

# Staying Connected with peer group members

## Introduction

This Quick Guide looks at how a peer network can stay connected with its members.

Peer support networks bring people together on a regular basis to share knowledge, build camaraderie and shared lived experiences to further members' life choices and opportunities. But what happens outside of the group sessions? In many cases, members will at some point feel the need to keep in touch with their peer group and there are some relatively easy and effective ways that a peer support network can stay connected with its members outside of group sessions.

## Let's make it happen

There are a range of considerations when planning and delivering opportunities for your peer group members to stay connected outside of the peer group sessions:

### 1. *What are some key ways of keeping in touch and staying connected with your peer group members?*

While everyone likes to keep in touch in different ways, some key alternatives to consider include:

- Putting together a regular newsletter, providing members with information about other peer group members, upcoming sessions, and perhaps even items of interest from other organisations. Consider if one (or several) of your peer group members may be interested in being editor/writer, and how this may be possible utilising free or low cost email packages available online (eg. Constant Contact offers special not for profit rates, and MailChimp has free options available).
- Consider holding an event, providing your peer group members with an additional opportunity to meet each other and share a social experience. For organisations running multiple peer support networks, these events could be open to all members, enabling further social opportunities to all members.
- Send reminders: A good way to maintain connection is to contact peer network members to remind them of upcoming sessions. For some people living with disability, particularly neurological disorders or brain injury, managing their own schedule and remembering about sessions can be something that needs to be supported. Low cost ways of keeping in touch include reminder emails or even a quick phone call. These not only ensure you have good group attendances, but also give members a sense of being remembered and valued outside of the group experience.
- Other opportunities: There may already be opportunities for members to engage with each other in the mainstream community that you can suggest

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to your group members. For example, perhaps there is a community morning tea or low cost lunch available at a local Community Centre on a regular basis. You can suggest to peer group members that a number of them may want to attend this and see each other outside of the group.

- Another way that peer group members will often informally keep in touch with each other is via the friendships and connections they make with other peer group members at your sessions. The building of informal social networks within the groups should be encouraged. One way of doing this, if all members give their permission, is to consider producing a member contact list and distribute this to all members. Include any notes about when and how (preferred method) members want to be contacted including hours appropriate for them. Obviously you can only do this if your members want to share their details, but often they are keen to do this and this will enable members to more easily get in touch with each other and build their own methods of staying connected with group members.

### **2. *What can you provide within your (often limited) resources to stay connected with members of your peer support network?***

There could be existing activities that your organisation undertakes that can be adapted to include your peer group members. For example, do you have a Facebook page in which members could play a role? Do you already prepare a newsletter that can include a peer group section? Do you already run an event for another purpose that could be opened up for peer group members? What about other community groups – will they assist you in delivering an event (e.g. a local Lions club may be willing to deliver a BBQ for your group(s))? It is important to only take on ways of staying connected that are sustainable, but often some creative thinking can bring about great opportunities to do so.

### **3. *Determine what your peer group members need or want to stay connected.***

It is important to always ask your peer group members about what would work for them and, indeed, if staying connected outside of the group is something they are keen to do. To do this:

- Ask questions about staying connected using a format appropriate to your peer group members (i.e. using a *surveymonkey* online questionnaire or the *doodle.com* booking app isn't going to work for an target group that do not use computers regularly).
- Give members the chance to get involved in planning and/or delivering any 'staying connected' attempts. These opportunities could be as a volunteer which can also open up other life options for the peer group members.
- Give feedback – if you do ask for members' opinions and idea, ensure you give them a summary about what the overall feedback has been so that they

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know you have taken their comments and the overall evaluation seriously and value their input.

- Dream about options even if you do not have the resources to put in place the mechanisms to enable their success. However, do be cautious about talking to your peer group members about ideas you have that you are not able to provide as you do not want to build expectations that cannot be fulfilled.

Whatever the reason you want more opportunities for your peer group members to stay connected, ensure your members take this journey with you and are part of driving any opportunities.

#### **4. *Who will do the work to stay connected and what does this cost?***

It is important to consider what ways your group members want to stay connected and how this will be actioned and funded. If you are considering a special event, there are several aspects to delivery that you need to consider, including: spreading word about the event, deciding who is able to attend, setting a time/date, booking (and initially finding) an accessible and available venue, preparing the room, arranging any food and/or drinks, delivering the event (including any logistics around set up and clean up) and having sufficient assistance to ensure making the day a success. One way would be to enlist members to undertake some of these roles. If members are taking on roles, how will you provide them with support and any required infrastructure? What is the time frame for planning an event, and is this reasonable?

#### **5. *How can you bring in new funds for staying connected events and activities?***

There may be new opportunities to gain grants and funding to run a special event or deliver a regular newsletter or coffee club or alike. The four core sources of funding for any community group are shown below, and each may enable you to bring in additional help in delivering and running the methods of staying connected that are appropriate for your peer group members:

- a. Grants: many local and some federal government and other grants are regularly available for application, though you may need an auspicing or host agency;
- b. Sponsorship, In-Kind and Other: are there local businesses or organisations to assist?;
- c. Donations: your members, contacts and even strangers may support your idea; and,
- d. Fundraising: can you and your members raise the funds from the huge number of opportunities available, from go-fund-me pages to selling Entertainment Books!

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Overall, running a peer support network is all about people coming together and sharing. You need to plan for this sharing, and ensure your members understand that peer support isn't a one sided approach. The reciprocal nature of peer support allows the peers to benefit from the support whether they are giving or receiving it. Giving back and sharing the tasks provides members with increased levels of self-esteem and in their ability to cope with their own challenges. In other words, sharing the work around help not only the group founders to not burn out, but also brings benefits to all those with roles in the network.

### Where you can find more information

There are lots of online resources about peer support as well as great resources on planning community events, community newsletters and other ways of staying connected.

The **Community Tool Box**, from Kansas in the US, has significant information on peer groups and additional community group opportunities, such as: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/training-and-technical-assistance/workshops/main>

The **Centre of Excellence in Peer Support** – Mental Health has great resources about Peer Support and offers good advice about keeping momentum and sustainability relevant on page 8, see: <http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-42-49/2014-12-16-02-22-27/Resources/CEPS-Setting-up-a-Peer-Support-Group/>

The **Australian Network on Disability** offers an excellent checklist on ensuring any special event being planned is fully accessible, see: <https://www.and.org.au/pages/event-checklist.html>.

The **MailChimp** free entrepreneur easy to use templates and other information on these newsletters are available at: <https://mailchimp.com/pricing/entrepreneur/>.

The **Constant Contact** online newsletter options, including low cost not for profit options and links with Facebook and other apps, can be viewed at: <https://www.constantcontact.com/pricing>.

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