up on additional information/resources.
- Being patient, tolerant, accepting and empathetic.
- Having a sense of humour, charisma, passion, confidence and humility.
- Knowing how to use assertiveness and conflict mediation.



PEER FACILITATOR TOOLS

SELF-CARE

Self-Care is an important part of peer support. Knowing what internal and external resources you need and when to use them is invaluable. Knowing your inner strengths and who you can count on for support can carry people through the most and least difficult circumstances.

Self-Care is about balancing the various aspects of our lives; mental, physical, social, emotional, economic, etc. We do this by learning how to adjust to life's dynamic changes: ups, downs, back, forward, and sideways. With practice we become more resilient by minimizing the hurtful and maximizing the helpful and joyful. We also learn how to master our reactions to these changes.

What do you do to create balance in your life? What wellness tools and supports do you use when life seems out of balance? How do you schedule self-care into the nooks and crannies of your life? How can you set a positive example for workshop participants?

Self-care enhances your own health, wellness, and happiness and you can share your tools and supports with others.

Getting support is extremely helpful and it makes you a better supporter. Getting support can look very different for everyone depending on the kind of support received and who it is from. Be clear about what you need from each of your different supports and pick the right person or service for the type of support you are looking for.

See Resources & References (Pg 38) for supports.

See Wellness Tools (Pg 32) for self-care tips.

"Self-care is asking yourself what you need, everyday, and making sure you receive it"
~**Caroline Jordan**

"Self-care is not selfish or self-indulgent. We cannot nurture others from a dry well. We need to take care of our own needs first, then we can give from our surplus, our abundance." ~**Jennifer Loudon**

BOUNDARIES

Create a safety bubble of emotional and physical space needed to honor your authentic self. Become resistant to external pressures that challenge your authentic self.

Create and communicate these boundaries based on your needs and preferences.

For example, in order to communicate with group members outside group, share the times you are available/not available. It is recommended that a separate email or phone number is used for calls and texts and if necessary reserve communications to group related information only.

Boundaries change and evolve as we learn more about ourselves and how we best work with others. It is okay to change your mind about your different boundaries along the

way. It helps to be honest and ask others to be patient with you and your process.

Make sure group members have supports outside of group. You can support others in obtaining additional supports such as; counsellors, social groups, social workers, doctors, etc. Make sure people know the crisis and warm lines for after hours and weekends.

See Page 37 for Resources & References.

Helper Fatigue

Be aware of:

- Doing more than your boundaries or self-care allows.
- Doing most of the talking.
- Feeling bad if your advice is ignored.
- Not getting feedback.

“Boundaries are a declaration of the integrity of you. Boundaries reaffirm, day in and day out, “who you are” and what interactions and behaviors you deem acceptable and unacceptable to you. Boundaries can be seen as a set of guiding principles that help you govern the closeness or the distance you are comfortable with between yourself and others needed to maintain the integrity of you.” www.lead-her-ship.com

ASSERTIVENESS

Having good boundaries and self-care makes being assertive much easier. As you know and understand more about your needs you are better able to assert them.

Being assertive takes time and practice. We may not learn it overnight but as we continue to incorporate assertiveness skills into our interactions we see how effective they can be.

An unassertive “No” can be accompanied by defending explanations as a result of feeling guilty or not worthy of saying no. E.g. “I don’t think I can meet you tonight. I worked a lot today, I had people stay over all weekend, I have to feed my cat and cook and I’m not feeling well, etc.” An aggressive “No” is done with anger and force (sometimes the anger can be subtle and/or passive

aggressive). E.g. “No, leave me alone, you are so manipulative.” An assertive “No” provides simple explanation and is direct. E.g. “I cannot meet you tonight. I need some time alone.”

Try to notice voice tones and what they convey. For example, raising your voice at the end of a sentence interjects a note of uncertainty and implies asking rather than telling.

Try standing up straight and tall when you want to be assertive. Find the balance between unassertive and aggressive posture.

