

Creating Safe Spaces

Peer support practice guide 1



Welcome to the Creating Safe Spaces practice guide!

[Creating Hope with Peer Support](#) is part of the Creating Hope Together [Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan](#). The project highlights the unique and powerful role peer support contributes to suicide prevention.

The first in a series of four, this guide is designed to complement the [Creating Hope with Peer Support resource](#) and relates to the Connect stage of the Creating Hope with Peer Support Pathway. It's also a useful tool for anyone developing and delivering mental health peer support.

The practice guides are developed to help people involved in peer support groups and services to: **learn from shared experience, reflect on practice, and develop confidence and experience** by providing accessible and practical advice and tips. They are based on the experiences of peer supporters, groups and services across Scotland. We have used the term peer supporter throughout this practice guide. This is inclusive across one-to-one support and peer group facilitators.



Throughout this guide we will share examples of the ways peer supporters create safe spaces. Thanks to Keep the Heid, Andy's Man Club, Living Warriors Project, Bipolar Edinburgh, and all the fantastic peer supporters across Scotland who continue to develop, deliver and champion peer support.

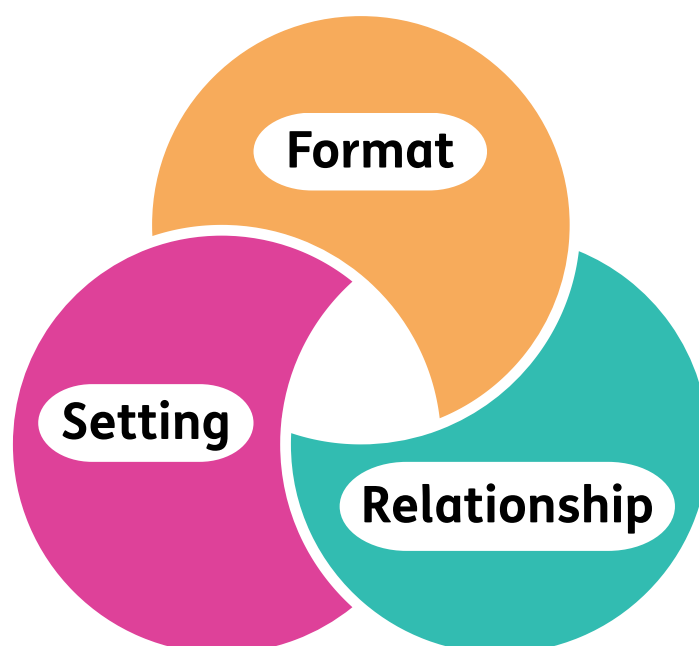
What is a safe space?

In peer support a 'safe space' is a place that provides a physically and emotionally safe environment where individuals / groups feel able to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences without the fear of judgement, disempowerment or discrimination.

Peer supporters do this through building relationships and spaces that enable people to feel safe enough to talk about and process difficult emotions and distressing experiences.

