

OBESITY UK

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS FOR

SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIM

WOMEN

FACILITATOR TRAINING

GUIDE

**A training resource for facilitators of peer support groups
for South Asian Muslim Women living with obesity**

About this guide

This resource has been developed with South Asian Muslim women, to provide a step-by-step guide to train facilitators of Obesity UK peer support groups for South Asian Muslim women living with obesity.

1. Setting up a good peer support group for South Asian Muslim women

There are some important things to consider when setting up the peer support group for South Asian Muslim women. These include the following:

1.A. A safe and suitable setting

- A face-to-face peer support group is usually preferred by South Asian Muslim women. However, when you are setting up your group you can ask potential group members whether they would prefer face to face or online sessions (or a mixture of both).
- The peer support group needs to be a safe and supportive space for South Asian Muslim women. This involves making sure that the setting is:
 - local and positioned in an area with a South Asian Muslim community.
 - safe and familiar. For example, a Mosque or community centre that the women routinely use.
 - culturally suitable. For example, a women-only space, where there is no risk of men coming into the session.
 - easily accessible by public transport and should have parking nearby.
- The setting should also have a facility to look after children where possible.
- A religious setting, such as the local Mosque would work well, as the group may want to talk about religious matters in relation to obesity.
- Parent involvement officers at local schools (where available), may be able to offer help with setting up a peer support group there.
- The room in which the peer support group is held needs to be:
 - warm and inviting.
 - relaxed and informal.
 - spacious and well-lit (with natural light where possible).
 - have comfortable and appropriate seating arrangements where possible (for example placing chairs in a circle rather than rows to help facilitate discussion).
- It is important to pay the venue promptly for use of its room
- Where possible, provide healthy refreshments, or ask the group to bring a healthy dish to each session. This is something that may attract South Asian Muslim women to join the group.

- You could build the peer support group onto an existing community group for South Asian Muslim women. This could be helpful as women would already be familiar with the setting and staff. You could deliver the peer support group sessions after the community group sessions, in a way that works best for the group.

1.B. A supportive space

- The women should all be from a South Asian Muslim background, where possible. This will help the group to feel safe and have a shared understanding of culture and religion.
- If the group decides to invite speakers, they do not necessarily need to be South Asian or Muslim but would need to be women with a good knowledge and understanding of Muslim religion and culture.
- Create a group agreement (set of ground rules for the group to ensure safety in the group) with the group during the first session. For ideas on how to do this, see 'The Group Agreement' section of the Obesity UK peer support group facilitator training guide, Quick Reference Guide in Urdu.

1.C. Inviting South Asian Muslim women to attend

- It is important to come up with a good name for the group, that will encourage people to attend.
 - The word 'obesity' could put some women off from attending.
 - Terms like 'wellness', 'health' and 'wellbeing' are usually preferred by South Asian Muslim women.
 - Once the peer support group is set up, you could ask the group what they would prefer to call it.
- Start the group at a suitable time in the year, avoiding during and immediately after school holidays, when family life may be busy.
- Regularly advertise the group in the following ways:
 - Ask trusted people in the community to tell South Asian women about it, for example people who work at or attend the Mosque. Word of mouth is important for spreading the word about the group.
 - Put up posters in Mosques, South Asian community centres, South Asian grocery stores and local schools. Make sure that the posters are large, eye catching, easily visible and in the most frequently spoken languages within your target community.
 - The peer support group facilitators should attend sessions at the Mosque, where possible, to talk about the peer support group: what it does and how to join.

