

MOBILIZING RURAL PEER SUPPORT GROUPS IN CANADA

How to start peer support groups in Canada?
Barriers and Solutions



BARRIER #1

DETERMINING THE OBJECTIVE OF YOUR PEER SUPPORT GROUP

SOLUTIONS:



PURPOSE OF THE GROUP:

- **COMMUNITY:** To determine the objective of your peer support group, you need to establish the rural area you are in and the population you are targeting. Each rural community will have unique problems for which you can provide peer support (e.g., peer support for retired farmers).
- **CONCERN:** What problems are you resolving, and are you equipped to provide peer support for that? For example, imagine that you want to provide peer support for farmers facing unemployment, or peer support for parents of newborn children. Do you need education or a certification to lead a peer support group on the intended topic?



TARGET POPULATION:

- **DEMOGRAPHIC:** What age group and demographic you are targeting? Do you want to provide support to parents, the elderly, children and adolescents, farmers, women, or another cohort?
- **DETERMINE MEMBERSHIP:** How many members will the group have? Will it be an open group* (where new members can join in) or a closed group* (where a set number of members attend each week)? (An example of a member intake form is attached in the supporting documents PDF below.)



UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF THE POPULATION:

- **NEEDS ASSESSMENT:** A community needs assessment will help you identify the purpose of your peer support group. You can conduct a needs assessment by circulating surveys online. Alternatively, you can look at community needs assessment reports in your area. Does your target area need a support group for unemployment or issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic? Is their primary concern climatic changes and its effects on agriculture? Looking for hints in the environment and culture can be helpful. Best practices start with a "place-based approach." Such an approach considers a community's capacity, as well as the socioeconomic and cultural landscape. (An example of a needs assessment survey is attached in the supporting documents pdf below)
- **LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS:** The suggestions of local stakeholders can help you identify location-specific issues and provide tailored solutions for them. They can also help you determine how your peer support group can meet the local needs of the area.

BARRIER #2

ACCESSIBILITY:



IN-PERSON GROUP CHALLENGES:

- **LOCATION:** A good location is one that is private and maintains confidentiality. Ideally, the site is reachable by public transportation and accessible for people with disabilities and mobility issues (e.g., enough space for wheelchairs). It should be gender inclusive and have facilities for storing belongings and providing food/drinks.
- **FREQUENCY:** The location for in-person meetings might depend on how frequently the meetings will occur.
- **TIME:** It may be beneficial to consult with potential group members to determine a preferred meeting time. For example, a group aimed at parents/caregivers may decide to meet on a Saturday or Sunday, whereas a youth group may choose to meet when school ends for the day.
- **TRAVEL SERVICES:** You might consider providing travel services for a group of people at a nominal cost. For example, you may offer a bus service, taxi vouchers, and community-organized volunteer driver programs.
- **COMMUNITY-BASED PEER SUPPORT:** This includes conducting peer support meetings in local areas like cafes, parks, town hall offices, detention centers and community health centers. Sometimes, services can be provided in co-locations (locations where several services are available under one roof), such as medical centers.
- **PILOT MEETINGS:** You may conduct pilot meetings and provide one or two free sessions. This can help motivate people to join your group and solve the problem of social isolation.
- **HYBRID:** If people cannot travel or meet at a familiar place, provide online sessions or offer hybrid options if possible (i.e., a combination of online and offline programs).



ONLINE GROUP CHALLENGES:

- **VIDEO OR AUDIO CALL:** Using Zoom, Google Meet, or phone calls for peer support meetings is helpful for people who cannot travel to attend group meetings.
- **THE BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY:** By using technology, you can reach people who are unable to access services due to travel time, lack of transportation, climatic conditions, or other barriers. Additional benefits of using technology are saving costs, fewer missed appointments, improved service availability, increased convenience, and higher perceived confidentiality/privacy.
- **TECHNOLOGY FLUENCY:** Some people may need to learn how to go online and register for peer support meetings or webinars. You can post videos on YouTube or your social media page with instructions for registration and provide links there. You may also provide instructions on how to make payments. You can include this information in pamphlets, brochures and newspaper leaflets that you distribute by hand while marketing.

BARRIER #3

STIGMA:



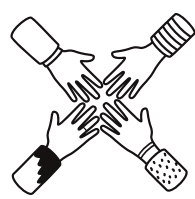
MAINTAIN ANONYMITY:

- **ANONYMITY:** Many folks from rural communities hesitate to join support groups due to stigma, especially if they belong to small communities where everyone knows each other. In this case, you can have them fill out intake forms where they have the option to remain anonymous. This ensures that no two members of your peer support group are from the same location, and that their identity will not be revealed when they join the group.
- **SURVEYS:** Surveys give people the opportunity to anonymously share their personal experiences regarding challenges they face in rural areas. These surveys can be distributed online or at doctors' offices and health care centers. Surveys help you gain a better understanding of factors that stop people from reaching out for support, and the various stigmas people face.



