

# Obesity UK

## Peer Support Group

### Managing challenges in the group



## Below are some ideas on how to manage some challenging situations you may encounter within the group.

There are examples of both unsuccessful and successful approaches to managing a variety of scenarios, which have been recommended by facilitators at Obesity UK and from a Mind resource, Developing peer support in the community: a toolkit: <https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4247/peer-support-toolkit-final.pdf>

It is important to acknowledge that there may be no single solution to these situations. Every person, and situation is different, therefore support needs and actions will vary. It is therefore useful to familiarise yourself with a range of strategies.

### 1. Managing difficult conversations

Occasionally there may be challenging conversations within the group that will need to be managed.

**An unsuccessful approach to managing these might include the following actions:**

- Ignoring or avoiding the issue: the facilitator ignores the conversation or changes the subject without addressing the challenging conversation, hoping it will resolve itself without intervention.
- Personal bias: the facilitator takes sides, showing favouritism or bias, which can escalate tensions and cause resentment within the group.
- Overreacting: the facilitator reacts emotionally or aggressively, raising their voice or using harsh language, which can intimidate participants and shut down open communication.
- Shaming: the facilitator singles out an individual for criticism in front of the group, which can humiliate the person and discourage participation.
- Inconsistency: the facilitator does not always enforce the group agreement around acceptable behavior which can lead to confusion and lack of trust in the facilitator's ability to lead the group. For an example of a group agreement, see 'The group agreement': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/01d-the-group-agreement.pdf>

**A successful approach to managing challenging conversations might include the following actions:**

- **Be clear and timely in responding to the situation:** remind people of their responsibilities (outlined within the group agreement).
- **Assume good intent** wherever possible.

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- Be consistent in your approach: enforce the group agreement consistently. Refer to the points around expected behaviours that were agreed by the group, and the actions to be taken when the ground rules are broken.
- **Take action:** be ready to gently stop someone if the group agreement is not being adhered to. This may mean interrupting, “I just need to stop you there as I’m mindful of our group agreement. Perhaps we can come back to this once we have heard from XX” and then thanking them.
- **Offer one-to-one support:** ask the individual(s) involved if they would like to speak with a facilitator one-to-one in a private space away from the rest of the group or in a breakout room during online meetings.

## 2. Finding a space for everyone to speak

**A.** There may be people in the group that are silent. It may be that they are simply listening and waiting for a time when they feel safe and confident enough to speak. You can help provide opportunities for everyone to feel that they are heard or listened to.

An unsuccessful approach might be to do nothing and not make any attempt to bring someone who is silent into the group discussions.

**A successful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Use an exercise:** start or finish a group with an opportunity for everyone to say how they are feeling or use an icebreaker exercise to encourage people to speak.
- **Use a comments box or a feedback form or send a private message to the facilitator:** this allows people to give feedback about the group anonymously and feel that they are being listened to.

**B.** There may be group members that dominate conversations within the group and do not allow others to speak. This will need to be managed. This may mean interrupting, “I just need to stop you there as I’m mindful of time. Perhaps we can come back to this once we have heard from XX” and then thank them.

**An unsuccessful approach might include the following actions:**

- Ignoring or avoiding the issue: the facilitator allows the person to keep dominating the conversation, hoping it will resolve itself without intervention. This prevents others from having an opportunity to speak and receive support.
- Shaming: the facilitator singles out the person dominating the discussions and criticizes their behaviour in front of the group. This can make the person feel humiliated and discourages others from participating.
- The facilitator reminds the group to allow other people to speak but does not refer to the group agreement. This makes it seem as though the facilitator is telling people what to do, rather than reminding the group what was agreed by them all.

**A successful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Make no eye contact** with the person who is dominating the group.

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- **Move the conversation onto another person or topic:** e.g. sorry to interrupt you but I am mindful of time, and we need to discuss...
- **Refer to the group agreement:** remind the group to allow others to speak, as agreed on the group agreement.
- **Speak with them one-to-one:** take the person to one side outside of the room or in a breakout room to find out what is troubling them, give them space to discuss any frustrations and remind them of the benefits of listening to others for support.
- **Use a game:** you can introduce an item such as a shell into the group, with the rule that only the person holding the shell can speak. This can be fun if introduced occasionally and can alter how people behave in the group.



