



# Peer support

Explains what peer support is, what types there are, how it can help you and how to access it.

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# What is peer support?

Peer support is when people use their own experiences to help each other. There are different types of peer support, but they all aim to:

- bring together people with shared experiences to support each other
- provide a space where you feel accepted and understood
- treat everyone's experiences as being equally important
- involve both giving and receiving support.

*“The support was mutual. When I was going through a low patch, I often received reassurance and kind words.”*

In peer support everyone's views and experiences are equally valued, rather than anyone being seen as more of an expert than others. How much support you give and receive can vary depending on what feels right for you at different times.

## Types of peer support

Many groups, organisations and individuals offer different types of peer support. These differences may include:

- **what you have in common.** Peer support brings together people with shared experiences, and these experiences can vary. For example, you might share a diagnosis of a particular mental health problem or similar personal interests. Or you may have shared experiences, such as [hearing voices](#), identifying as [LGBTIQ+](#) or having a shared cultural background.
- **what you do together.** You might focus on talking and discussion, which could be about particular topics or difficulties, anything you feel like or a mixture, depending on how the support is run. Or you might do activities together such as walking, gardening, sport or being creative.
- **how you access the support.** Peer support might involve meeting in person or it might be something you access online – for example social media networks or communities dedicated to [online support](#) (such as Mind's [Elefriends](#)). You might also use other ways of getting in touch, such as emails, phone calls or text messages.
- **how many people take part.** You might meet in a group, which might sometimes be called a self-help or support group. Or you might take part in one-to-one peer support, which is sometimes called mentoring or befriending. This is where you work towards goals you've agreed together with someone else.

You can find out more about the different types of peer support on our page about [finding peer support](#).

*“It's not always about getting or giving advice. It's also about having a safe space to get things off our chest and occasionally sharing a laugh about it all!”*

## Different names for peer support

People use many different words to describe peer support, like self-help group, support group or mentoring. You also might find that there are some groups or individuals who use the same terms to describe different things.

If you want to know more about what to expect from a particular type of support, you could ask someone who helps run the support to explain how it works.

[Read Sue's blog about finding a place to fit in at her local peer support group.](#)

## Could peer support help me?

Lots of people find peer support improves their [wellbeing](#) and helps them cope with [mental health problems](#). For example, it could:

- help you to open up about what you are feeling and experiencing
- introduce you to ideas and approaches that others have found helpful
- reassure you that you're not alone in how you are feeling
- help you to connect with others and give you a sense of belonging
- encourage you to value your strengths
- build your [self-esteem](#) and confidence
- help you to feel more hopeful about the future.

Peer support can be helpful on its own, or it can be something you try alongside treatments like [talking therapies](#) or [medication](#). It can also be a helpful way of getting support if you're on a waiting list for one of these treatments.

For some people, it can be difficult to decide whether to try peer support, or which type of support to try out. If you are struggling with this decision, our information on [whether peer support right for you](#) might help.

*"Things I was ashamed of and felt guilt for were common in the group. It was a profound and powerful experience."*

[Read Laura's story about how helping other parents through a peer support group also brought her comfort.](#)

## Is peer support right for me?

Before trying peer support, it might help to ask yourself these questions:

- **Can I try opening up?** It can sometimes be difficult sharing your experiences and feelings. It's common to feel nervous or worried about what people will say, and it's likely that your peers will understand. They might feel the same way too and it's up to you how much you share.

- **Is it the right time?** You might decide that peer support isn't what you need at the moment. Many people use peer support more at certain times and less at others, depending on what feels helpful at the time.
- **Do I want to focus on talking or doing activities?** You might want to take part in indoor or outdoor activities, or you might prefer talking and discussion. If you're not sure what feels right for you, it might help to explore different options before deciding.

*“That shared experience of helping someone you don't know and having them open up to you is a wonderful, life-affirming experience.”*

- **How do I want to access support?** You might find online peer support helpful because you can often access it quickly and can use most websites for free. Or you might prefer to take part in face-to-face support. You might find it helpful to use more than one type of support, or to try different things before deciding what you prefer. See our pages on [online mental health](#) for information about using online peer support safely and maintaining your wellbeing online.
- **Might it be difficult hearing about others' experiences?** Listening to other people is a big part of peer support. This can help you feel less alone or introduce you to new ways of coping, but there might also be times when other people's experiences feel unhelpful or triggering for you.

The kind of support that works for you is completely personal. If you aren't finding something helpful, you can try something else.