- Use trusted groups or networks, for example on social media platforms such as any Facebook or community WhatsApp groups for South Asian Muslim women that you may be aware of.
- Use Asian radio stations.
- Try contacting community centres or groups that support South Asian Muslim women in your local area to tell them about the peer support group. They may be able to signpost South Asian Muslim women to the group.
- Provide clear information about the purpose of the peer support group in all communication, including the following:
 - what it is for: i.e. a safe space for women to talk about health, lifestyle and living with obesity.
 - the group is led by peers and not professionals. This is to manage group expectations, i.e. so they don't expect medical help or advice in the sessions.
 - the facilitators are there to facilitate the discussions and not to give health information to the group.
- If members of the group do want health information, guest speakers could be invited to talk about certain topics, or facilitators can signpost to trusted information resources attached to this guide or from your local NHS.
- Arrange transportation for group members who may need it, if possible. Make sure that the driver is a woman.
- Ask the group how they would like to be contacted (this may be several different ways). Ask them if they would like reminders sending out on the day to attend.
- Give advance notice about when the sessions are going to be held, so that group members can make arrangements around work and childcare.
- Create a timetable (or agenda) of what will happen in each session. This is so that the group knows in advance what to expect from each session and which topics are going to be discussed.
- Have a discussion with the group once established, about the importance of self-care, which may be helped by attending the peer support group. This may help encourage the women to keep attending.

1.D. Good facilitation of the group

- The peer support group facilitator should be a woman who shares the same cultural and religious background as the group,
- speaks the same languages,
- has lived experience of obesity,
- can be a role model to the community.

- It would be helpful to have some knowledge of local services for South Asian Muslim women, where possible. Some information about services supporting South Asian Muslim women with their health are attached to this guide.
- Where possible, have more than one facilitator during each session, so that group members can talk to a facilitator one-to-one if needed.
- As a facilitator, it is important to feel supported in your role, see the 'Accessing Support for Facilitators' section of the Obesity UK peer support group facilitator training guide, Quick Reference Guide in Urdu.
- As a new facilitator, it is important to buddy up with one or two existing facilitators before you start, if possible. A buddy is an experienced facilitator that can offer you opportunities to shadow group facilitation and ask questions to or share concerns with.
 - Choose a facilitator that you would feel comfortable mentoring you.
 - Observe at least one established peer support group session before you start to facilitate a group yourself.
 - Remember every facilitator will have their own 'style' of facilitating, so learn from others but always facilitate your sessions in a style you are comfortable with.

2. What a good peer support group for South Asian Muslim women looks like

2.A. A clear structure

- Ask the group once it is established, how they would like the peer support group sessions to be delivered. As a starting point, you could run a weekly or monthly peer support group during the day for around 1-1.5 hours which is usually preferred by South Asian Muslim women.
- Once the group is set up, you can ask them when, how often and for how long they would prefer the sessions to run.
- Plan the sessions with your co-facilitators and agree on roles. The role of facilitator requires a significant time commitment:
 - You will need to spend around one hour planning and setting up each session. This includes setting up the room and preparing resources, such as leaflets or handouts/links, or organising speakers.
 - You will need to spend around another hour after each session to debrief with your co-facilitators and plan for the next session.
- Ask the group regularly what structure they would prefer. For example, if they would like to have specific topics for discussion and if they would like guest speakers and activities.

- If the group would like guest speakers, the type of professionals you could consider inviting would be a local health practitioner, dietician or researcher to talk about certain health topics, or someone to facilitate a guided activity session, depending on what your group would most like.
- If the group would like to discuss certain topics, set up ways for the group to tell you which topics they would prefer, such as using a suggestion box. For topic ideas, here are some examples of topics related to health and weight management previously chosen by South Asian Muslim women:
 - Eating behaviours, habits, patterns and impacts on health.
 - Obesity and health conditions.
 - Managing obesity and weight.
 - Religion and weight management.
 - Reducing illness through healthy lifestyle.
 - Emotional eating (loss/bereavement/stress).
 - Menopause and obesity.
 - Body image.
 - Mental health, including stress/anxiety and loneliness.
 - How to exercise and how to get motivated to exercise.
 - Fasting with Diabetes
 - Accessing NHS services.
- The group may want to take part in certain activities. Art or craft-based activities and exercises, such as walking, and chair-based exercise. Make sure that the activities are suitable for the culture, age and abilities of all the women in the group.