## 3. Breaches of confidentiality

Confidentiality is sometimes unintentionally broken by people who know each other and talk outside of the group. Dealing with it is not always easy.

**An unsuccessful approach might include the following:**

- **Ignoring and avoiding the issue:** the facilitator does not raise the issue around breaching confidentiality with the group, allowing group members to continue to do this and undermines the safety of the group.
- **Shaming:** the facilitator singles out the person regarding their behaviour in front of the group. This can humiliate the person and discourage others from participating.

**A successful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Refer to the group agreement:** remind the group of what they've all agreed to in terms of boundaries and respecting confidentiality.
- **Include the whole group:** have a specific group discussion about what confidentiality means to everyone, as people may have different understandings of what it means. Talk about how the group can make it work in practice.
- **Use a comment or suggestion box:** to help identify this problem and other problems within the group.

## 4. Dealing with aggressive behaviour

Occasionally there may be some people who may become aggressive during group discussions, perhaps when they are expressing strong feelings or in disagreement with another group member. Any aggressive behaviour towards another group member needs to be addressed, so that people feel safe within the group.

**An unsuccessful approach might include the following actions:**

- The facilitator asks the individual to calm down, without acknowledging their feelings or underlying emotions and offering any further support. This causes tensions to escalate.
- **Overreacting:** the facilitator reacts emotionally or aggressively, raising their voice or using harsh language, which can intimidate participants and shut down open communication.

**A successful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Use simple de-escalation and calming techniques:** allow space around the person who is being aggressive, do not get too close (face-to-face groups). Appear calm, keep a neutral facial expression and avoid eye contact. Control your breathing, lower your voice and keep an even tone.
- Use words and phrases that **de-escalate** such as, "I wonder if...", "Let's try...", "It seems like...", "Maybe we can..."
- **Acknowledge feelings** by saying, "it's understandable that that has made you feel angry."

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- **Offer one-to-one support:** ask them if they would like to speak with a facilitator one-to-one outside of the group meeting, where possible.
- **Try distraction strategies:** ask the person to think about a solution to the situation.
- **Use positive statements:** tell the person what you want them to do (making a positive statement) rather than what you don't want them to do. For example, "please would you mind sitting down" rather than "stop arguing with me." It's more important that you are seen to address the situation, rather than to 'win' an argument.
- **Refer to the group agreement:** remind the group what was agreed around respectful and appropriate behaviour. Refer to and enforce the agreed procedures for when someone breaks the ground rules consistently, e.g. asked to leave the session.

## 5. Speaking and hearing about difficult experiences

Occasionally someone who has shared an emotional experience with the group may become distressed or upset. It may be that they have shared too much information too soon. Hearing about difficult experiences can be upsetting and can lead to other people becoming distressed too – particularly if they share common experiences.

**It is important to ask group members to warn the group if they are going to talk about something emotionally triggering or distressing. This gives others the option to leave the session temporarily if needed.**

An unsuccessful approach to managing this would be for the facilitator to offer generic reassurance without addressing the underlying emotions. This leads to the person feeling unsupported, exposed and disengaging from the group.

**A successful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Acknowledge and validate their feelings:** show compassion, empathy and understanding. You could say things like, "that must be difficult for you", "this is a really challenging time for you", "it's understandable that that has made you feel upset/angry", and "thank you for sharing that with us today."
- **Offer one-to-one support:** ask if they would like to talk to a facilitator one-to-one in a safe confidential space away from the rest of the group (where possible) for face-to-face groups, or in a breakout room for online groups. You can use this time to listen and give further support. You could ask if there is someone at home to support them or you could ask if they would like some information for support organisations. See 'Further information and resources to signpost to': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/04-further-information-and-resources-to-signpost-to.pdf>
- **Check in:** if the individual does not want to talk with a facilitator one-to-one during the session, it can help to take them to one side afterwards and check if they're okay, or message them discreetly on your chosen online meeting platform.
- **Involve the whole group:** you could ask the group if they would like to offer any suggestions for further action or support, where appropriate.

