

Remote and Online Peer Support:

A Resource for Peer Support Groups and Organisations

August 2020

A collaborative project by
Bipolar UK, Get Up Set Up,
Mind, National Survivor User
Network, and Together for
Mental Wellbeing.

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Introduction

When Covid-19 brought about a global lockdown for everyone in the spring of 2020, the world of peer support was faced with a challenge. Most peer support groups and organisations were used to meeting face to face, whether in groups or one-to-one. This guide brings together some of the experiences of the many groups making the transition to connecting with people remotely and through a range of online platforms. This wealth of experience and expertise has been gathered through a series of fortnightly meetings organised during lockdown in the Spring and early Summer of 2020. They were co-hosted by Mind, NSUN (the National SurvivorUser Network), Bipolar UK, Together for Mental Wellbeing and GetUpSetUp (see section 9 Resources for details about this group) with contributions from many peer support groups and organisations making the move to remote and online peer support.

Navigating the benefits and challenges

Remote peer support has its challenges: many of us have assumed peer support to be a present and intimate connection with other people - something that can only work in face-to-face situations. Without the physical presence, the ability to pick up on non-verbal cues or make someone a cup of tea when they are upset, some of us may feel overwhelmed by the challenge of doing this remotely. Although remote peer support will not work for everyone, what we have found during this time is that it can work very well for some people.

Some groups have found creative and innovative ways of making the online space work for them. Some groups have found that they are reaching people they have not reached before, for example: Deaf and Disabled people, people living in isolated geographical areas without good transport links or even making international connections.

The guide is organised under the following headings, with top tips and brief case studies throughout.

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1: Values and Principles of Peer Support

Throughout the mental health peer support world, different organisations have identified different sets of values or principles as underlying and defining peer support. The most common are probably: **shared experience, choice and control, mutuality (reciprocity), safety, hope and empowerment**. NSUN's work with the a partnership of third sector and statutory organisations in Sussex identified nine principles: **commonality, self-determination, mutual benefit, hope, trust, diversity, equality, solidarity and empathy**. The Scottish Recovery Network identified six values: **Hope Experience, Authenticity, Responsibility, Mutuality and Empowerment**. Mind's original Side by Side peer support programme evaluation identified six core values^[1]:



1. Shared experience
2. Safety
3. Choice and control
4. Two-way interactions (reciprocal relationships)
5. Human connection
6. Freedom to be oneself

The thinking behind these values is that the first three need to be in place for people to be able to engage with the fourth, fifth and sixth. The Women Side by Side programme added Trust to these six values, and this also appears in lists compiled by other organisations.

Over and above these values are the principles that make peer support different for different marginalised and racialised groups. People from marginalised communities often find greater shared experience and commonality with people who identify from the same communities, including shared identity and cultural background, experience of discrimination, migration and racism.

Peer Leadership

One of the core elements of our commitment to peer support lies in peer leadership. The principles of mutual support, empowerment and reciprocity underlie the need to recognise the potential of everyone to take on leadership roles. We believe in the power of peer-led peer support in enabling people to realise their potential to support each other autonomously. Just as with face-to-face peer support, remote peer support can offer opportunities for people to take on new roles in the support of others and facilitation of the group.

2: Getting there: remote and online options

Options

Remote peer support can be provided by telephone and post, as well as by using online and social media platforms. It is important to work out what works for you and for your group members. Although the most common experience we found was of people using Zoom, many groups continued to use phone calls to remain in touch with people, particularly those without the technology to connect online. Some groups have supplemented this with postal communications, for example sending out activity packs, postcards or wellbeing packs.

Some people are using WhatsApp or Facebook groups as a means of connecting people: the advantage being that a chat group might be easier for many people to adapt to and telephones are more familiar to many people. Some groups had been using these before lockdown and so it became a natural starting point for the transition. Another option is Google Meet, which is newer but also offers video conversations via a mobile app as well as from your web browser.

