#

**Empowering connections**

**Tips for taking peer support online**

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# **Introduction**

Peer support is recognised as an effective and valued way to help people experiencing mental health problems. Sharing similar experiences brings connection, understanding and acceptance.

Pre Covid-19, peer support groups or one-to-one peer approaches usually happened face-to-face. When confronted with lockdown, peer supporters quickly rose to the challenge. They embraced digital tools to ensure that people were able to continue to access peer support and remain connected.

To capture learning from these innovative responses, Scottish Recovery Network gathered the views and experiences of different peer support services and participants from across the country.

The [**Meaningful connections**](https://www.scottishrecovery.net/resources/meaningful-connections/) research report explores ‘how peer support in Scotland adapted to a digital world during Covid-19’ and what we can learn from this. The launch of the report was complemented by two online sharing events.

One of the key learning outcomes is:

**Remote peer support can be welcoming, empowering and safe**

For many, face-to-face peer support is still preferred. However, there is a strong acknowledgement that remote peer support worked for a lot of people. It provided a way of accessing peer support that wasn’t available to them previously.

In particular it encouraged participation from people who found:

* Attending face-to-face peer groups challenging
* The travelling distance and transport availability a barrier
* Time, budget and other commitments got in the way
* Their privacy and confidentiality was potentially compromised (in communities where they are well known or mental health is stigmatised)

This guide is a result of the wealth of shared learning and experiences of over 400 participants. We hope you find this a valuable resource for developing and sustaining online peer support.

We would love to hear about your experiences.Please get in touch:

**0300 323 9956** | **info@scottishrecovery.net**

**“I could do it from home which was really convenient because I am a single parent on a low income and driving into town is a tenner in fuel.”**

**-** Remote peer support participant

**Developing your online space**

First things first, take some time to think about how you create an online peer support space that is welcoming, empowering and safe.

**Getting started**

People we talked with, emphasised the importance of planning together with participants. Decide what the purpose of the peer support activity will be and identify shared values. Consider:

* **Connection** – creating a warm, welcoming, accepting and safe space
* **Shared space** – how the space and time will be used and how to ensure people are involved as much as they would like to be
* **Empowerment** – participants should be in control of their group. Opportunities to take on roles should be encouraged and supported

**Choose an online platform**

There are many to choose from and all have pros and cons regarding their use. From phone calls, text messages and WhatsApp groups to many different video options e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Facebook Live. Find out the preferences of your community.

This guide focuses on Zoom. The majority of groups preferred this platform as it was more accessible across the wider community. However, the tips are adaptable for whichever medium you choose.

**Create a welcome pack**

Useful information for participants could include:

* When and how the group meet
* Names and contact details of facilitators / main contact
* How people will be contacted and how their personal information will be stored in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)
* Copy of the group agreement
* ‘How to’ guides for using the online tool
* How to raise concerns / complaints

**Group structure**

There are different types of groups and formats so having a clear structure is helpful. You suggested:

* Have a purpose that is clear to all participants
* Agree a time commitment. Usually between 1-1.5 hours (online groups are often shorter than face-to-face)
* Limit numbers so everyone has the chance to contribute - between 8-10 was considered good.
* If numbers grow, consider creating 2 groups
* Be mindful of the expectations of participants
* Create an agenda or plan
* Provide information on how to use the technology

**Group agreements**

Group agreements help create safe and caring spaces that will enhance any group activity. Create and review as a group. The agreement can be added to the welcome pack for new participants. Facilitators can also show the agreement online at each session using ‘screenshare’ and / or place in the chat box for everyone to see (more on page 13).

**Connecting and engaging**

Online peer support can miss the informal connections that meeting face-to-face provides. Consider opening the waiting room 10 minutes beforehand and invite people into the space for informal chat. Set aside 15-30 minutes after the formal group ends so that people can hang out and catch up as they would in a physical space.

To start the group use a fun and light-hearted way to let everyone introduce themselves. To help people open up in discussions many groups got creative. Suggestions included art and craft activities, writing groups, book discussions, share a film and discuss sessions, online cafés, exercise and meditation.

