

Power and privilege

Peer support is about equality: the shared experience and the give-and-take that forms the basis of peer relationships. Being a leader or facilitator means assuming some power in the peer support space; as a result, there can be less equality in the relationships. When facilitating a space, it is important to be aware of your own power and privilege in relation to group members. Being facilitator automatically gives you some degree of power, even if you exercise it lightly.

All of us bring different experiences of power and privilege, discrimination and oppression into the peer support space. Everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. These issues overlap in different ways. Someone who is Black and gay, for example, is likely to experience significantly more oppression and discrimination than someone who is white and gay.

For peer support groups to be sustainable, it is important to acknowledge these experiences and find ways of ensuring that everyone feels included in the group. Sometimes, if these issues are not respected and addressed, they can cause people to leave. There is a risk that the group will appear unwelcoming to new members from marginalised communities.

What does this mean in practice?

If you, as facilitators, have characteristics associated with greater power in society (such as being white, middle class, male), it is important to acknowledge this. It helps to recognise that there are multiple voices within a space; that there is no single way of experiencing an issue. In mental health, this can mean listening to, and giving space for underrepresented voices, and finding ways to challenge stereotypes or discriminatory comments. It is important to understand that some people experience greater degrees of discrimination and oppression, not just in society, but specifically within mental health services.

A starting point is to be aware of the membership of your group by gender, race, sexuality and disability (etc) in order that you know who you are reaching now. If you want to change this, then you can consider changing your activities or your publicity to reach different communities. An essential action is to deal with discrimination in the group when it happens, and make sure that inclusion and anti-discrimination form part of your group agreement.

Actions you might consider:

- Include items about (e.g.) inclusion, anti-racism, disability, LGBTQ+ awareness, equality and diversity in your group agreement.
- Consult members about access and accessibility issues.
- Invite members to talk or lead discussion on issues of concern to their identity, background.

Consider shared learning or training on inclusion, diversity, and equality issues to raise the collective knowledge of the group. This could be through reading articles and discussing them in the group, depending on the structure of your group.

Activity

Walk in someone else's shoes

This is a great way to mentally walk in someone else's shoes.

Lead your peer support group through this activity with the following steps.

2. Invite your group to share what types of diverse backgrounds are represented between them (education, sexual orientation, race, faith, disability, etc).
3. Pair each team member with someone from a background that is different from their own.
4. Invite everyone to write a few lines (or share a few words) on the challenges that they believe their partner could face in daily life, in work, in peer support, etc.
5. Share and discuss with the whole group