5 RESPONDING TO TRICKY SITUATIONS

A great peer support network is one that works well together.

Members get along well together and explore different ideas and views in a constructive way. People will have different views and ideas and sometimes people will disagree with each other. Having disagreements is normal. Healthy disagreements and different points of view will make the network most effective for everyone.

But sometimes the disagreements are not healthy and sometimes people act in ways that disrupt the network and what it aims to achieve. This can create tricky situations.

What kind of tricky situations are we talking about?

The Community Toolbox identifies a number of behaviours that can be disruptive to the network. These include:

- Often being late to meetings

- Talking too much, taking up more than a fair share of the time

- Dismissing every idea that other network members bring

- Often bringing problems to the network that are bigger than the network can handle.

- Often Interrupting others, changing to inappropriate or irrelevant subjects

- Bringing in topics or problems that have nothing to do with the purpose of the network.

- Using language that is outdated or offensive.

When this happens, it is important the other members have their views heard, and in a way that re-establishes the focus of the meeting and the purpose of the group.

Often, this means that the person who is running the meeting needs to help this to happen.

By 'running' the meeting, we don't mean that the person is the boss. They might be the meeting's chairperson or facilitator (where their role is to help make sure the meeting stays on track and is a success). Depending on what a peer network prefers, the facilitator role might be shared amongst all members, or it might be done by just a few members within the network, or the same person each time.

It is in difficult situations that the facilitator role becomes really important.

The main role of any facilitator is to make sure there is good communication between the members, in support of the meeting's goals.

Before a difficult situation emerges, a facilitator should know that they can help improve communication in the peer network by simply being a clear and respectful communicator and listener themselves, so that all members can see those behaviours and copy them.
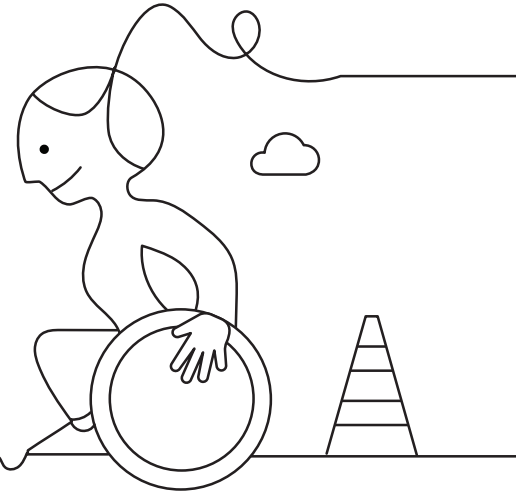
You can also refer to the peer network's rules that may have been set up at the beginning of the network, or take the time now to establish some.

Have a look at the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: Agreeing a set of rules for how people behave at a meeting:***

https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/agreeing-set-rules-how-people-behave-peer-meeting/

Assertive Caring

One strategy all good facilitators should practise is something called 'assertive caring'.

Being assertive doesn't mean being aggressive or impolite, but it means that when you recognise something isn't right you speak up and do something about it. Assertive individuals are able to get their point across without upsetting others, or becoming upset themselves.

Chris Hampton on the Community Tool box website states that:

> In dealing with difficult group members, support group facilitators must learn a delicate combination of control mixed with kindness. This sort of assertive caring directly addresses problems with the group without insulting or offending members. You may use assertive caring during a meeting to get the discussion back on track, or you may wish to speak to the member in private after the meeting.

https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main
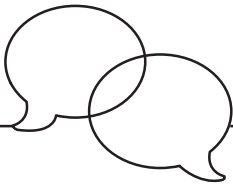
Things to say

Here are some examples of what assertive language looks like.

The *Psychology Today* blog gives some examples of assertive phrases. These are words that you can memorize and resort to when the occasion arises. You can pick the ones that feel most natural to you. Examples include 'thanks but' phrases:

> **"Thank you for sharing, but I'd like to hear from other people in the group."**

Another idea is to use brief "I" statements—a sharing of your thoughts, feelings, wants, or opinions:

> **"I appreciated you arriving on time today."**
>
> **"I would like you to respect my point of view."**
>
> **"I feel offended by your remark."**

Offering to help come up with a solution also lets the other person know that you care:

> **"Unfortunately we don't have time to discuss that today. Can I help link you to someone who might be able to help you with that issue?"**

https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/changepower/201210/speak-18-all-purpose-assertive-phrases

Things to do

With a mindset of caring assertively for any member of a network that might have caused some tricky situations, the Community Toolbox website and other resources suggest these ways to approach the situation:

Speak to the individual in private

If you consider that one member's way of doing things is impacting on the effectiveness of the peer network, it is a good idea to say something early on. Do this in private and suggest ways and possibilities to make positive changes. You could send out a reminder of the conversation to the member by email.

Respect the member's position or dilemma

State that you understand the reason(s) behind the member's negative behaviour. Use "I" or "we" statements, which show how his behaviour affects you and the whole network

Set limits

Gently but firmly correct the behaviour. Explain your reasons; letting the member know why the situation needs to change and what can be done to change the situation. It may be helpful to refer to the group rules (See Quick Guide: How rules can help your peer network).

Suggest an alternative

Explain what you'd like to see the member do instead of the negative behaviour

Get the member's agreement on the alternative

Make sure the member understands what is being asked of him/her and agrees to do it.

Give the member the opportunity to be heard

If a member is constantly interrupting, let the member know that they will have an opportunity to be heard and refer to the agreed meeting rules. Make sure you then return to the member later in the discussion and honour your agreement.

> *"Peer groups provide an independent space for people to voice their concerns and share ideas with others in similar situations, which can support safety and confidence in speaking up."*
>
> **Rhianwen Beresford, CoMHWA**
>
> *http://www.comhwa.org.au/*

For more information

See the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: Managing Conflict in the Group:***

https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/maintaining-network/managing-conflict-group/

This guide by ***Cancer Australia*** for Cancer Support groups provides a summary of competencies for effective facilitators (page 3):

http://www.healthissuescentre.org.au/images/uploads/resources/A-guide-for-peer-facilitators.pdf

The ***Community Tool Box*** website has great tips on running a peer network conversation and addressing conflict:

http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main

About Leaders is a general website about good leadership that has an article on conflict resolution:

https://aboutleaders.com/5-keys-to-conflict-resolution/#gs.69VXaOY

The ***Better Believe It*** blog gives some assertive communication examples:

https://betterbelieveit.net/9-helpful-assertive-communication-examples/

Checklist for approaching a disruptive peer group member

Speak to the individual in private

Respect the member's position or dilemma

Set limits

Suggest an alternative

Get the member's agreement on the alternative

Give the member the opportunity to be heard

Hopefully following these ideas means the peer network is flourishing and is feeling supported and able to function in a really good way. Your red bead has been threaded onto the string. What else could possibly go wrong?! Well, there is always the possibility the main facilitator or organiser of the peer network could no longer be there.

This might feel like the 'last straw', but we asked people running peer networks and they had a few great ideas on how to respond when a key organising member is no longer involved with the network.

We look at these ideas in the next section.

Reflection

Take a moment to think about a difficult situation you faced in the peer network. What does assertive caring look like to you? Which of the ideas in this section could you try, to support the peer group member?

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