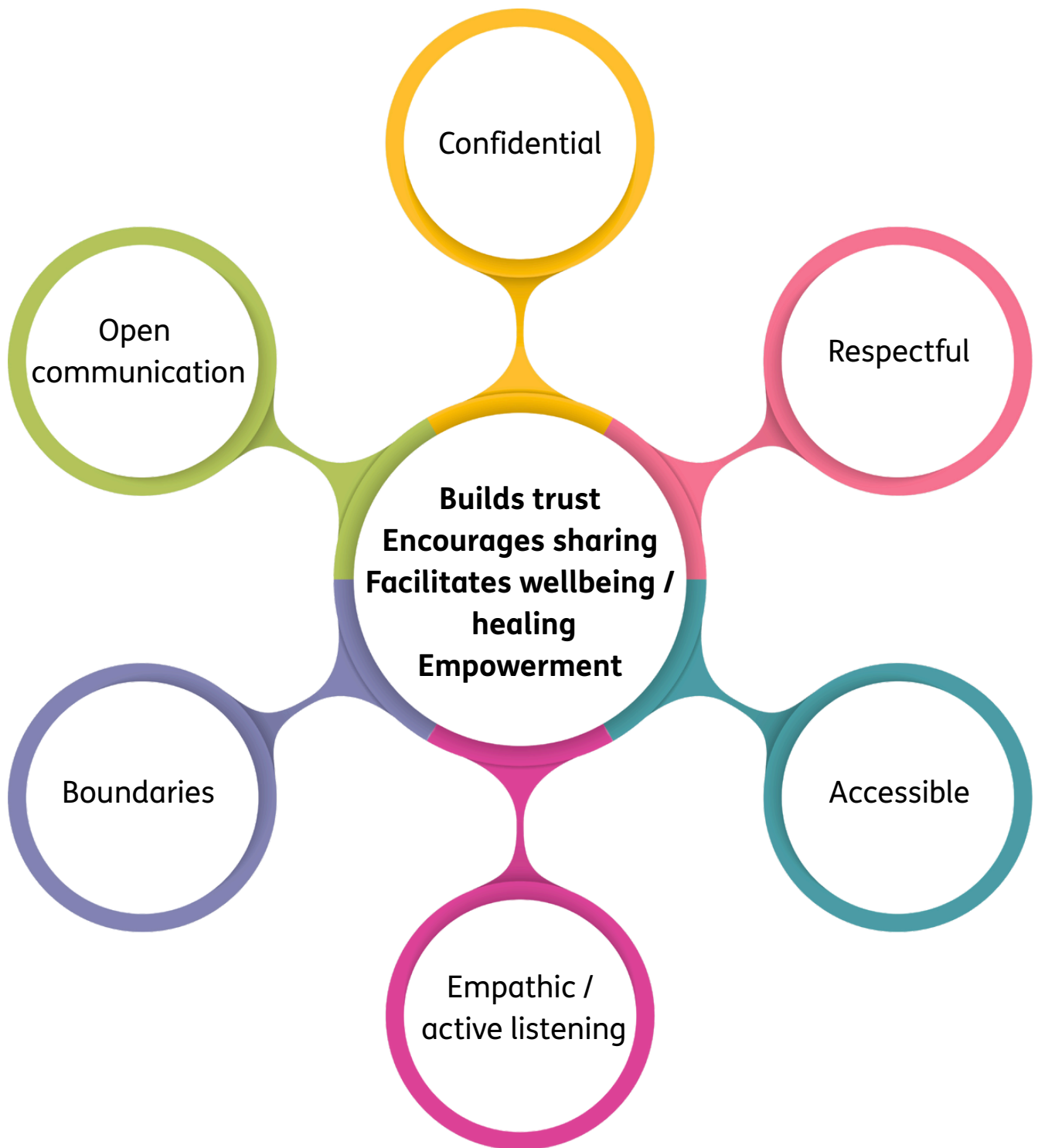
The peer support space

In peer support, creating safe spaces fosters trust and openness. Peer supporters have the unique opportunity to build relationships and guide hopeful conversations where people feel heard, understood and safe. A safe space can mean different things to different people. What is safe to one person or group can be very different to others. Core components that peer supporters describe as important are:



Key elements

Peer supporters describe that when the following six elements are created in peer relationships they provide the conditions for nurturing safe and peer spaces.



Top tips



Format of peer support

There are lots of practical ways peer supporters can foster a safe space. Here are some tips to give you some ideas and inspiration. There isn't one way to deliver one-to-one or group peer support. This is an opportunity to be flexible, adaptable and to design a format that meets the needs of the group and current / potential participants.

What is important is that the format is clear and owned by the people involved in the peer support.

- **Individual peer support** – clear information on what peer support is, the number of sessions, where you will meet, how meetings are recorded and what information is shared
- **Peer support groups** – clear information how the group is structured and what to expect

Many groups have a structure that includes a welcome and check in, discussion, and close with a check out.

Co-designed to be practical and adaptable the [Let's do Peer Group Facilitation guides](#) have a wealth of ideas to help with this.



Activities can provide a way to create a space and connect where the focus isn't solely on the person e.g., walking, crafting, book club, football.

Keep the Heid mental health café is based in East Lothian. By taking a strengths-based approach, they have a structure to their peer support groups that provide a safe space for people to bring their issues but also to focus on what helps. Tools they use include:

- A group agreement which creates a safe space and is shared at the start of each session
- A short meditation brings people into the space followed by time for people to share what is going on for them
- A break for tea and cake is followed by another period of sharing, this time focused on what is going well for people
- The groups close with a meditation

The peer support setting



The physical space we create for peer support is important. Peer support aims to be different from formalised support services and create an alternative space that is welcoming and more informal, where all involved feel they have ownership and control.

