

making sense



peer support

Making sense of peer support

This booklet explains how peer support can help with mental health problems, how sessions might be structured and how to find the right support for you.

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Improving mental health through peer support

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What is peer support?

Peer support is when people use their own experiences to help each other.

Forms of peer support include:

- community groups
- mentoring
- befriending
- self-help groups
- online communities
- support groups.

Support is based on sharing experiences and agreeing a reason for meeting. How you choose to meet up or connect with people is very flexible and depends on your personal preferences. Peer support can improve your emotional health, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

A vital part of peer support is mutual respect; peer support aims to help both those giving and receiving support. Everyone's experiences are treated as equally important, so you might find this gives you a different experience to more traditional support options.

Talking to people who have been through similar challenges may:

- help you to talk about what you are feeling and experiencing
- help you share suggestions for coping techniques and support options
- introduce you to ideas and approaches that have been helpful to others
- reassure you that you're not the only person who has felt like this
- increase your self-esteem and confidence over time
- help you see how common mental health problems are, and that everyone experiencing them deserves support
- provide a sense of belonging to a community of people with similar experiences
- give you a safety net to turn to at difficult times or if you're at risk of crisis

- help you to find support that's right for you
- help you feel more empowered about your own wellbeing, if you feel disillusioned with the support you've received so far.

●● *The support was mutual. When I was going through a low patch, I often received reassurance and kind words.* ●●

What kinds of peer support are there?

Peer support can take many forms. While the ways people connect can vary, the most important part of peer support is that you feel heard and supported by others.

All good peer support should include:

- **A sense of purpose:** everyone involved knows what you're working towards.
- **Everyone both gives and receives support.** How much you give and receive will vary over time.
- **Participants sharing their experience** of mental health problems.

There are a wide range of peer support options, although what is available in your area may vary. You can usually participate in more than one type at a time.

Online peer support

Online peer support offers lots of choices: when, where and how much you use it is up to you. It can be moderated (by volunteers or trained staff) or unmoderated. You might use:

- **social media sites** like Facebook or Twitter where people can share their experiences in public or closed groups
- **communities** dedicated to online support such as Mind's **Elefriends**, and Bipolar UK's **eCommunity**, which are moderated by trained staff.

What are the benefits of online support?	What should I be aware of?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It may be easier to find groups that are relevant to your experiences.• You can access support whenever you have an internet connection.• You can stay anonymous if that feels more comfortable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sites may not be moderated or managed by people you can easily contact.• You might not feel comfortable sharing your experiences on public sites.• It might feel less personal or overwhelming if there are a lot of users on the site.

Search 'staying safe online' at mind.org.uk for more information to help you to think about what you're comfortable sharing online.

Peer support groups

Groups meeting in person to discuss experiences are sometimes called self-help or support groups. Sessions may be held in: drop-in centres, in-patient care, your local Mind, libraries or community centres.

Groups can focus on different things, for example:

- **Shared experiences:** for example, identifying as LGBTQ, hearing voices, or having a shared cultural background.
- **Shared diagnosis:** for example, **Bipolar UK** and **Anxiety UK's** support groups and **Beat's** groups for people who experience eating disorders.
- **Shared interest:** for example, music, spoken word, cooking, or gardening groups provide a space to share experiences around a shared interest.

Each group will be different. You could ask the organiser for more information before you go along, or try more than one group to find what's right for you.

👏👏 *I'll be honest, I had to go through a number of groups before I found one that I felt ok with and fitted in.* 🗨️🗨️

One-to-one peer support

One-to-one peer support can also be called mentoring or befriending. Some one-to-one support aims to work through exercises together, address a particular challenge you're facing, or set goals. Other one-to-one peer support can be less structured, and you may feel more comfortable if you'd prefer to avoid a group setting.

One-to-one support can be useful if you're dealing with a change in circumstances, such as starting university or becoming a parent. This kind of support is often available over the phone or by email, as well as in person.

Student Minds run on-campus peer support for students, and organisations like **Home-Start** run befriending services for parents.

Formal or informal support?

Some peer support is facilitated by trained, paid staff who have experience of mental health problems. Online communities may have trained moderators who help posters share their experiences with others safely.

More informal support may be facilitated by volunteers with experience of mental health problems, either online or in person.

What kind of support you feel comfortable with is personal but whatever type of peer support you choose should make you feel supported and safe.

For contact details of the organisations mentioned please see the 'Useful contacts' section on p.18.

What happens in peer support?

What happens during peer support sessions will depend on the type of activity you're involved with. The aim of peer support is to share your experiences with people who understand and respect you.