Unassertive eye contact involves very little and/or is directed to the ground. Aggressive eye contact never breaks. Assertive eye contact is direct and occurs about 50 % of the time.

Note: Body language changes depending on culture and upbringing. Be aware of different non-verbal communication styles. **For more on cross cultural communication check out:**

www.diversitycouncil.org/toolkit/Resources_TipSheet_NonverbalCrossCulturalCommunication.pdf

“Assertiveness is about openly communicating our feelings and establishing boundaries without guilt or fear.”

~Cloris Kylie

“Whenever we avoid conflict by keeping our feelings to ourselves, we do ourselves and others a disservice.” ~Doreen Virtue

If you say, “Yes,” when you want to say, “No,” you’ll resent what you agreed to do. **It’s honorable and authentic to say “No”.**

STRENGTH-BASED LANGUAGE

Language has the power to limit our potential, demean, pathologize and stigmatize. It can also uplift, empower and strengthen.

Try to avoid Labelling. Use “a person diagnosed with or labelled with...” instead of calling someone or yourself “disabled”, “schizophrenic” or “depressed”.

Instead of saying “I have an addictive personality”, try saying “I’ve struggled at times with making healthy changes just like everyone else”.

Just as we have learned to say “people who use wheelchairs” as opposed to “the wheelchair bound”, we can say “individuals who use medication as a recovery tool” as opposed to “people who are dependent on medication”.

Change negative emphases to positive ones. An individual who doesn’t follow a specific treatment plan may be called “non-compliant” and “lacking insight”. Using strength-based language, this same individual can be “making use of their chosen coping strategies” or “self-advocating”.

Try to avoid extreme & globalizing language such as “never”, “always”, “everybody”.

Instead of saying “I have a chronic injury or disease and it will never heal”, try saying “My body has the ability to heal itself”.

Instead of saying “My doctor said I will never get well so I won’t”, try “Nothing is impossible and I can control many aspects of my health”.

Use Positive Reinforcement. Instead of saying “Why do bad things always happen to

me?”, try saying “There’s actually much more going right in my life than wrong”.

Instead of saying “I’m a loser, failure, stupid”, try “At this moment I’m experiencing disappointment, sadness & frustration”.

Instead of saying “I can’t do art, math, run, swim, etc...”, try saying “I could do this if I start small and build up my abilities”, “I don’t have to be perfect, I can enjoy this activity at any level”.

Be accepting. Be respectful. Use “I” statements. Try to avoid “you” statements. Speak from your own experience. Try to avoid “shoulding” on others. Use “and” Instead of “but”. Be empowering.

Changing old patterns and taking new paths can be challenging, so remember to be kind and patient with yourself.

COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES - OARS

Open Ended Question:

A question that elicits a more extensive response to a closed, “yes”/“no” answer, question.

“Tell me more about _____?”

“What do you think you will do?”

“What are you already doing to be _____?”

“When you responded the way you did, how did you feel about your reaction?”

Affirmation:

A statement that conveys and accentuates something positive, acknowledges a person’s strengths and efforts, and validates.

“You have been working really hard, that’s amazing!”

“You are really good at _____!”

“With all the obstacles you have right now, it

is fantastic you could make it today.”

Reflection:

A statement or paraphrase that involves listening carefully, then making a reasonable guess about what the other person is saying (mirrors the explicit or implicit meaning).

“That must have been hard for you?”

“It sounds like _____” or “I get the sense that _____”

“So on the one hand it _____ And, yet on the other hand _____” Is that right?

Summary:

A reflection that draws together content from two or more prior statements.

“Over the past few months you have been experiencing more anxiety and it’s starting

to affect your ability to have fun. You are frustrated and want to do something about it but don’t know what. Does that sound right?”

How can you apply OARS to your everyday interactions as well as in peer support groups?