- Clear information about the space, transport, facilities, accessibility etc
- Welcome people warmly and openly
- Make the physical space comfortable, warm and inviting as it can help people feel more relaxed
- Providing refreshments can reassure people there is time for them
- Literally think outside the box– peer support can happen where people choose to meet and that can include community and outside spaces, quiet cafés, walks in the park, etc
- Develop clear ways to encourage turn taking and sharing the 'floor'

People delivering peer groups have shared novel ways to manage conversations. **Andy's Man Club** runs nationwide men's peer support groups. They use a ball that the speaker holds. The ball symbolises who has the floor and can speak. The ball is passed to the next person once finished. This ensures the person has the space to share uninterrupted.



Peer support relationship

Peer support is a mutual intentional relationship based on shared experiences. It is powerful but requires nurturing with open and honest conversations by all involved.

The peer support relationship is one where all involved have equal power. To realise this, the peer supporter needs to ensure that power is shared and people can participate in a way that works for them. This approach can be supported by:

- Co-creating an agreement focusing on how you will work together. This establishes the parameters of the relationship through mutual agreement and can be done in one-to-one support and groups.
- Communication and how we use language is important. Peer supporters role model language that is inclusive and recovery focused e.g., explore what is possible rather than what's wrong.
- Using open questions demonstrates that you are interested and keen to understand a person's experience. This helps people feel reassured that they are important, valued, safe and encouraged to share.
- People can, at times, find it challenging to express themselves – be creative! Drawing, emojis, film and music can all be ways to explore experiences. When the pace and method of sharing is led by the individual, they are more likely to experience the space and relationship as safe.

Living Warriors Project is an Edinburgh-based peer support group for survivors of attempted suicide. A creative activity using thematic prompts is integrated into the second half of the session, to ground and settle the space after sharing. This encourages hope and self-reflection, allowing participants to engage in creative expression of their experiences of suicide and ongoing recovery in whatever way feels right for them.

Activity

This activity is an opportunity for you to reflect on your peer practice. Developing an agreement on how to work together is an essential part of figuring out how to create and maintain a safe space which works best for everyone involved, whether that is individual or group peer support.

[Bipolar Edinburgh](#) is one example of how a peer group has worked together to create and continually ensure that their members experience the groups as a safe space. They describe their Comfort Agreement as key. Check out the [short animation](#) they have created.

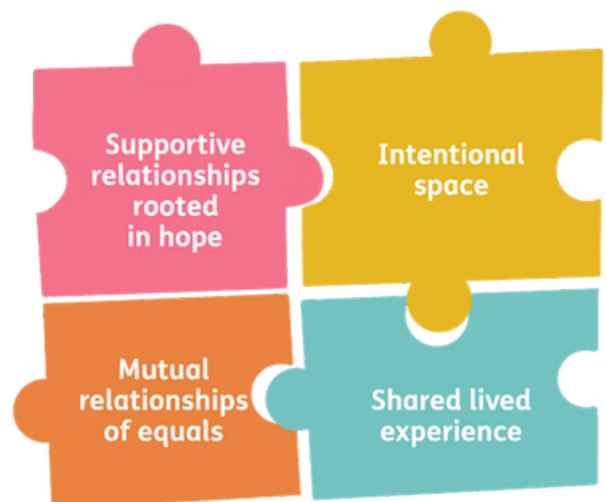
Our Comfort Agreement is developed by members and describes how we create a safe space in our groups. We share the animated version at the start of every meeting. It creates a relaxed atmosphere whilst reminding members of the purpose of the group and a commitment from everyone to making the group work. Our facilitators participate in training and reflective practice to ensure they facilitate in a way that upholds the Comfort Agreement and the values of Bipolar Edinburgh.



Michelle Howieson, Lead Facilitator

Either on your own or with others, reflect on the 3 questions below:

1. How do you create safety in your peer support practice?
2. The image identifies 4 key elements of what makes peer support unique. In co-creating an agreement, how do you include the 4 elements to ensure a peer approach?
3. How do you ensure that the agreement remains relevant and a live agreement that works for all?



Free resource

The [Creating Hope with Peer Support resource](#) was co-designed and piloted by groups and organisations already delivering peer support for people impacted by suicide. Download your copy from our website.

Peer Recovery Hub

On the [Peer Recovery Hub](#) you'll find more tools, events and opportunities to inspire you to develop and champion peer support.

Get in touch

Tel: 0300 323 9956 | [Contact Scotland BSL](#)

Email: info@scottishrecovery.net | www.scottishrecovery.net



[#CreatingHopeTogether](#) [#PeerSupportScot](#)

If you require information in a different format, please contact us.

Coming soon

Practice guide 2:
Navigating discomfort in
the peer relationship

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