*“I'll be honest, I had to go through a number of groups before I found one that I felt ok with and fitted in.”*

## Looking after yourself

When taking part in peer support, it's important to think about how it might affect your wellbeing. This includes the parts of peer support which may be helpful for you, but also what you might find difficult. For example:

- Try to notice how you're feeling, as there might be times when you aren't up to supporting others.
- You should feel free to share what you feel comfortable with, but it's worth thinking about how it makes you feel and how it might affect others.
- Remember to take time out if you need a break for any reason.
- Make sure you know [how to get help in a crisis](#). For example, you can call Samaritans 24 hours a day on 116 123 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

[Read Nikki's story about how peer support can be difficult and stressful at times, but it has transformed her life.](#)

## What if peer support doesn't work for me?

Although many people find peer support helpful, not everyone does. You might find that it doesn't suit you, or doesn't meet your needs. If you've tried something and it hasn't helped, it's important not to blame yourself.

Some people find peer support useful at some times and not others. If it's not the right thing for you now, you should still be able to access it in the future if you want to.

See our guide to [seeking help for a mental health problem](#) for other options you could explore.

## What if I have a complaint?

If you have a complaint, it could help to discuss your concerns with whoever organises your peer support group or service and ask about any ways you can make a complaint. You could also discuss it with your peers, if you feel comfortable doing so.

## How can I find peer support?

There are a number of different ways to find and access a type of peer support that suits you. You can often start doing peer support without a referral from your GP, although there are some types of support that do need your GP to refer you.

You may be able to access peer support through:

- [the NHS](#)
- [Mind's services](#)
- [online support](#)
- [community and voluntary groups](#)
- [student services](#)
- [becoming a peer supporter](#).

### Questions to ask before starting peer support

You might find it helpful to ask someone, such as a group organiser or moderator, these questions about the peer support they offer:

- How is the support structured? For example, if there is a set time to attend a group or meet with someone.
- Can I use the support for as long as I need to? Or is it limited to a set amount of time or number of sessions?
- Who leads or moderates the group? For example, some peer support is facilitated by trained, paid staff who have experience of mental health problems, or by volunteers.
- How many people take part?

- Can I bring someone with me?
- How can I find and access the venue where the support takes place?
- What ground rules or guidelines will I be asked to agree to? For example, you might be asked to take it in turns to talk or not share some types of information.
- What can I do if I have a question, concern or complaint?

## The NHS

Some NHS services run peer support groups. For example, this may be available within hospitals or organised by [community mental health teams \(CMHTs\)](#). You might need a referral from your GP to attend these types of support.

Your doctor or health care team might also have details of other support options in your area, such as charity or community groups.

## Mind's services

### Local Minds

Many local Minds offer different types of peer support service across England and Wales. To find out what's available in your area, you can ask [Mind's Infoline](#) or contact your [nearest local Mind branch](#).

### Mind's peer support directory

If you live in England, Mind's [peer support directory](#) lists some local options for peer support in different regions.

This includes some services offered by local Minds, and some provided by other organisations, so you may find a service in your local area.

## Online support

There is a wide range of peer support available online. For example:

- Mind runs the online support community [Elefriends](#), which is open to anyone over 18.
- Website such as [Big White Wall](#) can offer you free access to online peer support, although this is sometimes not available free if you live in certain parts of the UK. If your local area is eligible for this, you may be able to gain access with a GP referral or through your university.

- Our guide to [online mental health](#) has more information on [online support tools](#) and [looking after your safety online](#).

*“It’s also helped me to feel more accepting and at peace with who I am.”*

## Community and voluntary groups

Many community and third sector (charity) organisations provide peer support, although they're often not very well known and may not be easy to find.

These are some ideas to help you find out what may be available in your area:

- **Ask your local library or community centre.** They might know about groups which are run near you.
- [Mind's Infoline](#) can help you find support options in your area.
- **Explore our useful contacts for different diagnoses and experiences.** Each topic in our [mental health A-Z](#) has a list of useful contacts related to that topic. This includes many organisations that provide peer support focused on a particular diagnosis or experience.
- **Do an internet search** to look for details of online or offline peer support. You might also find details of local groups on social media. Our guide to [online mental health](#) has more information about using online support.
- **If you live in England**, you can find details of support groups on the [Rethink Mental Illness website](#) and the [Together UK website](#). The [National Survivor User Network \(NSUN\) website](#) lists groups in some local areas.
- **If you live in Wales**, [Hafal](#) provides some peer support services, including befriending.
- **If you identify as a member of an LGBTIQ+ community**, [Stonewall has a database of local groups](#) which you may find helpful.
- **If you're from a BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) community**, there may be groups in your area for people from your community. Your [local Mind](#) may offer this type of support, or you can search Mind's [peer support directory](#) for other local services.
- **For older people**, [Age UK](#) runs a telephone befriending service, as well as peer support and befriending services through local Age UK branches.
- **Befriending Networks** lists [befriending services in the UK](#), including in England and Wales.