“Ask open-ended questions. For example, if they tell you that they feel bad because their family doesn’t accept them because... , if you say “Does that make you feel bad?” you’ll get “yes”, but if you ask “How does that make you feel when your family has that attitude?” it opens up the dialogue. ~Carol Garcia

LISTENING

Can you tell when someone is truly listening or when they are rehearsing in their head what they are going to say next?

When others speak are you constantly comparing yourself to them, trying to figure out what the other person is really thinking, or are you daydreaming when something they say triggers a chain of associated thoughts and stories?

Are you quick to problem solve and offer advice before listening to the speaker's full story? Do you change the subject or go to lengths to be right or avoid being wrong? Perhaps you listen but placate the speaker by agreeing to their every claim.

These are listening roadblocks we all experience in some way or another. True

listening is a skill that can be developed with the help of mindful awareness.

Being aware of our thoughts as we listen can begin the self-awareness journey. Becoming mindful of our body's sensations (like the breath) can aid the slowing down of our thoughts.

Slowing down and letting go of our thoughts may involve letting go of the importance we put on our response to the speaker. This frees up our energy and attention so that it can be invested in the speaker's story instead.

Paying attention to how our body responds to the narration keeps us in touch with ourselves in a way that we can still offer self-care and continue to listen.

Mindful listening requires the use of our many senses. Become aware of sounds and vocal inflections, notice body language, and feel empathetic emotions.

Mindful listening can be used in any situation from conversations with a friend over the phone to trauma counselling.

Exercise - With a partner, talk for 2 minutes (partner is silent), then switch and listen for 2 minutes. Be aware of your body's responses to the speaker's story.

CLARIFYING COMMUNICATION

The way we label our experiences affects accurate, clear communication. If we are unclear about our emotions and the causes, it can lead to misunderstanding, blaming and conflict.

Distinguish between what we feel and what we think we are.

Eg. I'm inadequate as a group member vs. I feel disappointed when I am unable to contribute to the group.

Distinguish between what we feel and how we think others react towards us.

Eg. I'm unimportant to the members of my group vs. I feel sad when no one asks me how I am.

Acknowledge the root of your feeling.

Our feelings usually result from:

1. How we choose to receive what others say and do.
2. Our particular needs and expectations in that moment.

Express your needs and make a request of yourself or others to meet your needs.

Language that often stops communication can include: "you" statements, universal statements, "shoulding" on people, etc.

Being tough on the person but soft on the issues and invalidating feelings can also stop communication.

Try the following;

- "Do you mean ____?"
"Tell me what you think I am not understanding."
"I am struggling right now, how are you feeling?"
"When I said ____, what did you think I meant?"
"When you said ____, I interpreted that to mean _____. Is that correct?"
- Take turns speaking each for 2 minutes without interruption then have each person summarize what they heard. Clarify if what is heard is correct.
- Take a "time out" period of reflection, then reconnect.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Conflict can be a very normal and necessary part of group dynamics, especially in the beginning stages when differences among opinions and experiences are being worked out and understood.

Knowing various triggering factors can help minimize conflict and aggression.

Ask yourself, am I or others feeling:
Hungry? Thirsty?
Tired?
Lonely or vulnerable?

Are there any environmental factors that may contribute to the aggression or conflict such as:

The weather	Time of month
Time of day	Time of year

What other circumstances in an individual's life will influence their ability to think clearly, stay calm, and problem solve? How can we cultivate tolerance and patience?

What needs may be hidden and are not being expressed?

What language is being used that may stop the conversation and/or invalidate the individual's feelings and experiences?

“Conflict: A disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns.”

~**University of Wisconsin Human Resources**

“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't being said. The art of reading between the lines is a life long quest of the wise.”

~ **Shannon L. Alder**

NEGOTIATING CONFLICT & TRIGGERS

- Take a deep breath.
- Stay neutral. Try to see the bigger picture/greater perspective.
- Be kind to yourself.
- Refer to the comfort agreement.
- It's okay not to know what to do. Turn to the group for help.
- Use the word “and” to bring together conflicting arguments so that both points are validated. Be cautious of using “but”.
- If an individual is distressed have one facilitator talk to them, away from the group, while the other continues the session.
- Ask if the individual wants you to contact a friend, family or distress centre/mobile crisis team. Stay with

them until support arrives.