Things that help to choose your options:



- *The needs, views and capacity of peers and group members*
- *Ways you are connecting now - what is working well now and what does this suggest about remote options*
- *Your group resources (to access and use the technology)*
- *How you structure and facilitate your group*



Some ideas for Whatsapp groups

- *No private messages, messages go to everyone*
- *Ask members to please be mindful if they see anything that might upset someone.*
- *Try having a video call through the WhatsApp group at the same time you would normally meet.*
- *Have 3 admin people who know how to add new members, help with accessing the group, starting and ending the calls*
- *Some groups do activities to music; one person puts their phone next to their speaks for others to hear*
- *Another walking group use WhatsApp to share photos they take on their walk to stay connected*

Getting there

Some larger organisations have taken longer to move to online platforms, due to concerns about safeguarding and training, safety and security. Smaller groups did not have the same bureaucratic barriers, but often lacked the resources to make it work. Things that helped people to make the transition include:

- Take a **step by step** approach: being flexible and responsive to the needs of group members; one idea shared with us was to set people up in WhatsApp groups first as a starting point - and then progressing them on to Zoom as they become more confident.
- Identify **buddies or mentors** from amongst group members so that people can help each other to use the technology;
- Access **funds** to purchase additional technology, e.g. smart phones, laptops and Zoom subscriptions. Some people have found local businesses keen to support them, and others have accessed Covid-specific funds.
- Ensure that someone is **available by phone** during a Zoom call to help those who are having difficulties;
- Always stay in touch with people **by phone or text in between times** or when the technology fails;
- Be mindful of the need to **look after yourself** as the demands of many phone calls alongside Zoom can be considerable. Try using a snowballing approach where one person rings another who then rings another. An alternative is to build capacity among some group members to become volunteer callers. Much will depend on the structure of your group: are there already people identified as facilitators or is everyone of equal standing?



Case study - Anjie Chhapia from Get Up Set Up: A Step by Step Approach

We used to run face to face groups, many of our members are elderly BME people with barriers of language and equipment, familiarity with the technology. We took a flexible approach and started with one to one phone calls. Gradually we built up their confidence one to one video calling, so still staying in touch and not out of the group. Then, we started to do two to three people together on mobile phones. We continued to give one-to-one support to those without smart phones. From there, we progressed to doing four people connecting together, building people's confidence slowly. Now we are introducing them to Zoom calls, some weeks after the beginning of lockdown.

3: Managing the online space

Most of our experience has been gained through using Zoom, but there are alternatives. Some larger organisations, such as NHS Trusts, are obliged to use Microsoft Teams or bespoke systems. Some organisations are using Facebook Rooms or Google Meet, both of which are newer developments.

In thinking about managing the online space, we felt that it was useful to be reminded of the values and principles of peer support. Whatever platform we are using, these should retain a significant role in how we facilitate the space and connect with people. We are still aiming to create a safe and inclusive space where people can share their experiences and support each other. Many people who took part in our conversations expressed concerns about how to remain inclusive when some group members could not access the online space. This is where supplementing online methods with conventional remote contact becomes important: staying in touch by phone or post.

Technical features

This is not a guide on how to use Zoom, which you can find [here](#). There are features about using Zoom that can help with creating a safe space and sustaining connection with people.