SPREAD AWARENESS:

- **MEDIA:** Use media like newspapers, newsletters, magazines, radio and the internet to discuss the importance of mental health and peer support. It will empower the community to participate in the solution, reduce stigma, and raise awareness.
- **MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID:** You can provide mental health training to teach people how to identify signs of mental illness. Ideally, its content should be relevant and rooted in topics with a rural focus.
- **LOCAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS:** Collaborate with local health practitioners in rural areas to normalize conversations about seeking support and encourage people to share their lived experiences. For example, you may work with a general physician in your rural community.



RESPECT DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES:

- **PROVIDE CULTURALLY SAFE SERVICES:** It's important to acknowledge that all people living in rural communities, including members of Indigenous communities, must be provided culturally sensitive services. Tailor your content and outreach material to respect diverse cultural worldviews, trauma-informed diagnoses, and alternative healing pathways. You can also ensure your services are culturally safe by providing a land acknowledgement, including traditional healing practices, using culturally sensitive language, and being aware of your cultural biases.
- **ADDRESS LANGUAGE BARRIERS:** Consider that people in rural areas may speak in different languages. Knowing the language needs of people in the community will help you determine if you need to hire any staff who can communicate in these languages or if you need to provide material in a specific language.

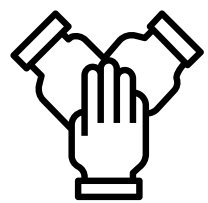
BARRIER #4

MARKETING:



SPREADING THE WORD:

- **HANDOUTS:** Some people prefer to have paper handouts like brochures, business cards, flyers, or newspaper leaflets to refer to what you're doing in the community. You can also create peer support group badges, magnets, or wearables for young people. Your collaborators can distribute these handouts at community events. (An example of a flyer is attached in the supporting documents pdf below)
- **SOCIAL MEDIA:** You can use social media to inform clients of your peer support group through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, or YouTube. Depending on your target population, some platforms may be more effective than others as diverse populations are comfortable with different kinds of media. Some people prefer watching YouTube videos, where you can speak about your group and provide a link for registration. You can also use E-newsletters on your online platforms.
- **WEBSITE TIPS:** Ensure that your website is user-friendly so that people from rural areas can access information on how to sign up for your peer support group. Display phone numbers and location information in a simple and appealing manner. You can also post your testimonials and update your website periodically to provide evidence that your peer support group is influential. Do not just think about a one-time group - think long-term. The peer group should be replicable.



COLLABORATIONS:

- You can collaborate with primary healthcare providers like general physicians by asking them to refer clients to you. Healthcare professionals can play an important role in decreasing stigma associated with seeking help from peer support groups. You can reach out to other local community places like schools, churches, grocery stores, community centers, and cafes to distribute your handouts and brochures. In addition, you can collaborate with law enforcement, health centers, detention centers, rehabilitation centers, and pre-relief centers, which refer clients to you for preventative measures. They also demonstrate to their clients how peer support is effective in a crisis response environment.



REACHING THE COMMUNITY:

- **COMMUNITY OUTREACH:** You can attend community events like public film screenings or cultural festivals to reach members of your local rural community. You can provide orientations or talks about your peer support group and distribute your brochures there. Even in small towns with limited resources, other local champions in the community may wish to partner with you and help you bring change to their area.
- **OUTREACH COORDINATOR:** You may wish to hire an outreach coordinator (i.e., a dedicated person to handle your social media, website, and emails). Their role is to reach out to people, answer questions or requests, and address their concerns. This way, you can focus on the essential tasks regarding the peer support group. Consider hiring a co-facilitator who will help you lead group sessions and who might have a different expertise than you.

BARRIER #5

BUDGETING:



PLAN THE BUDGET:

- The first step in planning your budget is calculating your expenditure and the funds you need. When calculating your costs, consider the price of materials and marketing in your area. Ask yourself questions like:
 - Do I need to rent a space? What are the costs of the room, and how frequently are sessions held?
 - Will I need to provide members with food, water, and materials for peer support such as manuals or worksheets?
 - Will I have to provide funding for transit/transportation? What will be the cost of taxi vouchers or the driver and vehicle?
 - How much will I need to set aside for marketing costs, like printing brochures or creating a website?



FUNDING OPTIONS:

- **FUNDRAISING:** If the group does not have any dedicated funding, it may be necessary to host a fundraiser to cover expenses such as snacks, bus tickets, and meeting room rental fees. Some peer support groups partner with local non-profit organizations or other peer groups who can offer resources and funding.
- **FUNDING INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS:** Getting funds for a small individual project, especially in rural areas, can be difficult. This [link](#) provides broad information about how to finance a small business like a peer support group.
- **GRANTS:** Consider applying for government-aided grants or grants offered by rural mental health projects throughout Canada. The [Rural Mental Health Network](#) project provides community grants across rural Alberta. Similarly, the Rural Coordination Center of British Columbia ([RccBc](#)) provides grants for continuing projects. [Trans Care BC](#) offers community grants to peer support providers across British Columbia.

(Additional resources for writing grant proposals are included in the supporting documents PDF below.)