**2**

Understanding peer support

Thinking about peer support

In this section, we look at different types of peer support (one-to-one and group, remote and online); and we explore the underlying values and principles that make peer support what it is. This section is useful if you are thinking of setting up your peer support group or project, but also if you are looking to review or rethink what you are doing now with a view to revising it.

Peer support is when people use their own experiences to help each other. There are different types of peer support, but they all aim to:

- bring together people with shared experiences to support each other
- provide a space where you feel accepted and understood
- treat everyone's experiences as being equally important
- involve both giving and receiving support
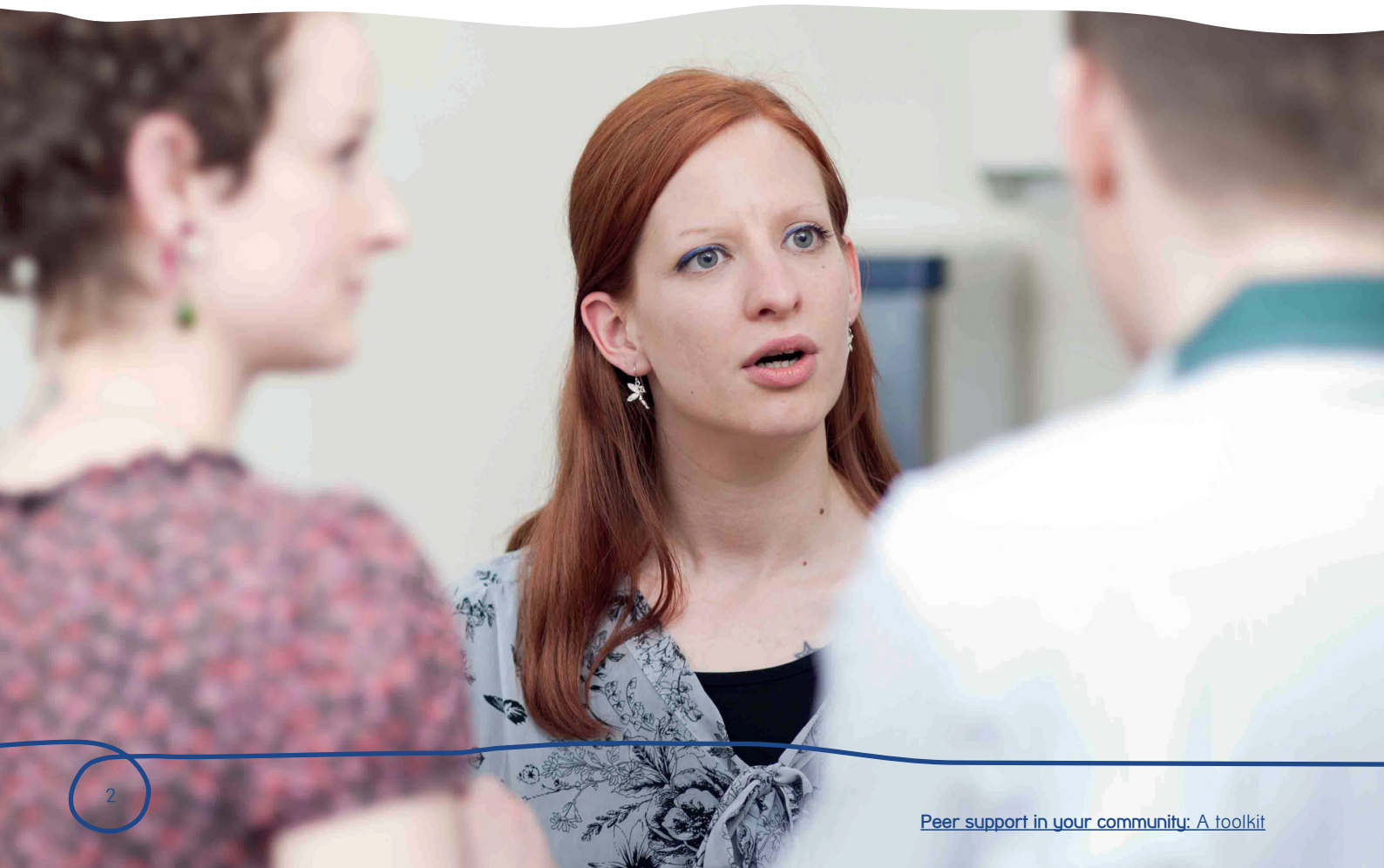
Types of peer support