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- **Use the group agreement:** one of the ground rules could make it clear that no one needs to share anything they don't want to.
- **Take a break** and have a cup of tea.

## 6. Giving advice or being too directive

Occasionally there may be members who become too directive with other group members and try to tell others what they should do in a particular situation. Suggesting and sharing strategies is an important part of peer support, but it can cross a boundary and become too directive.

**An unsuccessful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Ignoring or avoiding the issue:** the facilitator does not address the issue with the group, allowing the individual to carry on being too directive with other group members. This can make others feel uncomfortable and lose trust in the facilitator's ability to lead the group.
- **Shaming:** the facilitator singles out the individual and asks them to stop telling others what they should do in front of the group. This leaves them feeling humiliated and discourages others from participating.

**A successful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Speak to the whole group:** try to discourage the group from being too directive and say that it does not agree with the principles of peer support and may not be acceptable to other group members.
- **Talk to group members** to help them understand that everyone should feel as though they have choice and control within the group. They should be able to reach their own decisions within their own circumstances.

## 7. When the wrong information is given out within the group

Occasionally group members may unintentionally share incorrect information with the group. This will need to be addressed, as it is important that people are given the correct information based on their personal circumstances.

**An unsuccessful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Ignoring and avoiding the issue:** the facilitator allows group members to continue sharing incorrect medical information/advice, without stating that this information may not be relevant for other people. This may result in group members following the wrong advice.
- **Shaming:** the facilitator singles out the individual and criticizes them for giving the wrong information in front of the group. This leaves them feeling humiliated and discourages others from participating.

**A successful approach might include the following suggestions:**

- **Speak to the whole group:** ask the group to use disclaimers before they share medical information or advice. They could say something like, "this information is based on guidance from my medical team, it may not be relevant for everyone else."



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- **Intervene if someone forgets to use a disclaimer:** if someone gives out medical advice/information and forgets to use a disclaimer, remind them to do this and say, “I understand that this is what you have been told by your medical team and it is personalised for you. Everyone should talk to their own medical team for information that is accurate and personalised for them.”

## 8. Critical, judgmental or insensitive comments and lack of respect for differences

Within a group there can be limits to how well people will understand each other's differences. This may lead to people unintentionally saying things that are insensitive which can be upsetting. Occasionally group members say things that are directly offensive, or which demonstrate a lack of respect for other people, including racist or homophobic views or any other form of discrimination. This can make people feel unsafe in the peer support space, particularly members of marginalised groups, such as people living with disabilities, people from different ethnic or religious groups, or people who identify as part of LGBTQIA+ groups. It is important to address any offensive views or discrimination.

**An unsuccessful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Ignoring and avoiding the issue:** the facilitator does not feel comfortable raising the issue with the group. This allows group members to continue saying insensitive and discriminatory remarks, which may make some members feel unsafe and unlikely to return to the group.
- **Overreacting:** the facilitator reacts emotionally or aggressively, raising their voice or using harsh language which can escalate tensions further.
- The facilitator asks the group to be respectful towards other group members but does not refer to the group agreement whilst doing this.

**A successful approach might include the following suggestions:**

- **Refer to the group agreement:** refer to some of the points, such as the need to include everyone and to not discriminate against anyone. Remind the group about and enforce the group agreement on what will happen when one of the ground rules is broken e.g. having to leave the group.
- **Speak to them one-to-one:** talk to the individual outside the group to reiterate the need to include everyone and to not discriminate against anyone.
- **Run a discussion** around a particular topic and invite a member of the group to contribute to this. This will help group members learn about issues they may not be familiar with.
- Remind the group that gender reassignment and sexual orientation are two of nine protected characteristics, and it is against the law to be discriminated against because of these or any of the other protected characteristics.





