

OBEesity UK

PEER SUPPORT GROUP FACILITATOR TRAINING GUIDE

**A training resource for facilitators of peer support groups
for people living with obesity**

In addition to this general guide, we have created tailored guides designed to meet the unique needs of specific groups. If you are looking for more targeted information, please check out the following resources:

- Peer support groups for South Asian Muslim Women: Facilitator Training Guide: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/01b-peer-support-groups-for-south-asian-muslim-women.pdf>.
- Peer support groups for the LGBTQIA+ community: Facilitator Training Guide

This is a living document, that will be updated to keep the information and guidance current. A list of updates is provided below:

Version	Date of publication	Sections updated
v1	xx/xx/2024	First version

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This resource has been developed to provide a step-by-step guide to train Obesity UK peer support group facilitators

What is Obesity UK?

Obesity UK is the UK's largest charity representing the voice of people living with obesity (<https://www.obesityuk.org.uk/>), with a clear set of aims and activities:

Obesity UK Aims

- To raise awareness and understanding of obesity.
- To improve education about obesity.
- To reduce weight stigma and discrimination.
- To improve advice access and treatment in health care.
- To work with national and regional organisations.
- To provide a safe community for people living with obesity to communicate.
- To recognise obesity as a disease.
- To ensure people living with obesity have a voice.

Obesity UK Activities

- Facebook. Public Page: <https://www.facebook.com/Obesityuk/>.
- Online peer support groups: <https://www.obesityuk.org.uk/support-groups>.
- Face to face peer support groups: <https://www.obesityuk.org.uk/support-groups>.
- Hybrid peer support groups (in person and online at the same time).
- Engagement in external activities.

What is a peer support group?

A peer support group is a group of people meeting together in a safe space to give and receive mutual support, through sharing and discussion of lived experiences, in this case, experience of living with obesity.

Becoming a peer support group facilitator can be one of the most rewarding and fulfilling roles, however it does require commitment, preparation and knowledge. We hope this guide will provide a practical resource to support anyone wishing to take on this important role.

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

This quick reference guide highlights the important components of a facilitator role, with links to further information and resources, where required.

The role of the peer support group facilitator

The role of the peer facilitator includes hosting the group, and a safe space for people to contribute (whether online or in person), coordinating the group, and role modelling participation and engagement within the group.

Peer support group facilitation is a skill that you will build with experience.

A. Maintaining boundaries for yourself and the group

As a facilitator, you have your own experiences that you may (or may not) wish to share with your group. Sharing your own lived experiences can help and inspire others, however if this is something you choose to do, it is important you protect yourself by:

- being aware of your own personal triggers
- being careful not to over disclose.

When taking on the role of a facilitator, it is essential you think about and define your own boundaries from the start. Think about what you are willing to share and how you wish to engage 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. This will include:

- learning to share only enough of your experience (story) where relevant.
- being aware that group members may try to contact you outside of group sessions. You will therefore need to consider:
 - whether you are comfortable with group members contacting you, if not please ensure your contact details are not in the public domain, and you have appropriate privacy settings on your social media accounts (if applicable).
 - how much information you share publicly on social media.
 - agreeing with the group on whether contacting each other (including facilitators) outside of sessions is acceptable or not. This can be added to your group agreement (see below).

It is important to talk to the group about the boundaries, because if group members are not aware of them, they are likely to cross them. People in the group need to know:

- what the group (including facilitators) can expect from each other.
- what the group can expect from the facilitators. Be clear with the group that facilitators are there to facilitate the discussions, they may share their personal

experience, but they are not there to provide health or medical information/advice.

- any rules around language (see [Obesity UK: Language Matters](#)). This is important, as acceptable language around body weight, shape and size can vary significantly for different community groups, and individuals.

The boundaries for the group can be established using a group agreement (a set of rules, guidelines, limits) decided by the group. For more information, see ‘The Group Agreement’: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/01c-the-group-agreement.pdf>. This can then be communicated:

- Before the group meets, by sending information to participants before they join.
- At the start of every group meeting.

It is also helpful to reflect on whether the group agreement is working by:

- Facilitators debrief (check in with each other) after the meetings.
- Asking for feedback from the group (check in with group members).

For more information about the importance of boundaries, see ‘Boundaries and why they are important’: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/02-boundaries-and-why-they-are-important.pdf>.

B. Building your own facilitation toolkit

An important part of a facilitator’s role is to build your own toolkit, which will be unique to you and your peer support group. This toolkit should include a copy of your group agreement and debriefing protocol for after the session. For an example, see ‘Debriefing After the Session’: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/03-debriefing-protocol-for-after-the-session.pdf>. It should also include a list of community and online resources to signpost members to if they need additional support or information. See ‘Further Information and Resources to Signpost Group Members’ to: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/04-further-information-and-resources-to-signpost-to.pdf>. You can keep adding to your toolkit as your group and experience develops.

C. Setting up your peer support group

- Choose a safe and suitable setting for your peer support group, whether delivering it in person or online or hybrid. For more information, see ‘A Safe and Suitable setting’: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/05-a-safe-and-suitable-setting-for-the-peer-support-group.pdf>

Consider when, how often and how long your peer support groups will be held. It will be useful to discuss and finalise this with your group members once it is established. As a starting point monthly 2-hour sessions are usually recommended.

- Consider how many people each meeting can host. For a new group a maximum of 20 people (including 3 facilitators) is usually recommended for face-to-face groups and a maximum of 10 people (including 2 facilitators) for online groups. All groups should have at least two facilitators. This is a guideline, and each group will

determine the optimal number of participants as they become more established and gain experience over time.

- Make sure you advertise your new support group to the people who you have set the group up for. Provide clear details about the group time, date and venue or meeting links. All Obesity UK peer support groups are promoted via the Obesity UK website and Facebook Page, but also think about also using the communication channels your target community members are most likely to use). Ensure you provide contact details or a generic email address for people to contact you about the group.
- Find out how members would like to be contacted, and if they need a reminder. If a reminder is required, consider how this will be sent e.g. through text, email, phone call, and who will take responsibility for undertaking or automating this process.
- A one-to-one call may be helpful to anyone who may be anxious about joining the group. This gives them a chance to ask questions and meet the facilitator beforehand.
- Set up a way to communicate with the group. A social media messaging service like WhatsApp can be used to facilitate this but isn't always suitable for everyone – so ensure any communication is inclusive, this may involve using several different communication channels.
- Decide on a procedure for collecting group payments (if applicable - this decided on a group by group basis. You will need to decide whether group members make a voluntary donation or pay a membership fee if they are able to. The money can be used to keep the group running. Refer to the Obesity UK procedure for collecting and recording payments (to be provided later).
- As a new facilitator, it is important to buddy up with one or two existing facilitators before you start. A buddy is an experienced facilitator that can offer you opportunities to shadow group facilitation and ask questions to or share concerns with.
 - Choose facilitators 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.

It is important to send new group members information on what to expect from the peer support group to help them prepare for it. This could include the following information:

- The location or link to join the online meeting.
- The date and time for the session and how long it will run for.
- A "How to..." guide on how to use online meeting platforms, such as Zoom. NB Obesity UK currently has a zoom license for online group sessions,

however other online platforms can be used if appropriate license and user agreements are in place.

- You could use the following short videos from Zoom Support available at: https://learn-zoom.us/show-me?_ga=2.211269009.527051144.1721046729-141748541.1715163590. Useful videos include: 'Joining a zoom meeting', 'Basic in-meeting navigation' and the 'Zoom phone' section for installing and using Zoom on your mobile phone.
- Offer support with setting up the online meeting platform for new members, where possible.
- Reassure new members that the peer support group is a safe, confidential and non-judgmental space for group members to share their lived experience and give and receive mutual support.
- Explain what will happen at a meeting and include the following information:
 - When they arrive/join they will be greeted by the facilitators.
 - The facilitators will introduce themselves.
 - Group members will be asked to introduce themselves, they can use the chat box during online meetings, if they would prefer.
 - The group will create the group agreement (ground rules) and be reminded of these at every session, which can then be shared with all new members and reiterated before each session.
 - Group members can share their lived experience, if and when they are ready and comfortable to do so. It is okay to just listen.
 - If group members become upset or need some additional one-to-one support from a facilitator, they can choose to meet with a facilitator in a safe and confidential space outside the session during face-to-face meetings. For online meetings, group members can choose to speak with a facilitator one-to-one in a breakout room.
 - Discuss how group members can feedback or make suggestions for the group.
 - State how facilitators will communicate with the group about the sessions and how group members can get in touch with facilitators, if appropriate.

D. Running your peer support group

Before the session

1. Plan the session 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 or your preferred online meeting platform (e.g. Zoom). Preparing resources, such as leaflets or handouts/links.