This happens in lots of different ways. It might be helpful to think about a few things before you decide what you'd like to try.

Staying safe

In general:

- Try to be aware of how you're feeling. If you're not feeling well, you might find hearing about other people's experiences more difficult.
- You should feel free to share what you feel comfortable with but it's worth thinking about how it makes you feel and how it might affect others.
- If you're not sure how to express yourself, try to focus on sharing how you feel (eg angry, sad, scared).
- If you feel like you need a break for any reason, it's okay to take some time out from the session.

If you're worried about going along to a new group, you could:

- take a friend or family member with you the first time you go along
- choose a group where the meetings are held in a public space such as a library, community centre or village hall.

If you're thinking about joining an online community, you might want to read our information about staying safe online at mind.org.uk.

 *Things I was ashamed of and felt guilt for were common in the group. It was a profound and powerful experience.* 

How is the support structured?

Peer support can be:

- **Formal** – often with a set time that you attend a group or meet with someone, usually either in person or on the phone. There are usually trained staff or volunteers supporting people who are seeking help with their mental health.
- **Informal** – peer support services you can drop into when you want to, either online or offline.

How do I access support?

It might be:

- **In person** – talking to someone face to face.
- **Remotely** – having conversations over the phone or by email.
- **Online** – using websites or social networks to talk to others.

You might also want to check if the support is **ongoing or limited** – can you keep going as long as you need to or will there be a set number of sessions?

Is there a moderator?

Groups can be:

- **Facilitated or moderated** – groups with a formal leader, or online moderators, to keep the space and conversation safe.
- **Open** – more informal peer support that is open for anyone to contribute.

Is there a specific focus?

Depending on what you'd like support with, you might be interested in groups that are:

- **Specific** – peer support that is for people with a specific diagnosis (eg bipolar disorder or BPD), or experiences (eg hearing voices or eating problems).
- **General** – peer support for people experiencing a range of

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problems, often including things that aren't mental health problems but can be linked to them, like loneliness or parenting worries.

- **Activity-based** – some groups focus on activities such as spoken word, ecotherapy, sport or arts therapy which help people to connect.

How many people are involved?

Peer support can take place:

- **In groups** – peer support where lots of people come together to support each other.
- **One-to-one** – peer support, usually provided by the NHS or a charity, where you speak to someone who has had similar experiences to you (online, in person, by phone or email).

Can I become a peer supporter?

If you attend a group or share your experience online, you're already a peer supporter. Even if you don't speak up often, your presence counts. In peer support, listening to others is as important as sharing your own experiences.

You may want to use your experiences to help others by:

- **Volunteering as a peer supporter** for people who share your specific experience or diagnosis. Many organisations such as **Bipolar UK**, and **Beat** (for people experiencing eating problems) provide opportunities to volunteer.
- **Setting up your own group** or being involved in group facilitation. Try asking at your group, searching online, or visiting mind.org.uk/peersupport to find out more.

Is peer support right for me?

What kind of support you find most helpful is completely up to you. Many people find that peer support helps them to feel more in control of how they manage their mental health.

Before trying peer support, it can be helpful to think about the following:

- **Am I comfortable talking about my experiences to new people?** Talking about your experiences and feelings can make you feel more aware of your thoughts and emotions. Lots of people take a couple of sessions to start sharing their experiences freely.
- **Do I want to focus on talking about my experiences, or take part in an activity?** You may want to take part in activities like music, art or gardening to get to know people, or you may prefer to just talk with others in a support group setting. If you're not sure what's right for you, you can explore different options before you commit to anything.
- **Am I comfortable hearing about others' experiences?** Listening to others' experiences is a big part of peer support. This can help you feel less alone or introduce you to new coping strategies but there may be also be times when other people's experiences may be unhelpful or triggering for you.
- **Do I need more personal support?** You may decide that sometimes you would prefer to talk to a therapist or professional, rather than a peer.
- **Am I well enough?** If you need more regular or crisis support, peer support might not be right for you at the moment. If a support group sounds like it might be too intense, something less formal like gardening or sport might be suitable option.
- **Is it the right time?** You might decide that peer support isn't what you need at the moment. Many people dip in and out of peer support at different times – you will still be able to access it in the future if you want to.

●● *It's not always about getting or giving advice. It's also about having a safe space to get things off our chest and occasionally sharing a laugh about it all!* ●●

The kind of support that works for you is completely personal. If you aren't finding something helpful, you can try something else. For example, online support can be helpful if you feel worried about going to a group in person for the first time.

You could discuss this with your GP or mental health professional, or with your friends and family to help you decide. See 'What kinds of peer support are there?' on p.5 for more information.