- Debrief the situation with the group. Have the group do a mindful moment to identify thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions. Allow the group to share their experiences.
- Summarize and reflect on the challenge and learning.

Stories and experiences involving anger, illness, death, violence, abuse, trauma, suicide, and psychosis can be scary and triggering. It is important to be aware of our own feelings and experiences that may arise while supporting others.

Honesty with ourselves and others, self-care, and mindfulness can help. Stay in touch with your own emotions and how they manifest in your body as you are being triggered. Use self-care and self-compassionate techniques

to tend to your discomfort.

See Page 32 for Self-Compassion Break.

Know your resources to support others in crisis and do some planning. Crisis can look very different for everyone. Ask what your supportee needs from you in these difficult times and respect confidentiality.

See Page 37 for Resources & References and Page 28 for Confidentiality

Talk about it, gain knowledge and understanding, and be open to other perspectives. Check out these peer initiatives that work on clarifying misconceptions and reducing fear about psychosis:

www.recoverynetworktoronto.wordpress.com/recovery-perspectives/hearing-voices

www.theicarusproject.net



PLANNING A GROUP



PLANNING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

STEP

STEP stands for Supports, Timing, Environment, and People. Each of those has a profound effect on the success and sustainability of a peer support group, whether that group is only meeting once, or that group is going to meet every day for years.

SUPPORTS

What supports will you need to lead effectively?

TIMING

What elements of timing are important before, during, and after the workshop?

ENVIRONMENT

How will your environment affect your workshop journey? How will you ensure it's safe?

PEOPLE

How will you bring people to the group and evaluate whether you've met their needs?



PLANNING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

STEP: SUPPORTS & TIMING

SUPPORTS

Having 2 facilitators is key to running a successful group. Not only does it help to share the load but it ensures the group continues if someone falls ill or if a group member needs individual attention.

Once the group has started and you are creating group guidelines/comfort agreement, make sure you discuss supports. Have everybody discuss what they need for support and which supports are top priorities.

Workshop Facilitator Supports

Facilitating a workshop has its own list of special supports. For facilitating our workshops, here are a few of the must-haves:

- Markers (black and colours for highlighting)

- Big sheets of paper to cover walls or flip chart paper
- Sticky notes (many different sizes)
- A clock
- A schedule or agenda
- A participant list with contact info
- A cellphone with GPS, maps, and a full battery
- Emergency contact numbers

TIMING

Time is important. A group that takes up too much time will lose its participants. A group that takes too little time might not get all of the benefits out of the workshop.

Things Will Take Longer Than Expected. People will show up late, ask questions about things you don't expect, the weather may cause delay or cancellation, etc. Plan for that.

Consider the context of your participants' lives. Hold workshops and schedule groups at times that make sense for the way people live. This will increase attendance and help lessen distractions.

Be Flexible and Consistent. It's okay to change things but help the group end on-time and start on-time. Understand what can change and what can't.



PLANNING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

STEP: ENVIRONMENT & PEOPLE

ENVIRONMENT

In a workshop the environment is full of factors that affect the group. For instance, weather, traffic, washrooms, food, safety, noise, and so much more.

Choose a workshop location that is convenient for others and accessible by TTC and wheel trans. Make sure you can arrive early to set up the room.

Community centres, drop-ins, churches, libraries or even coffee shops can be free to use or low cost. Donations from the group can help support the rental fees if required.

Check out the space being used for the workshop. Look for proximity to washrooms, possible distractions and noise level, accessibility accommodations, etc.

Consider safety first in every sense of the word. During a group, participants need to feel safe physically and mentally. Physical safety issues can be obvious while mental health safety issues can often be hidden and take time to uncover.