Peer support is very flexible, with people involved in giving, receiving and sharing support in many different ways. This means that it can be tailored to both the people who are part of it and the local community where it takes place. There are many different ways in which peer support is happening across the country. This rich diversity is something to be celebrated.
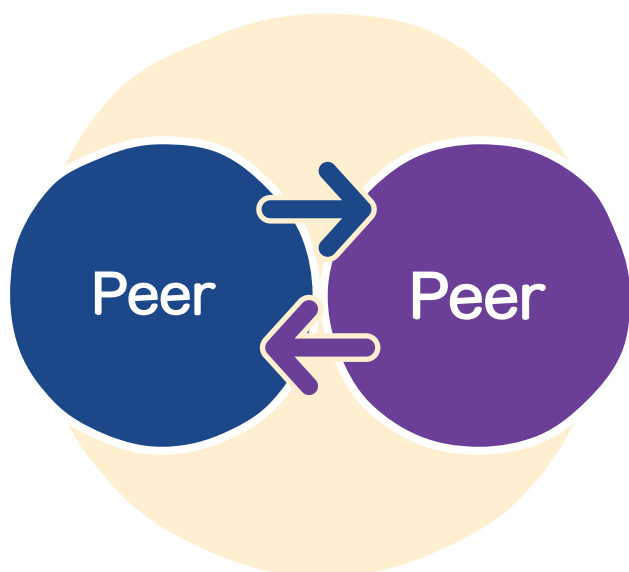
There are three broad approaches to peer support.
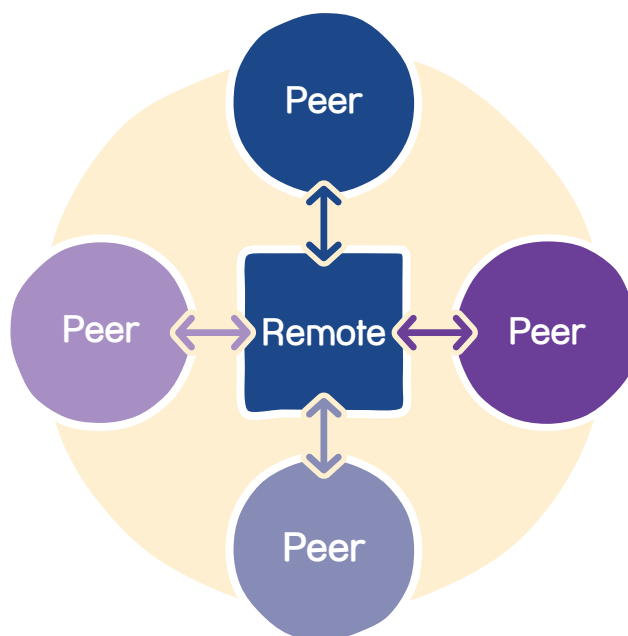
Group peer support
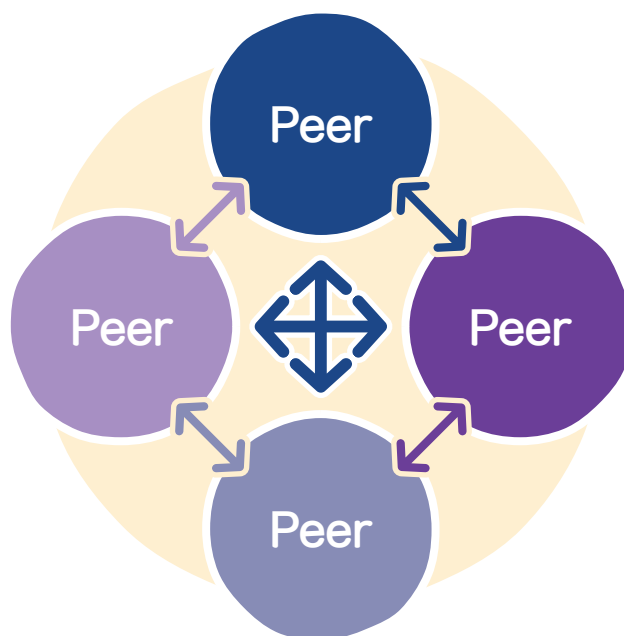
This involves three or more people coming together to support each other. There are many ways of doing this, from groups that allocate a number of official roles and run structured activities, right through to loose, informal gatherings.

