

What does good digital peer support look like?

Digital Peer Support
Training Toolkit for
people with Long Covid



Background and context

What is this resource?

- This **editable resource** is designed to support anyone interested in setting up and establishing digital peer support, to do so in a pragmatic, yet reflective manner.
- The reflective practice template is **one part of a learning toolkit** designed to inform, upskill and support anyone wishing to establish digital peer support projects within their organisations.
- It is not intended to be full or comprehensive account, but instead **an aide memoir** to support the planning, thinking and resourcing of digital peer support groups.
- It utilises the learning from the **Long Covid (LC) Peer Support project**, which established digital peer support groups and operated over a three-year period, engaging and supporting over 100 people living with Long Covid within the Betsi Cadwalader University Health Board (BCUHB) area.¹
- As such, it draws on the **lived experiences of these groups**, uses vignettes from participants, gained through focus groups and direct participant feedback, to reflect what matters and what's valuable for them about this kind of intervention.

Who is this resource aimed at?

- Organisations with an interest in designing **supportive interventions for people with Long Term Health Conditions (LTHC)**.
- Organisations with an interest in **supporting people with Long Covid**.
- People in organisations with an interest in **setting up digital peer support groups**.

How should it be used?

- This **reflective practice toolkit** is designed to be used in collaboration with the accompanying training webinar – 'Digital Support Training Toolkit – a how to guide for facilitators'.
- It is best used as part of an **action learning process** (plan, do, reflect) using the reflective practice framework practically and systematically, to stimulate thinking, planning and resourcing digital peer support groups.
- This resource breaks down the areas of consideration within peer support praxis into **5 tangible aspects**, which dovetails with the breakdowns described in the training webinar. These include:
 1. Contracting
 2. Knowledge and delivery style
 3. Skills
 4. De-briefing
 5. Troubleshooting.

1. The Long Covid Project was a partnership between Mental Health Foundation and Betsi Cadwalader University Health Board, which operated between October 2020 and October 2023.

What does good digital peer support look like?

This resource outlines **3 principles of good digital peer support**, which were developed and validated through the delivery of the Long Covid Peer Support Project.

Whilst each principle **is valid in its own right**, this resource presents them as a ladder, which supports thinking about each principle in turn and in order.

Good Digital Peer Support enables and supports these principles in the context of peer support groups:

1. Validation
2. Connection
3. Advice-giving.



Validation

'Holding the space for lived experience'

- Validation is 'the feeling that other people approve of and accept you' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), and is an important part of why people join a peer support group, as they seek reassurance that they are not alone in their experiences.
- Feeling validated is about:
 - Having a place to go where you feel safe to share your experiences
 - Feeling listened to by others
 - Having your experiences recognised and affirmed by others.
- People living with Long Covid often report feeling **excluded from family and work life** and marginalised by wider society.
- They describe feeling 'forgotten' by the economic and social groups to which they once belonged and that living with LC makes them feel **hidden in plain sight**, and often surrounded by people who do not understand their lived experience.
- In the Long Covid Peer Support Group, participants often **verbally expressed their support for each other**, validating each other's feelings and experiences:

"I'm angry that I'm not the person I was 2 years ago. I've lost my job; had to move to a bungalow... Nobody understands unless you've had it..."

"We understand... we understand you"

PART 1

How does **VALIDATION** happen in the context of digital peer support?



Areas of consideration	Considerations	Reflective questions	Notes/reflections
Contracting	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring people have all the tools they need to join and take part (IT, training, support) • Making sure people are able to reliably access the virtual space (links, joining information) • Making clear the purpose of the group and establishing a group agreement and arrangements for re-visiting this 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do people know about your group? • What are the arrangements for accessing it? • What resources do people need to access? • How are group agreements developed and shared? • How are safeguarding concerns raised and progressed? 	
Knowledge and delivery style	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for facilitators on setting up and establishing groups • Training for facilitators on building co-production, participation and feedback into group design and delivery • Reflecting on the digital peer support model • Peer facilitated, peer moderated or a hybrid model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What knowledge and understanding on setting up and establishing digital peer groups is required by facilitators? • Will your group be facilitated by peers with lived experience (peer facilitated) or by an external facilitator (peer moderated)? • What are the benefits and drawbacks to each of these models for your group design and development? • How might a hybrid model (peer moderated and peer facilitated) work? 	
Skills	<p>Skills might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital and technology skills • Supporting the development of online group culture • Structure and timekeeping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What skills and tools are needed by group facilitators to establish the group? • How are new group members welcomed and integrated? 	

Areas of consideration	Considerations	Reflective questions	Notes/reflections
Debriefing	<p>Mechanisms might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrangements for supporting facilitators pre, during and post-peer support group delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does programme design support and encourage facilitators to engage in self-reflection? • What structures exist to support facilitators at each stage of peer support? 	
Troubleshooting	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing participant expectations • Dealing with non-engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What systems and processes exist for dealing with challenges? • What happens if facilitator/s are not able attend? • How are issues/challenges with the group resolved? 	