- **Facilitation:** [see Section 4 Facilitation skills] Most groups using Zoom have more than one facilitator, sometimes as many as three. This is to help manage technical problems and to connect with people who have difficulties connecting. This can be an opportunity for group members to take on roles within the group if they have not done so before.
- **Keeping the room secure:** [see Section 5 Safety and Security] When setting up the Zoom group, it is important to activate the 'waiting room' facility so that the facilitator or administrator is able to see and control who is joining the group. It is also advised that you share the invitation link to the meeting only with those who are joining - i.e. only communicating it privately by email or other means and not making it public.
- **Views and video:** You can join a group without seeing your own face - there is a facility to 'switch off self view'. Equally, people can join without being seen at all by switching off the video if they wish. People can also join a Zoom meeting by phone, which is very useful for groups with members who do not have access to other technology. However, again, they will not be visible to other group members. All of this is about choice - it is important to talk about it as a group so that you agree together what you feel comfortable with.
- **Chat:** The Zoom chat facility enables people to type in their comments for viewing by the whole group or by selected individuals. You can decide whether to use the chat or not, depending on the needs of the group. It can be useful if you need to ensure that everyone is participating, but the group will need to decide how this will be managed. Someone will probably need to take on the role of reading the chat thread - which might mean that you need a second facilitator. Another issue with the Chat is that people can have semi-private chats with selected members of the group; again, the group needs to decide about whether this is going to be allowed, but it should be noted that these are not entirely private as the host may be able to see them after the end of the Zoom meeting.
- **Breakout rooms:** you can set up separate 'rooms' within the Zoom meeting, which is useful if you have a very large group or different issues to talk about. You may need extra facilitators to manage this, but again this can be an opportunity for group members to take on a new role.
- **Naming:** it is simple to rename yourself on the Zoom call. (Normally the name of the person registered to the device will appear on the image). This is useful if you share a device with others and you find yourself appearing in a meeting with someone else's name.

Connecting with people

The online space can seem structured, distant and formal: you are faced with a series of images on a screen, there is a need to take turns in speaking and you cannot pick up on non-verbal cues. It can be hard for some people to participate in this virtual space if they are unfamiliar with it. It helps to keep some things the same if you can: retaining features of your face-to-face groups to maintain familiarity and emphasising the shared learning experience. It is also important to note the differences. For example, your **group agreement** or **ground rules** might need to be changed to accommodate the virtual space. You may need to think about how the group can be inclusive if some people are calling in by phone and are not visible to the rest of the group. Here are some suggestions to help in connecting with people:

- **Review your group agreement:** is it relevant for this online space, or do you need to agree some changes with the group? Examples include: confidentiality - how to ensure that people are keeping the space confidential within their home if they live with others, and rules about recording the meeting. You may also need to refresh ideas with the group about how they would like to use the space. (Some groups have experienced the challenge of everyone becoming overly positive, leading to other members leaving.) [An example of a group agreement is given in Appendix A]
- **Bring something to share:** The GetUpSetUp team have been using a 'Bring and Share' activity; originally used in one of their members' own independent face to face peer support groups. The idea is to bring something to share in the virtual room; either an object or a short story. Bringing something that means something to you can make the virtual space more personal and help people to connect.
- **Try to retain some informality.** Depending on the size of your group, you can try leaving people un-muted and suggest that people raise a hand when they wish to speak. You can also try having meetings that are just about bringing a coffee and having a chat. Another idea, shared by the GetUpSetUp team, is to leave the room open when you are on a break, so that people can bring their drinks and continue to talk with each other if they wish.
- **Think about starting and ending.** It is always a good idea for facilitators to join the virtual room in advance of the meeting to check in with each other and make sure everything is working. Open the meeting with warmth and friendliness; welcome new members. Starting the group might include sharing an object (as above) but it is often helpful to start by going round and checking in with everyone. Ending online meetings can be challenging; it can be very hard for individuals to suddenly leave the shared space and be on their own again. There is no opportunity to chat after a meeting, make a cup of tea together or prepare for the journey home. Ideas for managing endings include: a guided visualisation or meditation; inviting each person in turn to say something as a way of ending - for example, to share a word to sum up the meeting or do a drawing.
- **Have tea/coffee breaks.** It can be helpful for people to take a break in a meeting, to remove their concentration from the screen for 10 to 15 minutes before returning. It can also be a way of making the space both more familiar and informal.



Rita Long from Get Up Set Up: Doing it differently, reaching more people

One of my groups had only met once before lockdown. We were meeting to share peer support for people wanting to come off psychiatric medication. There was huge energy in the room. So, when lockdown happened, we felt a responsibility to offer people something. Although we couldn't offer something to the whole group in the same way, we offered them a webinar - with four or five people speaking and others listening. We were totally transparent about the fact that we had not done it before. It was a huge success: nearly 50 people joined it, including people from New Zealand and Australia. It was giving us all permission to do it a little bit differently, and we have to accept it is different. But in the future, I think we'll be doing a bit of both.