Use the breakout rooms to enable people to have discussions in smaller groups and get to know each other. Use the chat box as a way for quieter people to contribute and information to be shared. You can also use the chat to pose questions and for people to respond.

Remember, sometimes using the chat box can be a distraction. Check with participants whether it adds or takes away from the quality of the group.

Help people to interact and work together online. Use screen sharing, a digital Whiteboard, or tools such as Google Jamboard.

**Wrapping up the group**

Check in with everyone. Was there something people hoped to get support for? Did this happen? Is there anything that people would like to discuss in the future?

Ask those that have been quiet if they have anything they would like to offer, any thoughts or observations? Be mindful that participation is voluntary and some people may choose just to listen.

Have a way to bring the group to a close. You might ask people to share a word or something they are feeling about attending the group.

Remind people to focus on their wellbeing and selfcare – ask people to share one thing they are going to do following the group.

Ensure people leave with an invitation to return and with the dates / times for the next meeting.

**“The people that come responded really positively, surprisingly positively, they seem to appreciate it and feel that sense of connection with people. I had an assumption people weren’t feeling as connected, but they said they had and it had been good.”**

* Remote peer support provider

**Technology**

**Learn together**

Online tools can be new to people and are regularly introducing new features. Encourage a light-hearted spirit of ‘we are exploring our way together’ and ‘we may not always get it right but we are prepared to try and learn from it.’ Model the model!

**Digital access**

There are disparities of access to and experience of using technology. Not everyone has access to a computer or Smartphone and Wi-Fi access comes at a cost. Others may lack the experience or confidence to use the technology. Meet people where they are at and work together so that people feel as supported as possible.

Technology and data suggestions highlighted at the sharing events included:

* Build technology and data costs into funding bids
* Identify low-cost refurbished tech suppliers
* Check the local digital plan for information and resources
* Local business may be willing to support

**Digital confidence**

* Meet with new members beforehand to discuss digital needs
* Provide information and ‘How to …’ guide
* Have one-to-one sessions to familiarise members with using the technology
* Have group members ‘buddy up’ or mentor new members
* Provide different ways for people to join e.g. video or phone

**Facilitator support**

* Ensure facilitators have the equipment and information they need to safely facilitate online peer support
* Encourage facilitators to try out digital tools together and get used to the different features
* Suggest a minimum of two facilitators at any one time

This allows for one person to concentrate on facilitating whilst the other focuses on the technical support. This can include managing break out rooms and the chat box. It also means someone is available to take over if a facilitators Wi-fi drops or their technology fails.

* Provide access to online training. Running groups remotely requires a different skill set and additional support may be needed

**Safety and security**

Creating a safe and secure space is important. People should feel confident and comfortable to participate.

There are new concerns to consider online. These include both the use and security of the digital space and ensuring emotional safety.

Peer support providers spoke about the many ways they were addressing these concerns. A message that came across clearly is to consider and plan for issues but also remember that peer support is about believing in people’s ability to look after themselves and take responsibility for their involvement.

Most platforms provide ‘How to’ guides to support people. Be open and upfront with group participants regarding use of any tools and features.

Useful ideas for creating a safe space include:

* Ability for more than one facilitator to manage the space
* Being able to invite people to sign up for the group
* The option to send joining instructions to only those who have registered
* Using the waiting room function
* Asking people to sign in with the email address / name they registered with (only allow those on your list to enter the group space)
* Ask participants to mute themselves to avoid background noise disturbance
* If participants are going be disturbed, ask them to consider turning their camera and sound off
* If others are in the room, protect group members confidentiality by ensuring the screen is not visible to them. The use of headphones can also help with privacy
* Encourage participants to check their space for anything they wouldn’t want others to see in their background

Zoom has the facility to use background images for privacy – these can make a great talking point!