Peer support for specific groups

You may find it useful to share your experiences with people who understand other aspects of your life as well as your mental health. If you are a member of a particular group in society, you may feel more comfortable talking to other members of that group.

Peer support may be particularly useful if you haven't had good experiences with traditional mental health services. Specific groups may focus on building a community, talking about your emotional wellbeing more, or finding ways to cope that fit with any religious beliefs you may have.

●● *It's also helped me to feel more accepting and at peace with who I am.* ●●

LGBTQ people

There are a number of support services for LGBTQ people, many of which support people with mental health problems. They will often be able to direct you towards peer support services and the support nearest to you.

- **MindOut** is a specialist mental health service run by and for LGBTQ people that can offer advice on peer support groups, and offers support via the telephone and online.
- **LGBT switchboard** provides information and support and is staffed by volunteers who identify as LGBT.
- **Stonewall** has a database of local groups you can search by topic and area.

BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) people

Specific groups may focus on building a community, talking about your emotional wellbeing more, or finding ways to cope that fit with any religious beliefs you may have.

Other BAME people may also have a greater insight into challenging experiences, such as racism in society and the mental health system. If you find it difficult to trust your GP or other services, peer support can provide a safe space to get support.

Other groups that may be able to assist are:

- **300 Voices** project, currently being piloted in the West Midlands, is intended specifically for younger African-Caribbean men.
- **Southall Black Sisters** include mental health support among their work with BAME women.
- **Chinese mental health association.**
- **The South Asian mental health service** at the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust (SLAM).
- **Sharan**, an organisation for Asian women, includes a community forum.

Your local Mind, or Mind's Infoline, will also be able to help you find out

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what's available. The **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)** also provides a number of links to groups for specific communities.

Older people

Mental health, particularly depression and loneliness, is increasingly recognised as an important issue for older people. You can find peer support through:

- **Age UK** who run a telephone befriending service, as well as peer support and befriending services through local Age UKs.
- Mental Health Foundation's **Standing Together**.
- Your local Mind, or Mind's Infoline, will also be able to help find out what's available in your area.

Children and young people

You may already use social media sites as a way to share your experience and get support, but you might prefer to find support more specific to mental health.

You could try:

- **YoungMinds** offer a range of peer support services for younger people.
- Online organisations like **The Mix** aim to support young people in general, including with mental health problems.
- Several experience-specific organisations have resources for young people, for example **Beat**, a charity for people who experience eating disorders.

👩👧 *That shared experience of helping someone you don't know and having them open up to you is a wonderful, life-affirming experience.* 👩👧

For contact details of the organisations mentioned please see the 'Useful contacts' section on p.18.

How can I find peer support?

Many peer support groups can be joined by anyone, without a referral from your GP. However, most peer support services are local and not available nationwide, so it can be hard to find out what's available in your area.

NHS services

Some NHS services run peer support groups, sometimes within hospitals or organised by your community mental health team (CMHT). These will often need a referral. To find out what's available in your area, your GP may be able to suggest what kind of peer support would be suitable.

Online support

There is a huge range of peer support available online:

- Some sites such as **Big White Wall** only cover parts of the UK, but may be free for you to access in your area, through GP referral or through your university.
- Mind runs the online support community, **Elefriends**, which is open to anyone over 18.
- See 'What kinds of peer support are there?' on p.5 for more information.

There are also countless informal groups available, and many people find informal groups on social media extremely helpful. If there is no moderation, make sure you know how to stay safe online.

If possible, you could discuss what you're doing with a trusted friend or relative. This is particularly important if you find you want to meet people you have met online face-to-face. It's often best to take a friend with you and meet in a public place.

Mind's online database

Mind believes that people should have access to quality peer support wherever they live. You can search our online database of peer support projects in England and Wales by region. To find support near you, visit mind.org.uk/peersupportdirectory

Peer support in rural areas

If you live in a rural area, mental health services and support may be more spread out. Your nearest local Mind should be able to suggest the most convenient peer support options.

Several organisations have been specifically set up to support rural communities and may be able to help you access peer support:

- **The Farming Community Network** is able to provide help, sometimes including peer support, to anyone in the farming community facing difficulties.
- **ACRE** provides information and signposting on a range of issues for people living in rural communities.

The growth of online peer support services such as **Elefriends** or **Friends in Need** can be particularly useful if you live in a rural area and struggle to find people who understand your experiences.