4: Facilitation skills

In many ways, the facilitation skills needed for the online space will be similar to those needed in face-to-face groups. However, there are some significant differences. One of these is the need for extra people to help with the technical aspects of the online space, particularly if people are struggling to connect. Another difference is the range of technical controls the host facilitator has access to on Zoom (e.g. the ability to mute and un-mute people, to eject people from the group and to create breakout rooms, etc). The virtual space may also need a slightly more structured facilitation than you are used to, depending on the nature of your usual group meetings. There may be a greater need for turn-taking and for managing people's contributions to ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak. It can be challenging if some people are phoning in or have their videos turned off, because it is harder to pick up when someone wants to speak. All of this can mean that facilitation of the virtual group can require intense concentration and can be tiring.

A light purple speech bubble icon with three small circles inside, located in the top right corner of the suggestions box.

Suggestions to help with facilitation

- *It is very hard for one person to host the meeting and facilitate the conversation as well as manage the technical issues. Try recruiting a couple of extra facilitators from within the group: people who can manage technical issues, or who can look out for people wanting to speak, or can phone people who are struggling to connect.*
- *Be transparent about the controls you have as the host on Zoom. Let people know if you are going to use them and how you are going to use them. This is about equalising the power as far as possible.*

- *Make sure you have substantial breaks in between Zoom meetings if you are going to be the host facilitator in consecutive meetings.*
- *Make time for debriefing with co-facilitators after a meeting.*
- *Don't expect to get it right all of the time: be open about the challenges and share your mistakes. This can help some people feel more comfortable.*
- *Think of ways of bringing silent participants into the group: make time to go round each person in turn inviting them to speak or asking them a question.*
- *Think about using the chat facility. This does not work for everyone, but if you have a few silent participants who are willing to type into the chat facility, you might give a co-facilitator the role of engaging with people in this way. It can be a useful way of bringing people into the conversation and involving people in a different way.*

5: Safety and security

Some groups and organisations have expressed concern about the safety and risks of managing peer support online. We have all been learning together about how to make this work, and this includes the online platforms themselves, some of whom have had to make changes quite quickly to improve security. There are several different aspects to this subject: technical ways of improving the security of Zoom (and other) meetings, practical ways of helping group members feel safe in the online space, and issues relating to the safety of individuals who are in distress. We found that our discussions often focused on the security aspects and neglected the emotional safety of group members: the feeling of safety in a virtual space whilst at the same time being in your own home, which may or may not be a safe space.

Technical security options on Zoom

- Use the '**waiting room**' facility to admit members so that nobody unknown joins the group. This puts everyone joining the meeting into a waiting area so that the host can admit them one by one or all at once.
- Share the **Zoom invitation link** only with those people you know to be members or to have registered to join the meeting.
- **Password setting**: again, there is a setting on Zoom that requires participants to enter a password to enter the meeting. Choose a unique meeting number and password for each meeting you host.

- Require people to **register** to participate in the meeting (either using Zoom's own facility, or e.g. Eventbrite) and check all names and emails provided in advance of the meeting. Users with suspicious names (e.g. numbers) or emails (e.g. not part of domain) can be followed up for additional checks or blocked from the meeting.
- The host can stop other participants from **screen sharing** and from **recording** the meeting on Zoom. However, you will need to seek agreement from the group not to record it in other ways or to take screen shots.
- **Lock the meeting** after it starts: you can select to do this if you are sure that nobody will want to join the meeting late. However, it will not work if you are expecting latecomers.
- There is an option on Zoom for individuals can choose a **background image** to replace their room. You can choose to be on a beach, in front of Golden Gate Bridge or a chosen image of your own.