* A really useful feature is ‘hide self-view’. Many people find it distracting to see themselves on the screen
* The chat box is a great way for people to communicate both with the whole group and privately with individuals. Ensure participants are aware that it is possible for the facilitator to view this chat
* When using Zoom the host can set it to stop other participants recording the meeting or screen sharing
* Use the group agreement as a way to reach consensus on people not recording the session in other ways

**Creating a group agreement**

Group agreements are the cornerstone of creating a safe space and provide a foundation for how members will support themselves and each other. Start each session with a review of the agreement. Additional considerations for an online group could include:

* How to join and whether the space will be locked shortly after the group has started
* How people will contribute / take turns
* Use of chat function
* Having cameras on / off
* Recording and taking photographs
* Whether smoking and drinking alcohol is accepted
* Making clear it’s everybody’s responsibility to keep the space safe
* What to do if you want to leave before the end
* Family / housemates in the room during the group
* Keeping in contact
* Sharing log-in details
* Microphones on / off
* Safeguarding and General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)

**Safeguarding**

When not engaging in person a concern for many facilitators and organisations is how to apply safeguarding policies that explore potential risks.

This includes what to do when people became distressed and how to manage disclosures. It is also important to be aware that some group participants may not experience their home as a safe space due to e.g. experiences of domestic violence and abuse.

Your ideas for managing the challenges of safeguarding in an online space were:

* Ensuring organisational safeguarding policies cover online spaces and interactions
* Discuss and agree strategies with the group as to how to respond when someone is distressed, in crisis or leaves the group suddenly. Keep in mind the groups values and principles
* Have open and transparent conversations regarding boundaries and safeguarding concerns so that group members have agreed and are clear of what will happen and in what circumstances
* Co-facilitators can offer to speak with someone either in a breakout room or offline e.g. by phone
* Spend time as a group debriefing on any distressing or challenging situations as its harder to reach out when you are not physically in the room together
* Facilitators taking the time to debrief following the meeting
* Ensuring facilitators have access to support and supervision including their own peer support

See issues of safety and safeguarding as an opportunity to model the peer relationships and seek to work with the group to reach consensus of what and how they want these situations to be managed.

**Facilitator wellbeing**

Identifying support for facilitators is an essential part of planning and developing online peer support groups. Facilitating an online space can be intense as the usual emotional cues and risks are less visible than in face-to-face peer support.

Aim for a minimum of two facilitators per session, so that the load is shared and the main attention is focused on facilitating the space. Encourage the facilitators to debrief together at the end of the session.

Often facilitators will be working from home so ensure that they have the private space, equipment and data as well as suitable desk, seating, microphone, heat and light. If using their own technology, ensure all information is password protected and in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Encourage facilitators to consider their own wellbeing and self-care. It is important that they are ‘putting on their own oxygen mask’ to enable them to be fully present as a facilitator. Have a backup plan if, for any reason, they become unable to facilitate (include how members will be notified - GDPR).

Provide regular support and supervision. Enable different ways for facilitators to maintain connection with fellow facilitators, colleagues, supervisors and managers. This can be by meeting regularly by phone, text and / or video tools.

Encourage informal opportunities to recreate the less work focused conversations that help us understand each other and how we can support each other.

**Resources**

* [**Valu****es fram****ework for** **peer wor****king**](https://www.scottishrecovery.net/resources/peer-2-peer-training/) (one of a set of Let’s do Peer2Peer resources)

* **Creating a positive learning environment** reflective practice tool (one of a set of Let’s do Peer2peer resources)
* **Remote and online peer su****pp****ort guide**
* **Creating accessible online events**
* [**Leading groups online**](https://www.leadinggroupsonline.org/)
* [**Digital** **se****c****urity**](https://scvo.scot/support/digital/guides/digital-services)
* [**How to us****e Zo****om**](https://www.tomsguide.com/uk/news/how-to-use-zoom)
* [**Guidance on how to join a Zoom meeting**](https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/disability-in-london/coronavirus-updates-and-information/ddpo-organisational-support/new-easy-read-guidance-on-how-to-join-a-zoom-meeting/)

**Get in touch**

* 0300 323 9956
* **info@scottishrecovery.net**

British Sign Language (BSL) users can contact us directly by

using[**contactSCOTLAND-BSL**](https://contactscotland-bsl.org/)

Visit [**www.scottishrecovery.net**](http://www.scottishrecovery.net)to download a whole range of free recovery conversation, story sharing and peer support resources.

If you need this resource in a different format please contact us.