Local Minds

Many local Minds run peer support groups. You can contact your local Mind to see what they offer. Mind is also running some specific peer support programmes across the country, through local Minds:

- **Side by Side** which aims to provide and research peer support in nine areas: mind.org.uk/sidebyside
- Our **Blue Light Programme** supports emergency services staff and their families through mental health champions and peer support: mind.org.uk/bluelight
- **Get Set To Go** encourages people to take up physical exercise that is beneficial to their mental health, or to use their experience to

help someone else take up a new activity. Several local Minds that aren't part of the project also provide support for people who want to be more active: mind.org.uk/getsettogether

- **Two in Mind** supports the mental health of pregnant women, new mothers and their families. Initially based in Wales, peer support is a major element: twinmind.org

For contact details of organisations mentioned, see 'Useful contacts' on p.18.

Useful contacts

300 voices

web: time-to-change.org.uk/300voices
Peer support for young African and Caribbean men.

Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE)

web: acre.org.uk
Providing information and signposting on a range of issues for people living in rural communities in England.

Age UK

tel: 0800 169 2081
web: ageuk.org.uk
Support, help and information for older people.

Anxiety UK

tel: 0844 477 5774
web: anxietyuk.org.uk
Support, help and information for people experiencing anxiety.

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

web: itsgoodtotalk.org.uk
Search for accredited therapists in your area.

Beat

adult helpline: 0345 634 1414
youthline: 0345 634 7650
web: b-eat.co.uk
Information on eating disorders, online community and a directory of support services at helpfinder.b-eat.co.uk

Big White Wall

web: bigwhitewall.com
Online community for adults experiencing emotional or psychological distress. It is free to use in many areas if you live in the UK, if you're a student, or if you have a referral from your GP.

Bipolar UK

tel: 0333 323 3880
web: bipolaruk.org.uk
Support for people experiencing bipolar disorder, their families and friends. Support groups, telephone mentoring and online support available.

Chinese Mental Health Association

web: cmha.org.uk
Support for Chinese people experiencing mental health problems.

Useful contacts

Elefriends

web: elefriends.org.uk

A supportive online community for people experiencing mental health problems.

Emergence

web: emergenceplus.org.uk

Information and support for anyone affected by personality disorders.

Farming Community Network

tel: 03000 111 999

web: fcn.org.uk

Support on a range of issues for people in the farming community.

Friends in Need

web: friendsinneed.co.uk

A site to help people affected by depression to meet online and in their local area.

Hearing Voices Network

tel: 0114 271 8210

web: hearing-voices.org

Information and support for people who hear voices or have other unusual perceptions.

Home-Start

tel: 0800 068 63 68

web: home-start.org.uk

Local support networks for families with young children.

LGBT switchboard

tel: 0300 330 0630

web: switchboard.lgbt

Information and support for LGBT people.

Mental Health Foundation

tel: 020 7803 1100

web: mentalhealth.org.uk

Research and information for people with mental health problems, including Standing Together, a peer support project for older people.

MindOut

tel: 01273 234839

web: mindout.org.uk

A mental health service run by and for lesbians, gay men, bisexual and trans people. Based in Brighton and Hove, they provide local services as well as online support that can be accessed nationally.

Useful contacts

The Sharan Project

tel: 0844 504 3231

web: sharan.org.uk

An organisation for Asian women, includes a community forum.

Southall Black Sisters

web: southallblacksisters.org.uk

Information and advice on a range of issues, by and for women from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Stonewall

tel: 08000 50 20 20

web: stonewall.org.uk

Help and advice for LGBT people on a range of issues.

Student Minds

web: studentminds.org.uk

The UK's student mental health charity.

The Mix

tel: 0808 808 4994

web: themix.org.uk

Online guide to life for 16-25 year olds. Straight-talking emotional support is available 24 hours a day. Chat about any issue on moderated discussion boards and in a live chat room.

YoungMinds

web: youngminds.org.uk

Information for both parents and young people.

further information publications from Mind

We publish over 40 printed titles and many more online resources on a wide range of topics, all available to read and download for free at mind.org.uk



If you found this booklet useful, you may be interested in the following titles:

- Understanding depression
- Understanding anxiety and panic attacks
- How to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing
- How to manage stress
- The Mind guide to seeking help for a mental health problem

You can telephone **0844 448 4448** or email publications@mind.org.uk and request up to three of our professionally printed information booklets free of charge. Additional copies are charged at £1 each plus delivery.

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tel: 0300 999 1946

email: supportercare@mind.org.uk

web: mind.org.uk/donate

This information was written by Sam Challis.

We welcome feedback on our publications.
To give feedback on this booklet, email us at mindinfoteam@mind.org.uk

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web: mind.org.uk

Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
info@mind.org.uk
mind.org.uk



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