



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
- Just coming for the food then wanting to leave
- Bringing in topics or problems that have nothing to do with the purpose of the network.
- Using language that is outdated or offensive
- Behaving in ways that others find unsettling or frightening.

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 tricky 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.

Community Toolbox

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



Before a tricky situation even 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** here:



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

Particular challenges for peer networks for people living in group homes or boarding houses

People living in group homes or boarding houses may have had life experiences that are very painful. It is possible that a peer network conversation touches on a very painful issue for a person, which can result in tears, an angry exchange, or behaviour that makes other members feel uncomfortable. Or the person may simply say nothing and not come to the meeting again.

The facilitator needs to be ready for these possibilities. For people who have very painful life experiences, a peer network can be an important part of their healing, but there will be limits on what a peer network is able or qualified to do.

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.

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.

Chris Hampton, Community Tool Box

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



Things to say

The Psychology Today blog gives some examples of assertive phrases. These are words that you can memorise and resort to when the occasion arises. You can pick the ones that feel most natural to you:

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



For people whose *tears* in the meeting might be because of something painful that they are carrying, the facilitator might call a break to the meeting and spend one-on-one time with the person to check they're okay and pass on information about where they could get help to talk about that pain.

For people who show anger rather than tears, the facilitator might acknowledge the person's anger and move the meeting forward by saying something:

"I can see you're feeling angry about this. I don't think the meeting today can help with it, and we need to make sure everyone feels the conversation is safe and positive. We can talk together after the meeting and I can see if I know anyone who can help you with that. Let's keep this meeting going and put these feelings to one side."

Be ready to pause the meeting and refer someone to the right authorities such as the police if they share something in the meeting that is very troubling about their group home or boarding house.

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. **Peer Connect Quick Guide: Agreeing a set of rules for how people behave at a meeting** here:

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



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.69VXa0Y>



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
- Take a break
- Give the member the opportunity to be heard

Hopefully following these ideas means the peer network is going well and is feeling supported and able to function in a really good way. Your red bead has been threaded onto the string.



GOOD LUCK

We hope this workbook has helped you to think about the connecting threads of a peer network for people living in shared accommodation arrangements and how to tackle some of the challenges that can come with running a peer network.

We have made a string of beads to show the three main stages of setting up and running a peer network.

If we put the 3 beads together they look like this:



You can find the companion guide: ***Strong Peer Networks: Connecting The Beads Together*** here:

➤ <https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/strong-networks-connecting-beads/>

We have also made a short animation film about the life of a peer network which can help explain some of the ideas in this workbook. You can watch it here on the Peer Connect website:

➤ <http://www.peerconnect.org.au/>

The Peer Connect website has lots of other Quick Guides about how to run a peer network and some of the stuff a peer network might talk about. We see this as a browsable library that you can dip into to get more information about what you need.