## 9. Group members giving too much support and not seeking support for themselves

It can be difficult for people to get the balance right between giving and receiving support within the peer support group. Some people may find that they naturally take on a supporting role but have difficulty asking for support when they need it. This could lead to feeling burnt out.

**An unsuccessful approach might include the following actions:**

- **Ignores and avoids the issue:** the facilitator is aware of the issue but does not discuss the importance of people seeking support for themselves with the group. This leaves the person feeling unsupported, burnt out and disengaging from the group.
- The facilitator reminds the person that the group supports them but does not address their underlying emotions or ask if they need further support. This may make the individual feel that their feelings are not valid, and that they are not getting the support they need.

**A successful approach might include the following suggestions:**

- **Check in:** take the individual to one side after the meeting and ask if they are feeling okay and ask if there is anything you can do to support them further.
- **Offer one-to-one support:** ask the individual if they would like to speak to a facilitator one-to-one in a confidential space outside of the room or within a breakout room during an online session, where possible.
- **Talk to the group:** talk to the group on a regular basis about what everyone likes to do to look after themselves. Encourage the group to think about what it means to take responsibility for their own wellbeing, how to ask for support when they need it and what that may look like in practice.

## 10. Responsibility for decision-making in groups

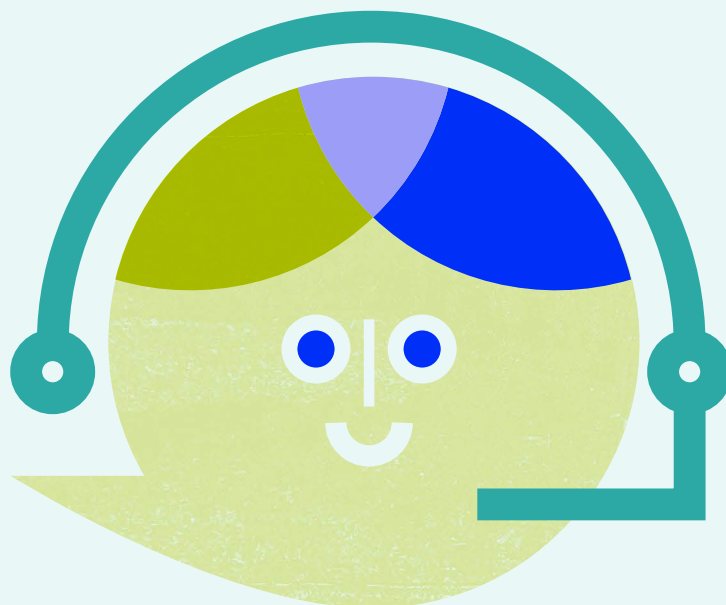
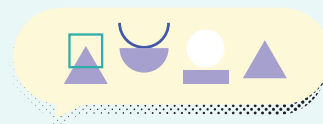
It can be difficult to encourage group members to take part in the decision-making for the group. Some people may feel that they have something important to contribute but find it difficult to do so. Others may feel reluctant to take responsibility for the group's decisions. This may make it difficult to make and carry out important decisions.

An unsuccessful approach might be for the facilitator to take on all the responsibilities for the group, without asking for any support from other group members. This may lead to them feeling burnt out and no longer able to carry out the role.

**A successful approach might include the following:**

- **Discuss with the group** how they would like decisions to be made (for example, voting or giving people different responsibilities/jobs). This should be reviewed regularly as the group itself changes.

If the group agreement does not include guidance on a behaviour that occurs, the group will need to talk about what they consider to be appropriate behaviour and what will happen when someone breaks the ground rules, this can then be added to the agreement.



## How to get in touch

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At Obesity UK we are happy to chat with you and answer any questions you may have.

We would be happy to hear your feedback and ideas for this resource.

We can also connect you with other people facilitating peer support groups for people living with obesity.

## Please get in touch

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Contact us: <https://obesityuk.org.uk/contact/>

Contact us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Obesityuk>