- You will need to spend around another hour after each session to debrief with your co-facilitators and plan for the next session.
 - Running groups online requires a different skill set, for which additional support can be accessed from Obesity UK. The following resources may also be helpful:
 - Getting Started for New Users available from Zoom Support: https://support.zoom.com/hc/en/article?id=zm_kb&sysparm_article=KB0061316.
 - “Show Me” Videos – Zoom Learning Centre: https://learn-zoom.us/show-me?_ga=2.211269009.527051144.1721046729-141748541.1715163590 e.g. ‘Zoom meetings’ videos.
 - A guide to setting up a virtual peer support group meeting: <https://www.dementiavoices.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Zoomettes-Guide-to-ZOOM-Version-Dec-2019.pdf>
2. Ask guest speakers (where invited) to arrive early to prepare.
 3. Set up access to any technology for guest speakers (where required).
 4. If delivering in person, prepare a safe and inviting space:
 - Do not set up like a classroom - prepare chairs in a circle or horseshoe.
 - If using tables, make sure everyone can see everyone else.
 - Make sure that your chairs are suitable.
 - Make sure that the clock is visible (especially to you)
 - Put out refreshments (where provided).
 5. If delivering online, ensure everyone in the group has access to Zoom or your preferred meeting platform:
 - Provide everyone with a ‘How to...’ guide for using your chosen meeting platform.
 - Where possible, meet with new members beforehand to discuss their digital needs.
 - Offer one-to-one sessions to familiarise members with using the technology, where required.
 - Provide different ways for people to join, e.g. video or phone.
 - Offer new members the opportunity to have an existing group member as buddy or mentor to help guide and support them both for technical help and general support too.
 - Make sure that guest speakers are comfortable with using your meeting platform and presenting their slides (if required). If they are not, you can control the slide presentation for them. When they say “next slide please” you can move it on to the next slide.

During the session

1. At the opening of the meeting, set start and finish time. Flag up the finish time 15 minutes before the end.
2. Inform the group about where the toilets and fire escapes are if delivering in person.
3. Do brief introductions. Ensure new members to the group are introduced.
 - Ask a couple of established group members to go first to demonstrate how group members should briefly introduce themselves.
 - Allow group members the option to use the chat box to introduce themselves within online sessions, should they prefer.
 - Introduce new members to established members during face-to-face meetings, where possible. Note: it should be made clear that in order to comply with the group confidentiality, it will be necessary to remove anyone in an online meeting who is not prepared to introduce themselves (although it is ok to do this with their camera off or in the chat if they would prefer).
4. Remind everyone of the group agreement and ground rules each week. It might be helpful to prepare a couple of slides to help with this – see example provided by the Obesity UK Bariatric Surgery Support Group: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/06-obesity-uk---template-zoom-housekeeping-2024.pdf>.
5. Remind the group that should anyone feel upset during the session, they are able to speak with a facilitator for one-to-one support in a safe and confidential space outside of the meeting room, or within a breakout room during an online session, where possible. Provide details of how members can discreetly request this support. For further information on how to set up breakout rooms, see the following support guides:
 - Zoom Support – managing meeting breakout rooms: https://support.zoom.com/hc/en/article?id=zm_kb&sysparm_article=KB0062540
 - Chatting in a Zoom meeting: https://support.zoom.com/hc/en/article?id=zm_kb&sysparm_article=KB0064400
6. You could start a session by leading a ‘check-in’ activity, depending on the size of the group. This activity may take up too much time with a larger group. The following resource from the Scottish Recovery Network may be useful to refer to for examples: <https://www.scottishrecovery.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Check-in-activities.pdf>
7. Icebreaker exercises can also be used to start conversations. See ‘Starting Conversations with the Group’: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/07-starting-conversations-with-the-group.pdf>. It may also be helpful to ask any members if they have any experiences they’d like to share (NB some people may need to vent their frustrations at their experience, and it is important to provide them with the space to do that).

8. Keep listening and being fully present. Facilitators should put into practice skills such as intentional listening, noticing body language and tone of voice.
9. Facilitators should work together during the session. One facilitator can concentrate on facilitating, while the others focus on providing additional support activities, which could include:
 - managing the chat box for online discussions
 - supporting guest speakers with their slide presentations
 - supporting group members who may need one-to-one support during sessions.
 - If running an online session, ensure a second facilitator is prepared to take over from the lead facilitator if their technology fails.
10. You can use 'powerful questions' to encourage people to think and share their thinking. The following resource from The Scottish Recovery Network provides some examples: <https://www.scottishrecovery.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Powerful-questions.pdf>
11. Follow the plan, keep people on topic and be mindful of the time.
12. If the session exceeds an hour, ensure an appropriate break is provided. But do not exceed the maximum time agreed by the group.
13. Promote the time and date of the next session and ask if there are any topics members would like to discuss next time.
14. You could lead a 'check out' round to end the session, depending on the size of the group. Check-out activities are useful to check in with the group again to acknowledge how people are feeling after the session and are a good way to bring the session to a close. You could use the following resource from the Scottish Recovery Network for examples: <https://www.scottishrecovery.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Check-in-activities.pdf>.
15. Check if the group need any follow up support if difficult topics have been discussed.
16. Signpost to support organisations where necessary. 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>.