2.B. Clear communication with the group

- It is important to clearly explain to the group why they are being asked to do something, such as filling in any forms or paperwork related to the group's activity.
- Ask the group how they would like any information from guest speakers to be given to them (e.g. handouts, leaflets, videos, email, WhatsApp group etc.).
- Make sure that guest speakers do not give out too much information at one time. It may need to be given out over more than one session.
- Make sure that all information for the group is written in the most appropriate languages and is easy to read and understand. Offer support with translation, where possible.
- Use conversation starters, such as icebreakers that are culturally appropriate. For example, you could ask women about their favourite:
 - nasheeds (songs that do not use musical instruments).
 - cuisine/dish
 - hobby/interest.
 - outdoor activity or what they enjoy doing.

2.C. Connection within the group

- It is important to build connection and trust within the group and create a welcoming and supportive environment. It is often useful to spend some time chatting and getting to know each other. When doing this, it is important to consider your own personal boundaries and how much you are willing to share with the group. You also need to think about how you engage with group members outside of the group setting. This is important in helping to ensure you achieve a comfortable and professional relationship with your group participants. For more information about boundaries, see the 'Maintaining Boundaries for Yourself and the Group' section of the Obesity UK peer support group facilitator training guide, Quick Reference Guide in Urdu.

2.D. An inclusive space

- It is important that the group is inclusive, therefore please do consider any key differences in age, experiences, interests and abilities across the members. It is important to include in the group agreement that group members should be respectful of each other's differences, including being respectful of those who may not 'look' like they are living with obesity. As obesity is a chronic disease, it may be that some people who are currently a healthy weight have lived with obesity in the past and may still need support in the changes they face in relation to weight management.

2.E. Difficult conversations and situations managed

- There are many challenges that can arise when facilitating a peer support group. When managing challenges in the group, part of your role as facilitator is to remind people of what has been agreed between them. The most helpful tool in managing challenges is the group agreement. Work with your co-facilitator, if you have one, bounce ideas off each other and support each other in sessions and afterwards.

3. Keeping the peer support group going

- Ask group members whether they would like to help facilitate the group, and if they do, 'buddy them up' with more experienced facilitators to help build their skills and confidence to facilitate. This will help to keep the group running if a facilitator leaves the role.
- Provide ways for group members to give feedback about, or make suggestions for improvements to the group, e.g., provide a suggestion box at each session. This might help members to feel that they have input into how the group runs and ensure you continue to meet your group's needs. This might encourage your members to keep attending, and hopefully encourage new members to join.

Further Information and Support Resources to signpost Group Members to

1. INFORMATION RESOURCES

1.A. Healthy eating and cooking

- Healthy Eating for the South Asian Community from Diabetes UK: <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/resources-s3/2017-11/Can.pdf>
- Your Flavour Toolbox for South Asian cooking from Diabetes UK: <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes/enjoy-food/cooking-for-people-with-diabetes/getting-started/your-flavour-toolbox>
- Healthy eating guide from the Healthier You NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme: https://assets.nhs.uk/campaign-resource-centre-v3-production/documents/221201_HealthierYou_AfricanCaribbeanSouthAsianFoodGuide_Online.pdf
- South Asian Diets and Cholesterol from Heart UK: <https://www.heartuk.org.uk/healthy-diets/south-asian-diets-and-cholesterol>
- Carbs and Cals Healthy Eating mobile phone App for counting nutrients and tracking food and drink consumed: <https://carbsandcals.com/app/free-trial/>
- Recommended books:
 - Carbs and Cals World Foods: <https://carbsandcals.com/books/world-foods/>
 - Carbs and Cals Carb & Calorie Counter: <https://carbsandcals.com/books/carb-calorie-counter/>

1.B. Type 2 Diabetes

- Diabetes and Ramadan from Diabetes UK: <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes/managing-your-diabetes/ramadan>
- Managing diabetes during Ramadan from Diabetes UK: <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/resources-s3/2017-09/Ramadan-Imam-Script-0315.pdf>
- Diabetes information in different languages and formats from Diabetes UK: <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/diabetes-the-basics/information-in-different-languages>
- A WhatsApp group run by qualified NHS workers from Bradford providing support with diabetes care, open to anyone from any background or gender:
 - For more information: <https://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/24291573.diabetes-care-peer-support-group-helps-people-manage-health/>
 - For how to join, email: info@abilitiestogether.org.uk or @abilitiesb on X.