PEOPLE

The STEP process for establishing a peer support group is iterative and it begins with understanding the needs of participants and each step ends with assessing how you've met those needs and how you can improve the group design for the next iteration.

Peer leaders will have the opportunity to gather feedback from participants and continuously reassess and adapt each STEP on the journey to building a successful group.

Keeping people engaged and participating in a group is important. Identifying somebody to be the timekeeper, note taker, clean up crew, etc. can help get people involved. What other roles can a group leader delegate?

People encounter many barriers to attending groups, so communicate the details clearly and consistently. Try to overcome as many barriers as possible through a variety of communication methods to help connect you with current participants and potential new participants.



PLANNING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

STEP - Fill in each box with the needs or factors to consider. Revise as your group's needs change.

SUPPORTS

TIMING

ENVIRONMENT

PEOPLE



PLANNING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

ADVERTISING & REMINDERS

A key skill for peer support group leaders is how to consistently communicate group details. Your invite for a group is important. Build it around **Supports, Timing, Environment, and People**.

Try to alleviate any uncertainties participants may have and prepare them for the group experience.

Having reminders posted at hosting organizations, sending out an email or communicating by phone the day before can be helpful to maintain group member participation.

Keep in mind that whether there are 20, 5 or just 1 person attending, the meaningful exchange and experience can be equally valuable.

Example Flyer:

Dear Peer Support Group Participant,

I'm looking forward to seeing you for the Mental Health Peer Support Group this Monday. Thanks for taking part to help build a healthier community! All of the details about Monday are below:

What's happening:

We will start the group by doing a brief stretching exercise then check-in and introduce ourselves. Each week will focus on a particular topic and will close with a check-out and mindfulness practice. Refreshments will be provided and there will be a 10 minute break halfway through the session.

What to bring:

Comfortable clothes for stretching and a travel mug for coffee/tea if you have one.

Date & Time:

Monday, August 12th, 5:30 pm to 6:00 pm

Location:

Self-Help Resource Centre, 40 St Clair Ave. Suite 307

Who is coming:

Peer Facilitators, Tony & Andrea, and anyone else interested in attending.

Contact:

If you have any questions at all, or if you have accessibility or health needs you would like to discuss in advance, feel free to call or email: 416-555-5555



RUNNING A GROUP



RUNNING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

CHECK-IN, CHECK-OUT & FEEDBACK

When beginning a group, create an opportunity for everybody to introduce themselves and begin the process of building social connections with the rest of the group.

A **check-in** at the beginning of each group session helps people to reconnect.

Ask people to share how they're feeling about today's group. Have they ever been in a peer support group before? Are they nervous about their first time and meeting new people? This helps to get people talking about their mental health and possible shared feelings and experiences.

It may also reveal that we are coming from different places, but we can all do something healthy together.

A **check-out** brings closure to the group session. This process aids the transition from the togetherness of the group to the separateness of members' individual lives.

Try to include next steps in the check-out especially if it is the final group session. Cultivate closure by reinforcing the availability of continuous supports in the community and celebrating change, growth, and evolution.

Before the group session ends it is helpful to get feedback from the participants on how the group is running. This can be done at the beginning at check-in, when the comfort agreement is referenced or at the end.

Use this feedback to adjust and reiterate for the next session.

When a Group Is Going Well

- Participants arrive on time and/or come early
- Group members are making connections and are in sync with each other
- Participants come back to the group
- Participants socialize after group
- Lots of interaction and chatter
- The group asks for more, more resources, sessions, time, etc.
- Participants are engaged in topics
- Time flies by and groups may go overtime
- The group is self-directed and problem-solving for themselves, the facilitator takes a back seat
- No one is falling asleep
- The group accepts responsibility for housekeeping
- Lots of humour and laughter
- Sense of togetherness, "we"-ness
- The group is respectful and participants are being responsive to each other



GOALS, AGENDA, & ACTIVITIES

Be clear about what will be covered in the group. Identify the overall group goals and objectives as well as the agenda for individual sessions.

Articulating a vision for why everybody is present and explaining the goals of each exercise during the workshop, can help relieve anxiety from uncertainty.

Although learning to accept uncertainty can be a key skill in recovering from mental health challenges, try to limit uncertainty anxiety as much as possible during a workshop.

Consider: What do you want individuals to get out of being in a group? What will people learn and gain? Why does the session take 2 or 3 or 5 hours? Why do we need to write

things down? Why draw things? How will each exercise provide insight, self-reflection and joy for group members? Etc...

Try to format a group session with a beginning, middle, and end.

Balance giving activities, where you offer information or insights, with receiving activities, where the group provides personal insights and effort. Then follow up with a synthesizing activity to bring the ideas and concepts from both giving and receiving activities together.

Capturing Insights

As soon as you complete an activity, visually capture the experience. This helps people understand and see what they just shared.

Make ideas visible, tangible, & persistent. Words can quickly get lost so write down or draw what people say on large sheets or flip chart paper. When writing down people's ideas, write what they say word for word or have participants write and draw then post it on the walls. This helps people feel validated and important.

COMFORT AGREEMENT

It's good to all be on the same page especially when it comes to comfort in a group. A comfort agreement can help to establish boundaries for facilitators and group members and among group members.

Have the group come up with their own comfort guidelines. Include things like general housekeeping and self-care, confidentiality, turning cell phones on vibrate, facilitator and group member roles, and treating others with unconditional positive regard and respect for diversity.

Talk About Talking

Some people may want to talk and others might not. Help people see that it's okay to do both. Ask the group to try and explore out of their default mode. Share the space and STEP UP STEP BACK.

Safety

Discuss any safety concerns that might arise. Know your supports.

Conflict

Have a conversation about conflict and what the group will do if this occurs. If conflict arises remember to refer to the comfort agreement.

Unconditional Positive Regard

We strive to:

Accept each individual as valuable in his or her own right.

Accept each individual unconditionally without judgement.

Trust in the ability of each individual to discover their own solutions to their situation.

Recognize individual strengths and efforts to change.

Focus on the individual, not on the behaviour

Provide feedback and comments that are validating and focus on observable situations rather than judgments.

Use language and communication that focuses on strengths.

Treat each individual as equal, with dignity, compassion, and mutual respect.



CONFIDENTIALITY

It is good practice to keep any information shared as a peer supporter confidential, unless permission is granted to share.

When to break confidentiality?

It is ethically responsible to break confidentiality in the following circumstances:

If an individual is 16 years of age and under and is at risk of being harmed, call:

Children's Aid Society
416-924-4640 (24/7)
www.torontocas.ca

If there is a serious possibility that an individual may harm themselves or others, call:

Gerstein Mobile Crisis Team
416-929-5200 (24/7)
www.gersteincentre.org

Note: It is up to you to discern the seriousness of the situation. Prior to breaking confidentiality, have a conversation about the sensitive circumstance and inform the individual of any actions you plan to take. Make sure you have exhausted all efforts to maintain their autonomy.



LIABILITY & FLOATS

If your peer support group involves physical activity, often the organization you are doing the group for will have its own liability waiver for you to have participants sign. This is to protect the organization and yourself from being responsible if anything should happen to a group member.

If you are running a group on your own the liability waiver is often not necessary. Since peer leaders are not medical professionals and do not give direct advice they should not be liable.

If there is funding through your organization to provide drinks and/or snacks for group participants you will have the responsibility of managing a float.

FLOAT TIPS

- Keep track of the date and amount of float \$ you are given.
- Secure a separate place for float money, tokens and receipts.
- Keep track of weekly spending in a spreadsheet.
- Plan ahead - submit receipts early to ensure you receive your next float on time.



GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK!

Leading a peer support group can be challenging at times so be kind to yourself. Make sure you do something nice for yourself and practice good self-care.

Connect with other peer leaders to share experiences and get support. Get together and do something fun!



WELLNESS TOOLS



SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

When you notice that you're under stress, see if you can find the stress in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the stress as it arises in your body.

Now, say to yourself:

1. **This is a moment of suffering**

That's mindfulness

Other options include:

- This hurts
- Ouch
- This is stress

2. **Suffering is a part of life**

That's common humanity

Other options include:

- Other people feel this way
- I'm not alone
- We all struggle in our lives

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels comforting, and feel the warmth and gentle touch of your hands.

Say to yourself:

3. **May I be kind to myself**

You can also ask yourself, "What do I need to hear right now?"

Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

- May I give myself the compassion that I need
- May I accept myself as I am
- May I learn to accept myself as I am
- May I forgive myself
- May I be strong
- May I be safe
- May I be peaceful
- May we all be kind
- May we live in peace

SELF-TALK

How to switch from negative to positive self-talk? First tune into your negative self-talk. Most of us experience negative self-talk at some point in our lives. Some estimates even indicate that 70-80% of our daily thoughts are negative. Unfortunately these negative thoughts have a large impact on our health, happiness and success.

Negative self-talk can:

- Make us less healthy. We may get sick more often and take longer to recover.
- Make it more difficult to succeed at a job, school, sports, etc.
- Lower our quality of life and relationships.
- Make it harder to start new relationships and maintain old ones.

So where do these thoughts come from? Negative thoughts can come from a combination of experiences such as criticism from others, mental and emotional

abuse, past failures and disappointments, betrayals, trauma, physical and sexual abuse, or comparing ourselves to others (E.g. co-workers, parents, peers, celebrities, models, or saints). This can make us feel like we don't measure up or aren't enough.

The good news is that as soon as we are aware of our negative self-talk and have the intention to change it, a lot of the work is already done.

Tune into your own “frequency” of negative self-talk:

- Do you call yourself names? (E.g. Stupid, geek, loser)
- Do you put yourself down? (E.g. I'll never get it; I'm always going to mess up.)
- Do you second-guess others' feelings towards you? (E.g. People just pretend to like me.)
- Do you predict negative outcomes? (E.g. I'm going to fail my test and mess up my

future.)

- Do you awfulize? (E.g. I spilled my coffee; my life sucks.)
- Do you catastrophize? (E.g. I lost my phone; I won't be able to call anyone ever again. This is the worst day ever.)
- Do you generalize that if one experience was bad than all experiences must be bad? (E.g. My first girlfriend cheated on me; all girls are the same.)
- Do you think in extremes/All-or-Nothing? (E.g. If this paper isn't perfect then it's a complete failure.)
- Do you automatically assume that others think negatively about you? (E.g. He thinks I'm stupid; he must hate me.)

Thought stopping. Imagine that thoughts are connected to you by cords and when you think of a particular thought the cord gets stronger and the thought gets bigger. In order to stop a particular thought you must stop “feeding” it and cut it off.

SELF-TALK

We can do this by thought stopping. Next time you have an unwanted thought, picture yourself cutting the cord to the thought. You can also visualize a stop sign or internally say STOP.

“Like food is to the body, self-talk is to the mind. Don’t let any junk thoughts repeat in your head.” ~ Maddy Malhotra

Thought swapping. Once you have noticed and stopped a thought, there are several things you can do. Use whichever combination of techniques works best for you.

Substitute the negative thought for the opposite positive thought (E.g. “I can’t do this.” becomes “I can do this!”)

If you are thinking you will never succeed at something, think about a time when you did succeed at something in the past. Then tell yourself: “I succeeded at (past success) so I can certainly succeed at this now”.

Substitute negative thoughts with positive affirmations and quotes (E.g. “I believe in my ability to think positively and be happy.”; “I have the power to change myself.”)

“Once you replace negative thoughts with positive ones, you’ll start having positive results.” ~ Willie Nelson

Validity testing. Question and challenge the validity of your negative thoughts. You can do this in your head or you can write it out in a thought record.