Group safety measures

- **Group agreement:** As mentioned earlier, the group agreement or ground rules that you use in face-to-face peer support may need to be reviewed for its use in the online space. Reviewing the agreement together on a regular basis can help the group to share ownership and feel safer in the space. Examples of new elements include the need to discuss privacy and confidentiality (see below) and to agree the range of ways the group members want to stay in touch.
- **Privacy and confidentiality:** It is important to discuss with group members how private and confidential the space they are calling from is. The group needs to agree the boundaries for this, but it is important to think about whether other members of a person's family might walk past the visual area or overhear the group. People in shared accommodation can wear headphones so that the meeting is kept private.
- Another thing to think about is what can be seen behind you of **the room you are calling from:** anyone concerned about their own privacy might want to look around and behind them to make sure they are not displaying anything they would prefer not to when on a video call.
- **GDPR:** As with any personal details, it is important that people's contact details for groups and meetings be kept safe and secure for the purposes of GDPR, password protected if you share a computer.
- **Group discussion:** One idea to help members feel safe in the online space is to start your meetings with a discussion about safety and what will help. Some members might need access to individual contact by phone or text if the group space feels too distant or remote.

- **Leaving the group:** if someone needs to step away from the screen or leave the group, suggest that they give a 'thumbs up' or enter into the chat what they are doing. Always offer to follow up with people who leave suddenly or without explanation.
- **Values and principles:** The values and principles of peer support are there to enable a peer support group to create a safe space together. It is worthwhile re-visiting these when you make the transition to remote or online peer support, just to check out with everyone that you are still working in a way that embraces these values.

Safety and safeguarding

Some organisations have concerns about how to apply safeguarding policies remotely. There may be challenges, such as how to identify risk when you are not with the person, how to manage disclosures and distress. A slightly new challenge is that some people do not feel safe in their own home, and so will find it hard to connect via online methods from within their home. This might include people experiencing domestic violence and abuse, and people whose mental health difficulties are being kept secret from their family.

Ideas for managing safeguarding challenges

- Just as with face-to-face peer support, it is important to have strategies agreed with the group about what to do when someone is experiencing a crisis or if you are concerned for their safety. In this online space, you might want to add to this a strategy for what to do when someone drops out of an online group and does not respond to messages. This is where additional facilitators can help: taking on the role of contacting someone individually if they are distressed during the meeting. It can also be one of the elements to add to your group agreement.
- Again, as is the case with face-to-face peer support, you will need good support and supervision in place for facilitators so that everyone has someone to turn to if they are worried about themselves or someone else.
- Debriefing after a group, even if it is only for ten minutes, helps to hold the group safely.
- Facilitators and other group members might feel helpless in the face of a person's distress - because it is so hard to reach out to them from a distance. Again, talking about this together will help the group reach its own ways of managing this that fit with the ethos of the group. As lockdown begins to ease, this may also become easier.
- Taking a flexible approach to connecting with people will help in some cases; for example: not expecting everyone to join Zoom calls, but connecting by phone, text and post, being sensitive to different people's circumstances...
- Organisations may need to review their safeguarding policies to ensure that they are relevant to online circumstances.

6: Creative ways of using the space

Many people have shared their ideas for using the online space in creative and innovative ways. We are sharing a few of them here. Some of these ideas can work just as well on other platforms; for example, a photo project or a virtual café can work just as well on WhatsApp or Facebook.

Crafts and other activities: some groups have posted craft packs or other resources to group members in order that everyone can engage in the same activity with the same resources in the online space. Members can either do the craft, writing or drawing in between meetings and then come together to talk about them - or, they can engage with the activity together in the same space.

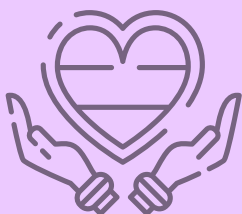
"We have done this and it was brilliant. While we were drawing, the conversation really opened up."

- **Peer support facilitator**



Discussions: Many groups have done quizzes together or discussed books or poems. The Mad Studies group based in Birmingham and run by Tamar Jeynes shares resources by email for discussion once a month. This is not technically a peer support group, but it engages in the sharing of knowledge and experience.

Virtual cafés: some groups have opened up small spaces on a regular basis (less than an hour) for people to come together and chat informally over tea or coffee.



Bring and share: [as mentioned earlier] The GetUpSetUp team suggest bringing an item from your room, or something meaningful to you, to share in the group in order to create that more personal connection often lacking in the virtual room.