Feedback from previous sessions has demonstrated that keeping sessions friendly, informal and informative is key to active engagement.

After the session

Have a process in place for facilitators to debrief after delivery. You can debrief with your co-facilitators after each session, provide support to each other and think about the following points:

- What worked well?
- What did not work so well?
- How could we have done things differently?
- Any challenging issues within the group?
- What follow up actions are required?

E. What a good peer support group looks like:

1. A clear group structure

You will need to create a structure that works for the group. This can be decided together with the group once it is established. For more information about this see 'The Structure of the Group': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/08-the-structure-of-the-group.pdf>.

2. Connections within the Group

It is important to create connection within the group and a welcoming and supportive environment. For helpful strategies on how to achieve this, see 'Creating Connection within the Group': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/09-creating-connection-within-the-group.pdf>.

3. Conversations starters

It can be hard to start conversations that allow everyone to feel included in the group, particularly when the group does not know each other. Icebreaker exercises can sometimes help to kick-start conversations and learn about each other. For more information on how and when to use icebreaker exercises and for some tried and tested examples, see 'Starting Conversations with the Group': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/07-starting-conversations-with-the-group.pdf>.

4. Good communication

Encouraging good communication within the group is a skill. For tips on how to encourage this, see 'Communication within the Group': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/10-communication-within-the-group.pdf>.

5. Inclusivity

To create a safe and inclusive space, it is important to ask new members about what access needs they may have. This may mean having a one-to-one discussion with someone to find out in more detail about how you can accommodate their access needs. Several strategies for creating an accessible and inclusive space are found in 'Ensuring Inclusivity within the Group': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/11-ensuring-inclusivity-within-the-group.pdf>.

6. Difficult conversations/situations managed

There are many challenges that can arise when facilitating a peer support group. These can include:

- People talking too much and dominating the group.
- People with strong opinions.

- People not speaking at all.
- People speaking for a long time and being repetitive in what they say.
- People giving advice or being too directive.
- Hearing about difficult experiences. People being upset/crying.
- Dealing with aggressive behaviour or confrontation
- People discussing difficult or triggering topics without being mindful of others.
- Critical, judgmental or insensitive comments and lack of respect for differences
- Breaches of confidentiality.
- People's relationship outside of the group.
- Responsibility for decision making in groups.
- When the wrong information is given out within the group.
- People giving too much support and not seeking support.
- People sharing too much information too soon.
- Groups getting too big.
- Safeguarding the group.

Managing challenging conversations and situations within the 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.

For ideas on how to manage challenging conversations and situations you may encounter, please see 'Managing Challenges in the Group': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/12-managing-challenges-in-the-group.pdf>.

Safeguarding the group

Safeguarding means protecting people's health, wellbeing and human rights, and allowing them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect. There may be times when you are not sure what action to take when there are challenging situations in the group, and you may need support and guidance about keeping everybody safe. For guidance on safeguarding the group, see the Obesity UK Safeguarding Policy (to be provided later).

7. Facilitator support

As a peer support group facilitator, it is vital that you feel supported in your role. Considering your own self-care, support and development is essential to creating healthy spaces of wellbeing for fellow peers.

It is important to discuss how you would like to be supported in your role and who you can talk to about this. For more information, see 'Accessing Support for Facilitators': <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/research/obesity-institute/peer-support-toolkit/13-accessing-support-for-facilitators.pdf>.

8. Groups getting too big

If a group gets too big, this can be challenging to manage. People may find it hard to talk in front of too many people, and it may be hard for everyone to be heard in a large group.

An unsuccessful approach might include setting up another group session during the week without consulting the group first.

A successful approach might include the following actions:

- Split the group into smaller groups during the same session, with your co-facilitators, where possible.
- Offer peer support at different times in the week so that some peers may choose an alternative day. Ask group members which days and times would be best for them.
- Encourage group members to become facilitators: ask group members to think about whether they would like to become facilitators, to help run more sessions. Provide opportunities to buddy up with experienced facilitators to observe and learn the role.

How to get in touch

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

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

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