[Read Rabia's story about setting up a peer support group for black and minority ethnic women aged over 50.](#)

## Peer support in rural areas

If you live in a rural area, mental health services and support may be more spread out. Your nearest [local Mind](#) should be able to suggest the most convenient options.

There are also several organisations that help support rural communities which may be able to help you access peer support, including the [Farming Community Network \(FCN\)](#) and [Action with Communities in Rural England \(ACRE\)](#).

Online support services like Mind's [Elefriends](#) can also be useful if you live in a rural area and struggle to find people who understand your experiences.

*“The stories shared were a personal revelation. Behaviours and thoughts I had kept secret and hidden for years were being mirrored by the words of others.”*

## Student services

[Student Minds](#) runs on-campus [peer support groups for student](#) at some universities. You could also ask your student union, advice team or wellbeing centre for information about peer support. Or your university may be able to give you access to [Big White Wall](#).

## Becoming a peer supporter

If you attend a group or share your experience online, you're already a peer supporter. Even if you don't speak up often, your presence counts. In peer support, listening to others is as important as sharing your own experiences.

You might also decide to get more involved by:

- volunteering. Many organisations offer opportunities to volunteer, for example by helping to moderate online communities.
- setting up your own group or being involved in group facilitation.
- applying for paid roles as a peer support worker, which will often include training.

[Read Zoe's story about how her experiences of using an online support forum led to her becoming a peer support worker.](#)

## Useful contacts

### Mind's services

- **Helplines** – all our helplines provide information and support by phone and email. Our Blue Light Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families.
  - Mind's Infoline – 0300 123 3393, [info@mind](mailto:info@mind)
  - Mind's Legal Line – 0300 466 6463, [legal@mind](mailto:legal@mind)
  - Blue Light Infoline – 0300 303 5999, [bluelightinfo@mind](mailto:bluelightinfo@mind)
- **Local Minds** – there are over 140 local Minds across England and Wales which provide services such as [talking treatments](#), [peer support](#), and [advocacy](#). [Find your local Mind here](#), and contact them directly to see how they can help.
- **Elefriends** is a supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. See our [Elefriends page](#) for details.



## Who else could help?

### Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE)

[acre.org.uk](http://acre.org.uk)

Information and signposting on a range of issues for people living in rural communities in England.

### Age Cymru (Wales)

08000 223 444

[ageuk.org.uk/cymru](http://ageuk.org.uk/cymru)

Information and support for older people.

### Age UK (England)

0800 678 1602

[ageuk.org.uk](http://ageuk.org.uk)

Information and support for older people.

### Befriending Networks

[befriending.co.uk](http://befriending.co.uk)

Information on befriending, including an online directory of UK befriending services.

### Big White Wall

[bigwhitewall.com](http://bigwhitewall.com)

Online mental health and wellbeing community. You need a paid subscription or NHS referral to join, although it is free for people living in some areas.

### Farming Community Network

03000 111 999

[fcn.org.uk](http://fcn.org.uk)

Support on a range of issues for people in the farming community.

### Hafal

[hafal.org](http://hafal.org)

Information and support for people affected by mental health problems in Wales.

### National Survivor User Network

[nsun.org.uk](http://nsun.org.uk)

Independent, service-user-led charity for people with experience of mental health issues. Provides information, networking opportunities and peer-to-peer support.

## Rethink Mental Illness

[rethink.org](http://rethink.org)

Provides support and information for anyone affected by mental health problems, including local support groups.

## Samaritans

116 123 (freephone, 24 hours a day)

[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

PO Box 90 90

Stirling FK8 2SA

[samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

24-hour emotional support for anyone who needs to talk.

## Stonewall

08000 50 20 20

[stonewall.org.uk](http://stonewall.org.uk)

Information and advice for LGBT people on a range of issues.

## Student Minds

[studentminds.org.uk](http://studentminds.org.uk)

Mental health charity that supports students.

## Together UK

[together-uk.org](http://together-uk.org)

Supports people with mental health problems, including through peer support.

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References are available on request.