Guided visualisation or meditation: this can work very well in a virtual space, and again enable group members to connect in a different way. It can be a good way of ending an online meeting, gently enabling people to make the transition from being online back to their own space.



7: Wellbeing

Wellbeing and support or supervision is important in any peer support. It is important not to neglect it in the remote or virtual space. Online peer support can be demanding in a different way: the concentration required of facilitators and members in engaging with several people through a small screen can be tiring. Some peer support facilitators have found the disconnection from people distressing. Some find themselves making more phone calls than they would normally, in order to stay in touch with group members. It helps to build wellbeing into the online space as well as continuing to think about it when offline.



Wellbeing ideas

- **Connect** with others who are doing the same thing: online forums - such as those co-hosted by the partners who developed this resource - can provide peer support for facilitators and others who are struggling to take their peer support online.
- **Debrief** after meetings: check in with your co-facilitators and/or group members about how the meeting went, review any difficulties and plan for next time.
- **Space out calls** and meetings: to give yourself a break in between.
- **Share responsibility** for meetings by enabling members to take on different roles - this can be empowering for people if they have not done this before. Some people will be better at facilitating online groups, others may be better at individual support alongside or outside of meetings. It helps to share your skills and support each other.
- Take a few minutes in each meeting to **invite members to breathe, stretch and move their shoulders, head and arms**. Some groups find meditation or guided visualisation useful (see above).
- Take some time in a meeting to **talk about what each person is doing for their wellbeing**. Even if some are doing little or nothing, others may have ideas that can contribute to the group.

8: Returning to face-to-face peer support and other options

In our early thinking about returning to meeting up face-to-face, people are expressing a number of concerns, including about the safety of venues and the safety of individuals who are at risk of Covid-19. Nevertheless, what has been coming across is that many people feel passionate about the need to see people in person, particularly those who were already isolated before this happened and were unable to use technology to connect online.

"We owe it to them to have as much face to face as we can. They need this face to face contact, we owe it to our participants to be there for them. What we have been through is so unprecedented. It has left a mark on the people we have been supporting."
- *Quote from remote and online peer support forum*

Things to think about in returning to face-to-face:

- **Don't make assumptions:** check in with your group to find out what they want; some may be anxious about returning to meeting in person, whereas others may be keen to do so.
- **Venues:** these will need to be risk assessed and will probably have guidelines about the maximum number of people permitted at any one time. It will be important to get this information and visit the venue to plan what is going to be possible.
- **Numbers:** you may need to think about how to manage the number of people attending a group if you usually operate a drop-in. Ideas from our first discussion include: organising a two-weekly rota, meeting with some people individually.
- **Retaining online groups:** for some people, the online space has worked well, so it may be useful to consider retaining online or remote peer support alongside face-to-face in the longer term. Some groups have seen an increase in membership and reach - gaining members from further afield - so it may be useful to consider a balance of both in the future.
- **Working with anxiety and promoting wellbeing:** many people, both facilitators and group members, will be anxious about the transition back to meeting in person. It will be important for everyone to check in regularly with their peers and fellow facilitators about what will help each other to feel safer.

- **Shared learning:** It will continue to be important to share our challenges and our successes as we learn together about returning to meeting face-to-face. The forums will be continuing on a fortnightly basis and can be contacted via peersupport@mind.org.uk.
- **Be patient and take care: stay safe!**

9: Useful resources

- **How to Zoom on your phone:** <https://depressionxpression.org.uk/how-to-zoom-on-your-phone/>
- **How to join a Zoom meeting:** <https://www.tomsguide.com/uk/news/how-to-join-a-zoom-meeting>
- **How to set up a WhatsApp group** <https://faq.whatsapp.com/android/chats/how-to-create-and-invite-into-a-group/>
- **How to use Zoom on iPhone, Android, Windows and Mac:** <https://www.tomsguide.com/uk/news/how-to-use-zoom>
- **Microsoft plans to teach digital skills to 25 million people:** www.geekwire.com/2020/microsoft-unveils-sweeping-job-training-initiative-teach-digital-skills-25m-impacted-pandemic/
- **How to include the digitally excluded:** <https://charitydigital.org.uk/topics/how-to-include-the-digitally-excluded-7674>
- **Tips for facilitating online groups:** <https://aps-community.org/tips-for-facilitating-online-groups/>
- **Some alternatives:**
 - How to use Google Meets:** www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGX10KpkR50
 - How to create a group on Facebook messenger:** www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldhrAQz4r8A and **Using Facebook messenger for video calls** www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADnmMMbSuOA

- **GetUpSetUp** is a community of facilitators with lived experience of facilitating and receiving peer support. We have been working collaboratively together, supported by Mind, since 2017. In response to COVID-19, we co-produced a shared learning workshop about moving your face-to-face peer support online. The strength of our work is that it is entirely experiential. In our workshops, we listen, share our experiences and respond to the needs of each group. Our passion for peer support comes alive, like so many oral traditions, through our spoken words. Contact Lucy Armitage for further details: lucyemmaarmitage@yahoo.co.uk
- **Elefriends** is a supportive online community where you can feel at home talking about your mental health and connect with others who understand what you are going through. We all know what it's like to struggle sometimes, but now there's a safe place to listen, share and be heard. Whether you're feeling good right now, or having a hard time, it's a safe place to share experiences and listen to others. The community is available to all, 24/7 and it is moderated daily from 8.30am to midnight.
<https://www.elefriends.org.uk/>
- **The Bipolar UK eCommunity** is a safe and anonymous moderated space, open to anyone affected by bipolar disorder. The forum is available 24/7 and is moderated between the hours of 8am and 8pm. With over 5000 members it's a great space to share and learn from others' experience and to support each other. Find out more at www.bipolaruk.org/ecommunity.

APPENDIX A: EXAMPLE OF A GROUP AGREEMENT (WITH THANKS TO BIPOLAR UK)

House rules

Just like our face to face support groups, we have a code of conduct that everyone needs to abide by. By attending the meeting you agree to abide by the code of conduct.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality and the privacy of group members is paramount to Bipolar UK. As in face to face support groups, what is said in the meeting is not to be shared outside the meeting by other group members. The difference with remote sessions is that there is a greater chance of being overheard if you are occupying a shared space. Therefore, we ask that all participants are in a private room, alone and with the door shut. Where possible, we also ask that people use headphones.

Crisis support

As you are likely aware, Bipolar UK does not provide crisis support. If you are in need of crisis support your facilitator will supply a list of organisations to call. In any emergency always call 999.

Having a successful experience

Please...

- arrive 5-10 minutes early for the meeting, so that you can wait in the virtual waiting room for it to start. This will allow the meeting to start promptly.
- mute your microphone when you are not talking, this will help to minimise background noise.
- have your camera on, if possible. It is good for everyone to be able to see one another.
- use headphones, if possible, to help with privacy and limit background noise.
- have everything you need nearby, such as water, to ensure you don't have to move during the meeting.
- try to remain in one place, with your device in a stable position.
- adhere to the timings set by the facilitator, this ensures everyone can share.
- protect your privacy. You can do this by ensuring your background does not contain any personal information or photographs.
- Raise your hand in person or via chat to speak to the facilitator.

Please do not...

- record the meeting. Doing so will result in a ban from all Bipolar UK events.
- talk over one another, instead wait until it is your turn as indicated by the facilitator. If you would like to speak please wave or raise your hand and the facilitator will make sure you have the chance to speak. If you do not have a working camera, please use the chat function to message the host if you would like to speak. If this is not adhered to, the group facilitator will mute your microphone.
- enter your full name before the meeting.
- smoke, drink alcohol or smoke. These are not allowed in face to face meetings, and remains the same for remote meetings.
- use any zoom or personal video backgrounds or show personal photos as this can be triggering to others and breach your own privacy.
- exchange personal contact details with other members.
- have any children present, or indeed anyone else in the room who is not participating in the meeting. No one under the age of 16 is able to attend a Bipolar UK support group.