Freedom to be oneself

What does this mean?
It’s impossible to artificially generate a sense of freedom, but you can create the environment in which it can flourish. The ability to express ourselves freely, without fear of judgement, is necessary for people to be able to share difficult experiences. Not all of these discussions will directly relate to social and emotional distress.

The experience of feeling heard and understood in peer support is powerful. For this to happen, peers need a space in which it is okay to be vulnerable and talk about difficult experiences. Structures need to be in place to create this safe space, and this often involves ground rules that address the way peers behave towards each other.

For many people, peer support allows them to feel normal and accepted. This often contrasts to feeling different, stigmatised, or excluded in other aspects of life.

Peer support is good like that because you feel, once you get to know people, you can let your guard down a bit, which is lovely... It’s probably the one place where you feel you can [do that]. So that’s why I went to it and thought it was good.

We can talk about any subject whatsoever. Nobody thinks you’re odd, you’re just you.

Why is it important?
Within the supportive environment of peer support, people may feel that they don’t have to pretend that they’re okay, or that things are better than they really are. It can be a great relief for some to be able to say that they’re not coping, and know that they’re in a supportive environment with others who know how that feels.

‘Freedom to be oneself’ is at the top of the values pyramid. It is unlikely that people will feel like they can truly be themselves in peer support if any of the other values are not in place. However, where peers feel understood, safe, and in control, they are likely to develop nurturing human connections through two-way interactions with their peers. This may enable them to feel like they can truly express themselves.

For this reason, it’s important to think carefully about how you create safety and encourage people to feel that they have control over their own participation in peer support.
What can it look like in practice?

There are a number of factors that can enable peers to feel like they can express themselves freely:

• Being with peers who listen to them and respect their experiences.
• Being with peers who don't judge them for their mental health or for things that have happened in the past.

• Feeling like their experiences or difficult feelings are respected.
• Not feeling defined by their mental health experiences.
• Not being judged if some of the things they do are unusual or different.

Reflection questions

• How do we build trust between peers in our project?
• How do we show other people that they are respected and valued?
• How can we balance individual expression and the wishes or preferences of others?
• Are our activities culturally appropriate and accessible?
• What do we do to discuss and celebrate our uniqueness?