

Peer support networks: How rules can help your peer network

Introduction

Working in groups works best when people have agreed on some ground 'rules' or guidelines for being together. This Quick Guide will help you think about why ground rules/guidelines are helpful and how to think about setting them. A separate Quick Guide (See Quick guide: *Agreeing on a set of rules for how people behave at the peer meeting*), which outlines a process for developing group rules, is also available.

Let's make it happen

How can rules help?

Networks aim to connect people, build confidence and capacity, and add value and enjoyment to people's lives. The work is group work, and groups can be great places for being heard, learning, gathering information and building relationships.

However, within any group environment there is also potential for conflict to arise from time to time. Rules are important to make sure that this does not happen, or if it does, that the group has a way of managing it.

Things to consider?

Here are some things to consider as having ground rules/guidelines will help decrease the chances that these things will happen, and provide a framework for managing them if they do:

- **Conflict:** It is okay, even good, when people disagree. Different perspectives can help learning and can help with coming up with a new idea or solution that you might not get to if everyone agreed straight away. Conflict, however, where people are 'stuck' in a position, things get personal, and everyone ends up angry and upset, is not helpful. An example of a ground rule/guideline maybe to "park" this topic and bring it up again at another meeting when members have had time to think about the topic
- **When someone takes over the meeting:** It is great when people feel they can speak up, but also important is that everyone has an opportunity for their voice to be heard. One or several strong voices may mean that you don't get all the information and learning that is possible, and may also discourage quieter people to speak up. An example of a ground rule/guideline maybe only the person with the talking stone can speak. See Quick guide: *Starting a Peer Support Network – Group Processes*
- **Members who don't speak up:** People may be very shy, or not used to speaking, or may have complex communication needs – these things can be a barrier to speaking up for some. The safer a person feels, and the more support they have to speak up in a way that honours their needs, the more likely they are to contribute their voice to the group. An example of a ground rule/guideline could be that it is ok to just listen and participate when you feel ready.

QuickGuide

- **Members not honouring their commitments:** if people say they are going to do something and don't, the group loses trust, and other group members have to pick up the load. Having a rule that addresses this will be very helpful to a group running well. An example of a ground rule/guideline could be that if you are finding it hard to do something from the meeting that you said you would do, ask for help from another member.

How does a group set rules?

The very best way to establish ground rules/guidelines for a group is for the group to develop the ground rules/guidelines together. People will be much more likely to accept and follow ground rules/guidelines when they have had a hand in creating them, know what they are, and have agreed to them.

A separate fact sheet (See Quick Guide: Agreeing on a set of rules for how people behave at the peer meeting is available which outlines a process for developing group rules.) However, there are some principles to keep in mind when thinking about setting and keeping a group to its rules:

- Inclusion – make sure everyone is included in the process of setting ground rules/guidelines, and that they are inclusive of everyone
- Respect – underlying all of the ground rules/guidelines set by a group should be the principle of mutual respect – respect for each other's rights, value, contributions and capacity to grow and learn
- Compassion – understanding that everyone has a unique set of life circumstances, potential and barriers. It is good to design ground rules/guidelines that honour this and ensure people feel cared for and treated well.
- Reminder- you include the rules as an item on each meeting's agenda so that members can be reminded of them and new members can be made aware of them.

Pay attention to these things as designing a good process for developing group ground rules/guidelines helps members remember and enact them, and your network will be a group everyone enjoys coming to, which delivers real value for its members.

Where you can find more information

See Quick Guide: Agreeing on a set of rules for how people behave at the peer meeting

Useful web links:

This article on setting group rules provides some good food for thought:

http://pages.jh.edu/~virtlab/misc/Group_Rules.htm

The Centre of Excellence for Peer Support (mental health) has some great resources for peer support networks:

<http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-42-49/2014-12-16-02-22-27/Resources/>

QuickGuide

Co-authored by [Queenslanders with Disability \(QDN\)](#)