1. investigate the circumstances around the thought. Check if you are hungry or tired. Remember you are not alone and try to relate your thought to one of the common “cognitive distortions”.
2. List the evidence for and against the negative thought, then try to create a more balanced thought and perspective.

Goal-directed thinking.

Ask yourself:

- Will this way of thinking help me to reach my goals?
- What can I do to help solve this challenge?
- Is there something I can learn from this situation that will help me in the future?

Engage yourself.

Do a mindful moment meditation. Drop into your body, focus on your breath. Become mindful in your current activity or start a new one (E.g. Listen to music, paint, do a sensory walk, play a game or sport, or write a gratitude list). Hang out with people who think positively and try to stay away from negative environments.

At first, you might only remember to pay attention and use the thought changing techniques once in a while. Don’t fret, it gets easier. Hang in there and you will start to see your world change!

SLEEP HYGIENE

If you struggle with getting a full night's sleep try a combination of the following:

- Get up at the same time every day, even on weekends.
- Get enough sunlight during the day. This will help you sleep when it's dark.
- Cut down or stop caffeine altogether (E.g. coffee, tea, power drinks, chocolate).
- Especially avoid it past 4:00pm.
- Do some physical exercise every day. Avoid intense exercise after 6:00pm.
- Eat healthy food. Avoid heavy meals past 8:00pm.
- Take care of yourself. Avoid over-the-counter drugs and get regular medical check-ups.
- Try not to take naps during the day. It will prevent you from being tired later at night.
- Try to stop nicotine intake 4 hours before bed.
- Nicotine has stimulant properties and may keep you awake. Also, your body may crave it during the night and wake you up to get a fix.
- Try to stop drinking alcohol 2 hours before bed. Alcohol may initially help you fall asleep but your sleep will not be sufficiently restful. Alcohol reduces restorative REM sleep, the sleep you need to process events from the day. It also suppresses breathing thereby decreasing oxygen to the brain and kicking you out of restful sleep numerous times a night. It is common that people wake up throughout the night from dehydration as well.
- Make your sleep environment comfortable (but not too warm), dark, and quiet.
- Avoid screen time and stimulating activities 1-2 hours before bed.
- Have a light carbohydrate snack before bed. This helps stimulate serotonin and melatonin, the comfort chemicals that help you sleep.
- Only crawl into bed if you feel tired. Train your mind to sleep when in bed.

“Sleep is the golden chain that binds health and our bodies together” ~Thomas Dekker

TOOLS FOR TRIGGERS

THOUGHTS

- Remember the positive things about using healthy wellness tools.
- Be aware of negative self-talk and try to shift to more positive thoughts.
- Tell yourself that nothing is forever and it will pass.
- Remind yourself that you are in charge of whatever decisions you make.
- Remember the negative things about harmful coping strategies.
- Think about your future goals and how you can achieve them.
- Make a commitment to yourself to fulfill a goal.
- Distract yourself.
- Think of things you are grateful for.
- Tell yourself that you are doing well.

FEELINGS

- Ask yourself what you're feeling.
- Remind yourself: unpleasant feelings are difficult but they are normal.
- Give yourself permission to feel emotions and express them.
- Ask for support. Talk to someone about your feelings.
- Find ways to express yourself creatively.
- Keep a journal. Write about your experiences.
- Attend a support group.
- Offer yourself compassion and remind yourself you are not alone.
- Take time to soothe and care for yourself.
- Praise yourself for your hard work.

ACTIONS

- Try to avoid people, places or things that are high risk or trigger cravings or thoughts about unhealthy behaviours.
- Take someone you trust with you when facing a risky situation/place.
- Leave situations that seem risky or limit how long you stay.
- Plan ahead for potentially difficult situations or obstacles.
- Go for a walk, exercise or do something physical you enjoy.
- Go on the internet, watch tv or read something inspiring.
- Do volunteer work.
- Go outside and get some fresh air.
- Reward yourself with delicious food, buy something new.
- Go out with friends.