1.C. Weight management

- The NHS Digital Weight Management Programme: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/digital-weight-management/>
- NHS Better Health: <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/lose-weight/#free-programmes>
- Obesity treatment - NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/obesity/treatment/>

- Physical activity on referral schemes - it may be worth contacting your GP to find out what schemes may be offered in your local area. Examples include Everyone Active's GP Exercise Referral Scheme: <https://www.everyoneactive.com/content-hub/health/gp-referral/> and Living Well Bradford BEEP: <https://mylivingwell.co.uk/physical-activity/beep-bradford-encouraging-exercise-in-people/>.

1.D. Mental health

- BAME Mental Health from Rethink Mental Illness: https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/information-on-wellbeing-physical-health-bame-lgbtplus-and-studying-and-mental-health/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-mental-health/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMlyZWE8Zav7AlVyuvvtCh3N9QtIEAAYASAAEgl-fPD_BwE
- Supporting Young South Asian People with Wellbeing from Rethink Mental Illness: <https://www.rethink.org/aboutus/what-we-do/our-services-and-groups/step-up/step-up-schools-colleges/supporting-young-south-asian-people-with-wellbeing/>
- Mental Health and Muslim Communities from the Muslim Women's Network: https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/factsheets/143970-Mental%20Health%20+%20MC%20Leaflet_WEBFINAL.pdf
- Dealing with trauma from the Muslim Women's Council: https://muslimwomenscouncil.org.uk/dealing_with_trauma

1.E. Setting up a walking and talking group

- A guide to setting up a walking and talking group from the Muslim Women's Network: https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/factsheets/1697966294-MWNUK-Walk-and-Talk-Booklet.pdf

2. SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIM WOMEN

Examples of national and local organisations and charities

2.A. Mental Health, health and wellbeing

- **South Asian Health Foundation:** <https://www.sahf.org.uk/resources> - includes resources on diabetes, cardiovascular disease and healthy eating.
- **Muslim Community Helpline:** <https://muslimcommunityhelpline.org.uk/> - national organisation providing listening and emotional support service for members of the Muslim community in the UK.
- **Muslim Women's Network MWN helpline:** <https://www.mwnhelpline.co.uk/issuesdetail.php?id=49> - has its own counselling service and you can receive counselling over the phone. However, there is likely to be a waiting list. Contact 0800 999 5786.
- **Sharing Voices:** <https://sharingvoices.net/> - charity in Bradford that aims to reduce mental health and related inequalities for Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities.

- **The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network:** <https://www.baatn.org.uk/> - the UK's largest independent organisation to specialise in working psychologically, informed by an understanding of intersectionality, with people who identify as Black, African, South Asian and Caribbean.
- **South Asian Health Action** support services: <https://amhp.org.uk/resources/support-services/>
- **Mind** - Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Mental Health Support Organisations: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/racism-and-mental-health/useful-contacts/>
- **Roshi Sheffield Health and Wellbeing Services:** <https://www.roshnisheffield.co.uk/services/health-and-wellbeing-services-in-sheffield/> offer a befriending service, advocacy and mental health support.
- **Sahil:** <https://www.sahilproject.co.uk/> - South Asian mental health and wellbeing support centre in Coventry and Warwickshire.
- **Shifa Network:** <https://shifanetwork.org.uk/> - emotional wellbeing support across Surrey.