One-to-one peer support

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

Remote peer support

There are websites and social media forums designed to facilitate peer support remotely; these may be available at any time of the day or night and can permit people to remain anonymous. With the onset of Covid-19, many peer support groups moved to offering peer support remotely, whether using online video platforms or more conventional phone, text and WhatsApp channels.

You might find that the practical advice in this toolkit can be more easily applied to face-to-face settings than online. However, peers in the process of establishing more informal online peer support might find many of the issues discussed in this toolkit worth thinking about. Mind have also co-written a guide to Remote Peer Support with NSUN, Together, GetUp SetUp and Bipolar UK.

Core values

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

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

1 **Experience in common (p.7)**. Peers share similar backgrounds, experiences, interests, or goals.

2 **Safety (p.9)**. Peer support has structures in place to create physical and emotional safety.

3 **Choice and control (p.12)**. Peers have choice and control in how they are involved in their peer support.

4 **Two-way interactions (p.14)**. Peers have opportunities to give and receive support.

5 **Human connection (p.16)**. Peers develop meaningful connections with each other.

6 **Freedom to be oneself (p.18)**. Peers feel able to express themselves, and be themselves in peer support.

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

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

How do core values relate to each other?

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

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

Freedom
to be oneself

Two-way
interactions

Human
connection

Experience
in common

Safety

Choice
and control
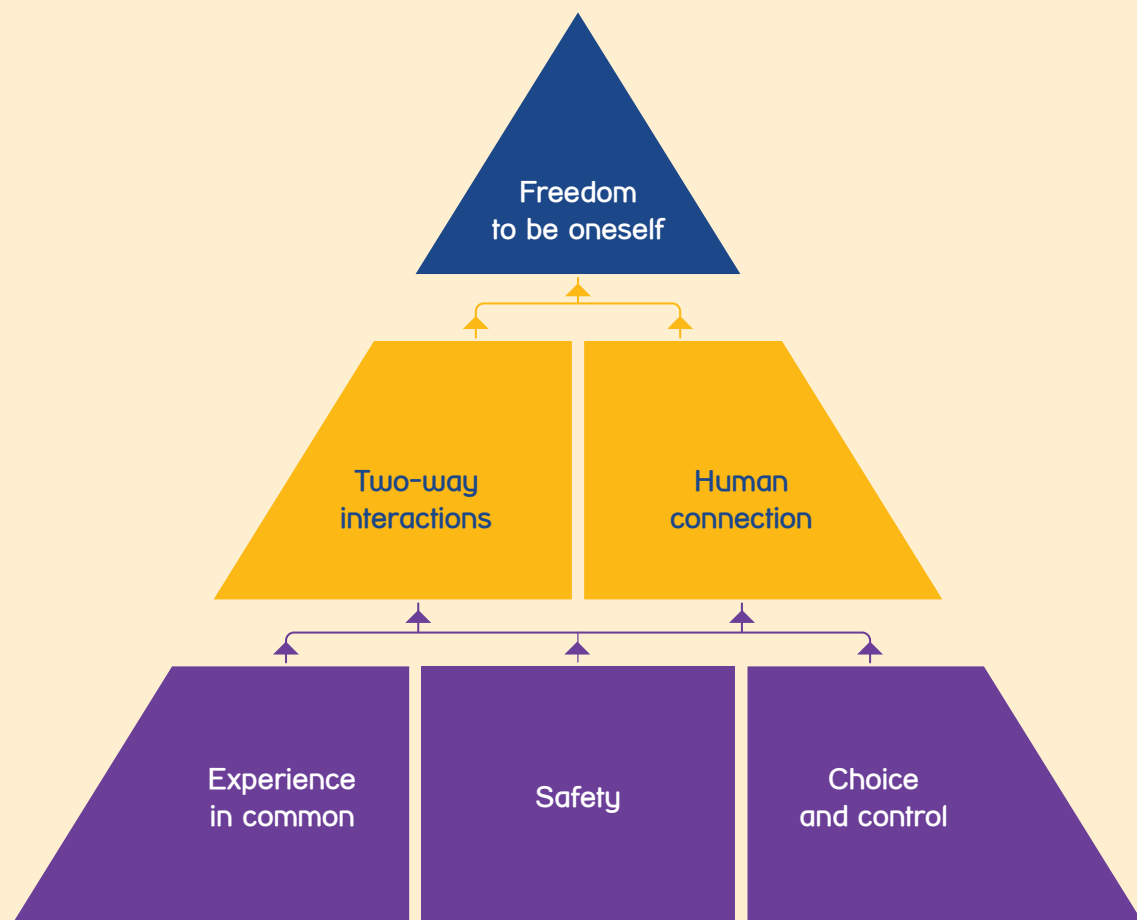
Experience in common

What does this mean?

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

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

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

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

Why is it important?

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

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

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

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

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

What can it look like in practice?

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

- peer support for people who have been migrants or refugees, some of whom may have experienced trauma

- women-only peer support, including common experiences of domestic violence

- peer support for people from the LGBTQ+ community

- peer support for people with learning difficulties.

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

Reflection questions

- Who is giving and receiving peer support? What are our shared experiences?

- Do people who join have more than one kind of experience in common? Which experiences?

- What are the challenges, if any, of focusing on our shared experiences in peer support?

- Are there people who might not find this peer support helpful? Are there people who might not be able to contribute appropriately?

- If there are people who don't fit the peer support criteria at the current time, how would we tell them this, and how might we help them look for relevant support?

- Are there any practical or cultural barriers to people joining? Is our peer support unintentionally excluding people, for example, by not having disabled access or failing to use diverse images of people in our publicity materials?

Safety

What does this mean?

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

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

- reviewing meeting locations for privacy and accessibility

- role modelling the way peers can share (or not share), and finding clarity over how peers may discuss particular topics (for example, the level of detail peers give about self-harm may be limited).

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

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

Why is it important?

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

We can think about safety in two parts:

- **Being safe**. Practical things that are designed to ensure the safety of everyone involved with peer support. These may include:

  - decisions about where peer support happens

  - decisions about when peer support happens

  - a code of conduct around how peers behave towards each other

  - guidelines to allow people to share their experiences safely.

- **Feeling safe**. How people feel when they're taking part in peer support. This may include:

  - feeling physically safe in the place where peer support happens

  - feeling safe to talk about difficult experiences or emotions.

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

What can it look like in practice?

- Peer support for women who have experienced abuse from men, taking place in a women's centre where men are not allowed, or have restricted access.

- Peer support for people who have struggled with alcohol, taking place in a venue where there is no access to alcohol, and which is not located close to a pub or bar.

- Peers holding a meeting to create clear ground rules on how their peer support will be conducted and how people will talk with each other. This could include an agreement on who will be responsible for upholding ground rules (everybody) and what should happen if one of those ground rules is either broken, or it turns out not to work in practice.

- Clear rules on an online forum against posting graphic pictures or text about self-harm.

- Introductions and expectation setting when somebody joins for the first time, to ensure that they feel welcome.

Reflection questions

Venues – being safe

- Is the venue easy to get to and find?
- Can we get there using public transport?
- Who else uses the venue? Will people feel comfortable with other people in the venue?
- Is it private enough?
- Is it large enough?
- Is the venue accessible? For example, is there level access for people with disabilities? Are there accessible toilets?
- Is the venue staffed by people who could assist if there is a difficulty?
- Is the venue culturally appropriate?
- Does the venue account for specific needs (for example, a women's centre for women who have experienced domestic violence)?
- Is the platform you're using secure and confidential?
- Do members have the right resources to join an online gruop (for example, headphones and webcams)?

Venues – feeling safe

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

- Are members aware of how the online platform works?
- Do members have a safe and comfortable space to join an online group?
- Is there a safe space for people to go if they want to take a moment away from the group?

Are there ground rules?

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

Choice and control

What does this mean?

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

- when they attend or take part
- how often they attend
- what they choose to share
- what support they want to try
- what role they take in a group or an interaction
- how long they stay in peer support.
- someone choosing to turn off their video in an online forum.

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

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

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

Why is it important?

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

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

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

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

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

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

What can it look like in practice?

- Being able to talk online with someone late at night on an online form of peer support, when other support would not be available.

- A peer who is new to a group not feeling that they have to say anything at all, while they get a sense of how everything works.

- Somebody deciding to go home early from their peer support as they don't feel well, rather than struggling through to the end.

- A group discussing what activities they would like to continue or develop before putting in a new grant application.

- Someone deciding to leave the group, to find one that suits them better.

Reflection questions

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- How comfortable do people feel to dip in and out of peer support?

- Is it generally okay not to say anything?

- Are peers able to decide how the peer support is run?

- Are there ways to provide feedback either anonymously, or in a way that doesn't require talking with the whole group? For example, a suggestion box or talking one-to-one with the facilitator.

- Do we need training or discussion to consider our boundaries (what we feel comfortable sharing, and what we don't, at the present moment in time)?

Two-way interactions

What does this mean?

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

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

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

Why is it important?

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

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

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

What can it look like in practice?

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

- Sharing experiences and listening to other people's experiences.

- Sharing coping strategies and learning coping strategies from other peers.

- Listening carefully to people who may be speaking about difficult experiences.

- Performing simple gestures of kindness such as making a cup of tea for someone or sending a supportive message.

- Expressing patience, ensuring that people don't feel under pressure to share when they're not ready.

- Helping each other in practical ways, for example, helping each other fill in difficult forms.

Reflection questions

- What opportunities are there for everyone to share?

- How can people contribute if they don't feel comfortable talking in a group?

- How can we ensure that new members feel comfortable enough to contribute?

- How can we best work with each other to identify and develop our skills, strengths and interests?

- How often do people interrupt each other when speaking? How do people react when this happens?

- Are there facilities for peers to make each other tea or share refreshments?

- Do we need some training or discussion to help develop our listening skills?

- Do we need some training or discussion to help us share our views and experiences with others, in a way that is safe for us and helpful for others?

Human connection

What does this mean?

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

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

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

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

Why is it important?

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

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

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

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

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

What can it look like in practice?

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

- welcoming each other as they arrive
- making each other tea or sitting with each other over refreshments
- being kind to each other (and to themselves)
- being patient when someone is having difficulty expressing themselves
- offering each other practical help or support
- having everyday conversations about things that aren't necessarily peer support-related, where appropriate
- sharing jokes and funny stories
- getting to know each other's hobbies and interests.

Reflection questions

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

Freedom to be oneself

What does this mean?

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

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

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

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

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

Why is it important?

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

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

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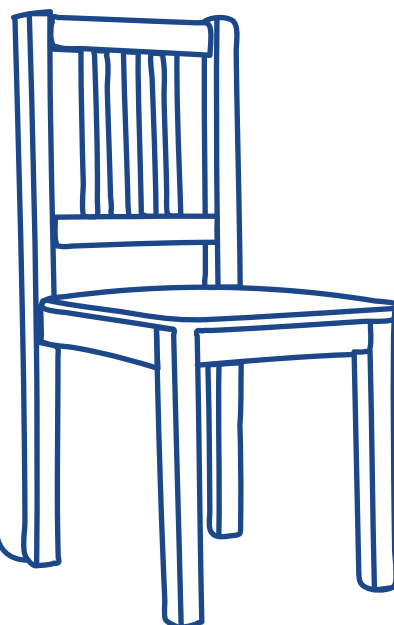
What can it look like in practice?

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

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

Reflection questions

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