Connection

‘Supporting people to share their experience’

- Connecting is the act of joining or being joined with others (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024) and is an important component of peer support and explains why people **keep coming** to a peer support group.
- When people feel **genuine connections** with others, they are more likely to invest in **supporting and maintaining the group**.

- Connecting with others is about:
 - Being able to **share** your experiences
 - Being able to **listen** to others’ experiences
 - Being able to **empathise** and **sympathise**
 - Offering **support and encouragement** for peoples’ lived experiences
 - Feeling the **real time benefits** of peer support.

- In the **Long Covid Peer Support Group**, participants often recognised and expressed their connections with each other:

“We are all in the same storm. We’re not in the same boat, but we are in the same storm”.

PART 2

How does **CONNECTION**
happen in the context
of digital peer support?



Characteristics of peer support	Points to consider	Reflective questions	Notes/reflections
Contracting	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that people are clear about how they can connect and communicate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through what modalities do people connect? (Teams, email, WhatsApp, social media platforms?) • What arrangements are in place to facilitate people connecting between groups? 	
Skills	<p>Skills might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting turn taking • Bringing people into conversations • Keeping to time • Structuring the support session • Managing group dynamics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What skills do facilitators need to support people to connect? • How are these identified? How are gaps identified? • How is facilitator skill development built into training and support mechanisms for your group? 	
Knowledge and delivery style	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for peer facilitators on group process and dynamics • Determining whether a peer facilitated or peer moderated style • Processes for monitoring group attendance and engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What training do facilitators receive in how to understand and manage group dynamics? • What measures exist to determine how effectively people are connecting? • How are you measuring group success? 	
Debriefing	<p>Mechanisms might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways of seeking feedback from participants • Building in self-reflection mechanisms for facilitators • Peer support for facilitators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways is feedback solicited from participants? • How is feedback used by facilitators and programme operators? • How does programme design support and encourage facilitators to engage in self-reflection? • What structures exist to support facilitators at each stage of peer support? 	

Areas of consideration	Considerations	Reflective questions	Notes/reflections
Troubleshooting	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with disagreements/discordant perspectives/experiences • Responding to someone who takes up excessive verbal space • Personality/perspective clashes (e.g. someone who wants to 'think positively' Vs someone who is viewing their personal experience more pessimistically) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What knowledge and skills might facilitators need to deal with in-group challenges? • What structures, mechanisms and processes exist to support facilitators and encourage a culture of reflection and development? 	

Advice-giving

'The advice that people give and receive within the group'

- **Giving and receiving advice** in the context of peer support is a feature of many groups' sessions.
- **Advice is often subjective and refers to** an opinion that someone offers about what you should do or how you should act in a situation (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).
- Advice-giving **may be valued by some peers, but not others**, and requires skilled facilitation to ensure it is appropriately situated with a peer support group.

- Advice may be well received by peers, **assuming trust has been built between participants and it is preceded by the two previous principles** of validation and connection.
- Within the **Long Covid Peer Support Group**, advice sometimes occurred in respect of both emotional and practical support:

"No negative thoughts... if you can't flip a negative into a positive, dismiss the negative".



PART 3

How does **ADVICE-GIVING** happen in the context of digital peer support?



Characteristics of peer support	Points to consider	Reflective questions	Notes/reflections
Contracting	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing a group agreement which details what people can expect from the group Building trust between participants and with the facilitator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are your group rules for giving advice? How is trust built within the group? How do participants feel about giving and receiving advice from each other? How do participants feel about receiving advice from the group facilitator/s? 	
Skills	<p>Skills might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Checking that the stages of <i>validation</i> and <i>connection</i> have been sufficiently explored before advice-giving takes place Moderating advice-giving so that it forms part of discussion of options rather than becoming directional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How is advice-giving brought into the session? How is it managed by the facilitator/s, as part of a menu of ways of supporting each other? How might the facilitator bring advice-giving to a close, if it is not valued by one or more members of the group? 	
Knowledge and delivery style	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How advice-giving is situated within the scope of peer support? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the group peer-facilitated or peer-moderated? What style of delivery does the facilitator adopt within the group? Do they have lived experience of the conditions discussed? 	

Characteristics of peer support	Points to consider	Reflective questions	Notes/reflections
Debriefing	<p>Mechanisms might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-reflection mechanisms for facilitators • Offering regular 'check points' during peer support, so that the group shape what interventions occur in the sessions • Building in different ways for participants to give feedback on their experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do participants report in relation to advice given in the sessions? • What do facilitators report about advice given in the sessions? 	
Troubleshooting	<p>Considerations might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervening to moderate advice-giving, particularly if this is not appreciated by one or more group members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do facilitators check the salience of advice giving in a peer support session? • How do facilitators intervene in advice-giving, if this is deemed necessary? 	



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