2.B. Other types of support

- **Sharan:** <https://sharan.org.uk/> - providing support and advice to vulnerable women, particularly of South Asian origin, who have been or are at risk of being disowned due to abuse or persecution.
 - A health information resource from Sharan: https://sharan.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Health-resource_SP_Oct-2018.pdf
- **Aawaz:** <https://www.aawaz.org.uk/help-and-advice/> - have an open-door system to assist women and families with social welfare benefits, housing, unemployment, finance, debt and many other issues.
- **Aanchal Women's Aid:** <https://aanchal.org.uk/> - 24-hour telephone helpline and services for Asian women who have experienced domestic violence, emotional support, group work and counselling.
- **Muslim Women's Network:** <https://www.mwnhelpline.co.uk/> - a national specialist faith and culturally sensitive helpline which offers information, support, guidance and referrals for those who are suffering from or at risk of abuse or facing problems on a range of issues.
- **Ashiana Network:** <https://www.ashiana.org.uk/> - specialises in helping BAME women, in particular women from South Asian, Turkish & Iranian communities, aged 16-30 years who are at risk of domestic violence and sexual violence.
- **Muslim Women's Council** domestic abuse support: <https://muslimwomenscouncil.org.uk/media/resources/domestic-violence-services-and-helplines>
- **Apna Haq:** <https://apnahaq.org.uk/about-apna-haq/> - supporting women with any form of violence, including domestic violence across Rotherham and South Yorkshire.
- **Shama Women's Centre Leicester:** <https://shamawomenscentre.co.uk/> - offers support with empowerment, camaraderie, peer support, training and upskilling, as well as information, advice and guidance, based in Leicester.
- **Muslim Women's Welfare Association:** <https://www.mwwa.co.uk/> - offers ESOL classes, dressmaking, computer classes, parenting skills programme, Yoga and keep fit activities and many others across Essex.

- **Nottingham Muslim Women's Network:**
<https://nottinghammuslimwomensnetwork.co.uk/> - runs sports and exercise classes, English and employability support for Muslim women and girls in Nottingham.
- **Amina** - The Muslim Women's Resource Centre: <https://mwrc.org.uk/> - service based in Scotland, provides helplines (Mon-Fri 10am-4pm) for casework and advocacy, befriending support, and specialist clinics.

Further more general information and support resources can be found in the 'Further Information and Resources to Signpost to' resource of the Obesity UK peer support group facilitator training guide, Quick Reference Guide in Urdu.

“Developing a peer support group for South Asian Muslim women living with obesity”

Why we did this

Obesity UK run peer support groups for people living with obesity, but we know these support groups are not used by many South Asian Muslim women. We wanted to work with this community to develop a new peer support group that was tailored to meet their needs.

How we did this

- Obesity UK, researchers and South Asian Muslim women living in West Yorkshire all worked together.
- We recruited South Asian Muslim women using social media and community links and ran 4 workshops (at a community centre, Mosque, sports centre, and online) where 44 women attended.
- We set up a twice-weekly in-person peer support group at two Mosques in September 2023. Due to very low attendance, we relocated the group to a community centre at another Mosque, where it ran after an existing coffee morning. This group ran for 10 weeks with a total of 22 sessions, attended by an average of 7 women per session.
- Three South Asian Muslim women, trained by Obesity UK, ran the group sessions.
- We spoke to 4 women who attended the sessions, as well as two facilitators and the setting manager to find out how the sessions went.

What lessons did we learn

- We achieved a safe, supportive, culturally tailored space for South Asian Muslim women, which women valued as they felt listened to.
- The women preferred a combination of peer support and educational sessions featuring guest speakers. The women wanted something different to the traditional model of peer support, for example they wanted it to include health advice.
- The group needs sustainable funding to pay for facilitators and other expenses, such as room hire and guest speakers, to keep it running.
- It is important to create a distinct and separate space for peer support, when delivering it after existing activities.
- The term obesity may put some women off from attending. The women preferred the terms ‘wellness group’ or ‘health and wellbeing’, which encompasses a broader range of health issues related to obesity which they often spoke about.
- Facilitators need comprehensive training, mentoring and ongoing support, as well as emotional support to help them debrief after sessions.
- It is important for the organisers (e.g. Obesity UK) to build a trusting relationship with the facilitators so that they receive support and feel a sense of belonging to the work.

What this work achieved

We used the findings to develop resources and a toolkit to help others develop peer support groups in their communities. You can access these resources here:

