

# STARTING A RURAL PEER SUPPORT GROUP IN YOUR COMMUNITY: A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE





# A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTING PEER SUPPORT GROUPS IN YOUR RURAL COMMUNITY



Dear Rural Minds Matter Peer Support Trainee,

Thank you for taking the important step towards building support for mental wellbeing in your rural community through taking the Rural Minds Matter Peer Support Training with Stigma-Free Mental Health Society and Sara Riel Inc. We commend you for your dedication to opening up the conversation around mental wellbeing and helping break down the stigma around seeking help.

As a result of taking the Rural Minds Matter Peer Support Training, you will now be able to:

- Apply peer support skills in one-on-one and group settings;
- Help others by sharing your personal experiences;
- Facilitate your own peer support groups; and,
- Practice self-care and prioritize your mental wellness

This resource is intended to help you implement what you learned in Rural Minds Matter Peer Support Training and put theory into practice. This Step-By-Step Guide to Implementing Peer Support Groups in Your Rural Community will give you the tools to:

- Reflect on important considerations for facilitating peer support within your community;
- Conduct a Needs Assessment to determine needs and gaps for mental wellness support in your community;
- Determine the technical considerations of Peer Support, including building a framework for your Peer Support Group, finding funding, mitigating risk and liability, and advertising your group;
- Take your education and skills around Peer Support further

Remember to visit the Rural Mental Wellness Toolkit at [www.ruralmentalwellness.com](http://www.ruralmentalwellness.com) to access more supportive resources. Thank you for taking this important initiative towards opening up the discussion around mental wellbeing in your community.

Sincerely,

*Andrea Paquette*

Andrea Paquette, President, Stigma-Free Mental Health Society



# PLAN YOUR RURAL PEER SUPPORT GROUP: STEP-BY- STEP OVERVIEW



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Determine the  
Feasibility of a Peer  
Support Group



**STEP 2:**  
Conduct a Needs  
Assessment in  
Your Community



**STEP 3:**  
Create a Peer  
Support Group  
Framework



**STEP 4:**  
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**STEP 5:**  
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**STEP 6:**  
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Take Your Peer  
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Further

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[www.ruralmentalwellness.com](http://www.ruralmentalwellness.com)



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# Step 1: DETERMINING FEASIBILITY

## Important Questions to Ask Yourself

Starting a Rural Peer Support Group is an important endeavour requiring planning, time, and dedication. Take time to reflect on the questions below to determine your readiness and ability to start a Peer Support Group in your community:

AREA OF REFLECTION	CRITICAL QUESTIONS
<b>OUTCOMES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have people in my community expressed a need for mental wellness support?</li><li>• What population am I focused on supporting?</li><li>• What unique needs does my focus population have?</li><li>• How can this Peer Support Group fill gaps for mental wellness support in my community?</li><li>• What outcomes do I hope to see from the Peer Support Group?</li><li>• Who will facilitate and manage the administration of the peer support group?</li></ul>
<b>STIGMA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What stigmas currently exist within my community around seeking mental wellness support and resources?</li><li>• What efforts can I take to help reduce mental health stigma in my community?</li><li>• How can I address culturally or generationally-imposed stigmas around mental health and wellness? How can I ensure all feel included in the conversation?</li><li>• How can I use my story and experience to help reduce stigma?</li></ul>
<b>ACCESSIBILITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are there accessible locations within my community in which the Peer Support Group can be held?</li><li>• For larger geographic areas, can Peer Support be held online? What are the technical requirements for online Peer Support facilitation?</li><li>• What barriers to participation could community members face?</li><li>• What steps can I take to eliminate barriers for participation in Peer Support Groups?</li></ul>
<b>MARKETING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where can I advertise my Peer Support Group?</li><li>• What tools can I use for marketing? (i.e. newspaper, social media, flyers, etc)</li><li>• What community groups and associations can I reach out to for promotion?</li><li>• What costs are associated with my marketing efforts?</li><li>• What is the minimum number of participants needed to go forward with the Peer Support Group?</li></ul>
<b>FUNDING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What will be the potential costs associated with running a Peer Support Group? (i.e. venue rentals, refreshments, insurance, etc.)</li><li>• Who can I approach within my community for funding?</li><li>• Is there an opportunity to apply for a grant?</li></ul>

## Step 2: CONDUCTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN YOUR COMMUNITY

### What is a Needs Assessment Survey?

A Needs Assessment survey is a method of asking group or community members what they see as the most important needs of that group or community. Needs Assessments help address gaps in the community that need to be filled. Conducting a Needs Assessment Survey regarding mental wellness support in your community can help you guide future action, and it is also a method of determining what needs are most important.

### Outcomes of a Needs Assessment Survey

Conducting a Needs Assessment Survey for mental wellness support in a rural community offers several compelling possible outcomes:

- It provides a comprehensive understanding of the community's needs beyond individual observations, ensuring insights from a diverse and representative group;
- It allows for a more honest and objective depiction of needs around mental health that individuals might not openly express. It may also uncover needs that may have been overlooked or unknown;
- It ensures alignment between community needs and subsequent actions taken, fostering greater support and participation from the community;
- By connecting expressed needs and actions to be taken, it increases the likelihood of garnering broader support from potential funders, community leaders, and potential participants.

### Important Considerations

Before you start a Needs Assessment survey, here are a few important considerations:

- What you hope to uncover through the survey;
- Your own capacity for creating, conducting, analyzing, and taking action on survey results;
- Methods of conducting the survey (i.e. online, in-person, over the phone);
- Minimum number of people who participate to provide accurate and results that are representative of community needs;
- Who you will reach out to for survey participation;

### Online Survey Tools

If you choose to conduct a Needs Assessment Survey online, here are some tools to help you create, conduct, and analyze a survey and its results:

- Google Forms (free) - <https://docs.google.com/forms/>
- SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com))

# SAMPLE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

[I/we am/are] looking into the feasibility of starting a Peer Support Group for mental wellbeing in [geographic area]. Prior to starting, it is important to understand what needs exist around mental wellness support and resources to guide the implementation of a Peer Support Group. This survey will help us determine the fundamental requirements of the population of [geographic area], and what needs a Peer Support Group can help address, and help us pursue funding from donors or grants. It will assess various aspects of demographics, health, housing, available resources, and gaps in services. Please direct any questions about this survey to [email address]. Thank you for your participation.

**PRIVACY STATEMENT:** I/we value your privacy and are committed to protecting the confidentiality and security of the information you provide. The information you provide on this intake form will be used solely for the purpose of assessing needs in the community around mental health support. Your personal information will not be shared with any third parties; however, some quantitative data from this survey may be used in applications for donors or funders.

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

City, Town, or Municipality: \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Language Spoken: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your ethnic origin? This helps us ensure that a Peer Support Group is culturally sensitive and appropriate:

- Indigenous (First Nation)
- Indigenous (Métis)
- Indigenous (Inuit)
- European
- Asian
- African
- Latin, Central, or South American
- Caribbean
- Oceanian
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

What is your gender or how do you identify? This will help us understand any potential needs associated with gender and gender identity:

- Male
- Female
- Non-Binary
- Transgender
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

# SAMPLE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION (CON'D)

What is your current parental status? (Check all that apply)

- I do not have children
- I am a single mother
- I am a single father
- Two-parent household
- Raising children of other family members (I am a grandparent, aunt, etc.)
- Adoptive parent or foster parent
- Prefer not to say

Including you, how many people reside in your home? \_\_\_\_\_

How many children or dependents do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a caretaker for any seniors or adult dependents (i.e. due to disability)?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Do you have reliable internet access within your home or through your phone?

- Yes
- No

## MENTAL WELLBEING INFORMATION

How often do you have challenges with your mental wellbeing?

- Never
- Daily
- Around once a week
- Around once a month
- A few times a year

Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

# SAMPLE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

## MENTAL WELLBEING INFORMATION (CON'D)

If you've been diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition, what is it? This will help us determine any specific support required within a prospective Peer Support Group. Check all that apply:

- Depression
- Anxiety disorders (e.g., generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder)
- Bipolar disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Eating disorders (e.g., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating disorder)
- Borderline personality disorder
- Substance use disorders (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse)
- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- Attention-deficit disorder (ADD)
- Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

What additional challenges do you face that may impact your mental wellness? This will help us determine whether certain topics need to or may be addressed within a Peer Support Group:

- Anger management
- Caregiver support
- Couples' communication or strain on a relationship
- Disability
- Family conflicts
- Financial strain
- Legal issues
- Making decisions/problem-solving
- Parenting
- Self-esteem
- Spouse or child abuse
- Suicidal ideation
- Trauma
- Work stress
- NONE
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

# SAMPLE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

## MENTAL WELLBEING INFORMATION (CON'D)

What are some of the barriers you experience when trying to access mental wellness support?

- Location or distance
- Isolation
- High costs or affordability
- Lack of transportation
- Shortage of healthcare professionals
- Lack of anonymity while seeking help
- Stigma attached to seeking help
- Cultural differences or lack of culturally sensitive or appropriate care
- Language barriers
- Lack of internet or phone services
- Difficulty accessing healthcare providers/appointments
- I prefer more informal supports (i.e. talking to friends or relatives)
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

As a community member, what are some of the issues in your community that may be negatively impacting people's mental wellbeing?

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## FORMAT AND STRUCTURE OF A PROSPECTIVE PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

What would be your most preferred format for a Peer Support Group? Please rank your choices from 1 to 3, with 1 being your most preferred:

- In a public location (i.e. community centre, coffee shop, church, etc.)
- Fully online
- Hybrid of in-person and online

If the Peer Support Group were to be held in person, what accessibility issues may you face?:

- Need accommodation for a disability (i.e. wheelchair);
- Lack of transportation;
- Fear of embarrassment or stigma;
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

How long would you prefer to engage in a group peer support interaction?

- 10-20 minutes
- 20-45 minutes
- 45-60 minutes
- 60-120 minutes

# **SAMPLE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY**

## **FORMAT AND STRUCTURE OF A PROSPECTIVE PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM (CON'D)**

What other barriers, trepidations, or concerns may you have with participating in a Peer Support Group?

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What are some ideas that you may be able to offer for a Peer Support Group?

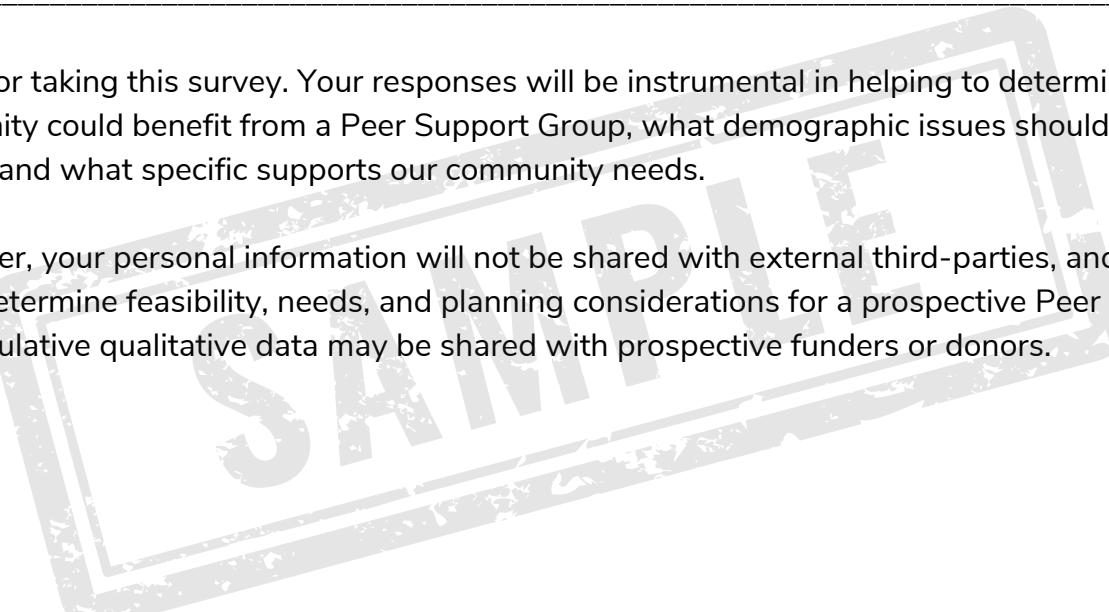
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Thank you for taking this survey. Your responses will be instrumental in helping to determine whether the community could benefit from a Peer Support Group, what demographic issues should be considered, and what specific supports our community needs.

As a reminder, your personal information will not be shared with external third-parties, and will be utilized to determine feasibility, needs, and planning considerations for a prospective Peer Support Group. Cumulative qualitative data may be shared with prospective funders or donors.



# Step 3: CREATING YOUR PEER SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

Conducting a Needs Assessment will help you determine whether a Peer Support Group is needed within your community, and what gaps a Peer Support Group will fill for mental health, and the format that would work best for those who are interested. Now you can begin to shape what your unique Peer Support Group will look like by reflecting on some of the following questions:

## OBJECTIVE & OUTCOMES

- What is the level of diversity within the community (i.e. age, ethnicity, employment status, language, etc.) that I may need to consider or accommodate? How will I ensure the Peer Support Group meets the needs of everyone?
- What are some common mental wellbeing challenges that people are facing?
- What are other common challenges people are facing within their lives?
- Am I equipped to provide the type of support on the topics of interest or need, or do I need further education or the support of experts?
- What local stakeholders or leaders can I consult to help me formulate the group's objectives and outcomes?

## ACCESSIBILITY

- How can I tailor our group format and outreach material to respect diverse cultural worldviews, trauma-informed diagnoses, and alternative healing pathways?
- Where will the Peer Support Group be held? Do chosen facilities need to be accessible, provide gender-neutral facilities, and is it easy to access?
- If I choose to do the Peer Support Group online, will people have ease of access? What support or guidance will I need to provide?

## GROUP FORMAT

- How often will meetings occur and how long will they be?
- How will I ensure that the timing and scheduling of meetings can accommodate all who are interested?

# Step 3: CREATING YOUR PEER SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

## STIGMA & ANONYMITY

- What measures can I take to ensure anonymity within the Peer Support Group?
- What efforts can I take prior to advertising the Peer Support Group to help reduce stigma and open up the conversation (i.e. media releases, social media posts, community talks, etc.)
- What mechanisms can I implement to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of what is shared in Peer Support Groups?
- Will the Peer Support Group be an open group (where new members can join in at any time) or a closed group (where a set or limited number of members attend each week)?

## MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

- Where can I advertise my Peer Support Group?
- What tools can I use for marketing to reach diverse audiences? (i.e. newspaper, social media, flyers, etc)
- What community groups and associations can I reach out to for promotion?
- What costs are associated with my marketing efforts?
- What is the minimum number of participants needed to go forward with the Peer Support Group?

## BUDGETING & FUNDING

- What will be the costs associated with running a Peer Support Group? (i.e. venue rentals, refreshments, providing transportation, accessibility accommodations, insurance, etc.)
- Will Peer Support Group participants be required to pay a fee for participation, or will it be fully funded from an external source?
- Who can I approach within my community for funding?
- Is there an opportunity to apply for a grant?
- Could we hold a community fundraiser for the Peer Support Group?

# Step 4: FUNDING YOUR PEER SUPPORT GROUP

Your Needs Assessment and planning may have revealed that starting up, marketing, and running a Peer Support Group will require a budget and funding. Finding funding is not always easy, but it isn't impossible! Below are a few ways that you can consider funding your Peer Support Group:

## PRIVATE DONORS

While the types of private donors are vast, private donors may include corporations that have corporate social responsibility programs, philanthropic individuals or foundations, and non-profit organizations that provide funding to programs that meet their desired community-based outcomes.

Private donors may give one-time or continuous funding and may require reports that demonstrate the impact of the programs they fund.

## GRANTS

Grants are financial allocations offered by charitable organizations, corporations, and foundations to individuals or groups aiming to support initiatives that benefit the public. Applying for a grant usually applies drafting a proposal, which is comprised of, but not limited to a comprehensive cover letter, a statement emphasizing the need for the project, a detailed budget, and a well-thought-out evaluation plan. For Canadian-specific guidelines and resources on writing grant proposals, consider exploring resources provided by Canadian charities, government agencies, and foundations.\*

Some resources to find grants include:

- GrantWatch Mental Health Grants (<https://canada.grantwatch.com/cat/23/mental-health-grants.html>)
- GrantConnect (<https://grantconnect.ca/>) (there is a fee to access, but many Canadian libraries provide free access with a library card)
- Government of Canada's Mental Health Promotion Innovation Fund (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/funding-opportunities/mental-health-promotion-innovation-fund.html>)

\*Some grant programs may require organizations or initiatives to be registered as a charity or non-profit

# Step 4: FUNDING YOUR PEER SUPPORT GROUP (CON'D)

Your Needs Assessment and planning may have revealed that starting up, marketing, and running a Peer Support Group will require a budget and funding. Finding funding is not always easy, but it isn't impossible! Below are a few ways that you can consider funding your Peer Support Group:

## Resources for tips on writing successful grants include:

- Charity Village's Grant Writing Resources (<https://charityvillage.com/category/fundraising/grant-writing/>)
- Keela's Comprehensive Guide to Grant Writing (<https://www.keela.co/blog/nonprofit-resources/nonprofit-grant-writing-trends-and-tips#grant-writing-trends-for-nonprofits>)
- Pandadoc's How to Write a Grant Proposal Guide (<https://www.pandadoc.com/blog/grant-proposal/>)

## MEMBERSHIP FEES

While there may need to be a mechanism to ensure financial accessibility to the Peer Support Group, you may choose to implement membership fees to cover the costs of a Peer Support Group in your area.

# Step 5: ADVERTISING YOUR PEER SUPPORT GROUP

The best way to spread the word about your Peer Support Group is to meet people “where they’re at”. This may include implementing a diverse range of marketing strategies to spread the word about the group while also helping to break down the stigma surrounding mental wellbeing. Below are some ideas for marketing:

## HANDOUTS & FLYERS

Some people prefer to have paper handouts like brochures, business cards, flyers, or newspaper leaflets to spread awareness of the Peer Support Group. Your collaborators can distribute these handouts at community events. Tools like Canva are user-friendly ways to make brochures and flyers, with helpful templates.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

You can use social media to inform clients of your peer support group through Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), LinkedIn, TikTok, or YouTube. Depending on your target population, some platforms may be more effective than others. Using social media as a method to build awareness of Peer Support is an excellent way of helping to reduce stigma. You may even choose to have a private Facebook group to have an online means to communicate with each other; however, issues of anonymity must be considered.

## WEBSITE TIPS

If you choose to create a website for your Peer Support Group, ensure that it is user-friendly so that people from rural areas can access information on how to sign up for your Peer Support Group.

You may choose to use a website as a means to provide links to reputable mental health education resources such as Stigma-Free Mental Health’s Rural Mental Wellness Program and Rural Mental Wellness Toolkit. Platforms like Squarespace, Wix, and GoDaddy provide easy ways to build a website.

Visit

[www.ruralmentalwellness.com](http://www.ruralmentalwellness.com)



# STIGMA-FREE MENTAL HEALTH'S RURAL MENTAL WELLNESS TOOLKIT

## Cultivating Resilience and Inclusion in Rural Communities



Living in a rural community comes with its own unique set of challenges. Stigma remains prevalent in rural areas across Canada, discouraging individuals from seeking support and prioritizing their mental wellbeing. The [Rural Mental Wellness Toolkit](http://www.ruralmentalwellness.com) ([www.ruralmentalwellness.com](http://www.ruralmentalwellness.com)) is a comprehensive resource designed specifically for rural residents. It provides valuable tools that enhance mental wellness, eliminate stigma, and foster strong, connected rural communities. Our Toolkit features:

### ① Mental Wellness Resources

- Strategies for finding a work-life balance and managing stress as a rural resident
- Self-care techniques tailored for rural lifestyles
- Brochures and conversation cards to spark discussion about mental wellness in rural communities
- Engaging videos and comics to educate rural youth on mental wellbeing
- Mental wellness activities for families and seniors living in rural areas
- Local support and crisis resources



### ② Inspiring Stories

- A platform for farmers and rural residents to share personal stories about overcoming challenges with mental health and stigma
- Videos that encourage compassion and help those who are struggling to feel less alone



### ③ Information on Rural Minds Matter Peer Support Training

- Help spread the word about the availability of this unique online training facilitated by experienced professionals specializing in rural mental health
- Rural Minds Matter Peer Support Training equips rural residents with the skills needed to provide effective support in their community and facilitate their own peer support programs
- Fosters a culture of understanding, empathy, and growth
- Helps participants develop active listening skills and assist others while sharing their experiences
- Offers tools to support rural residents in their journey to recovery



Together, we can build healthier and happier rural communities.  
Visit [ruralmentalwellness.com](http://ruralmentalwellness.com) to access the Rural Mental Wellness Toolkit at no cost!

# Step 6: MITIGATING RISK & LIABILITY

Implementing a Peer Support Group within your community is meant to be an informal, grassroots initiative that represents a meeting of community members coming together for a shared purpose. However, there are a few considerations one may want to undertake in terms of potential liability and risk. This information is for informative purposes only and is not to be perceived as legal advice.

## INSURANCE

Group leaders may want to consider their personal liability when creating a Peer Support Group. If personal liability is of concern, we suggest contacting your local insurance provider to discuss coverage options.

Another way that Peer Support Group leaders can address insurance is through a possible partnership with a nonprofit or charity that would be willing to take on your Peer Support Group under their organization and provide insurance coverage.

## MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is the help provided to a person developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. Just as physical first aid is administered to an injured person before medical treatment can be obtained.

MHFA is given until appropriate treatment is found or until the crisis is resolved. Peer Support Group leaders may consider taking Mental Health First Aid training to accompany their peer support knowledge.

The MHFA Canada program aims to improve mental health literacy, and provide the skills and knowledge to help people better manage potential or developing mental health problems in themselves, a family member, a friend or a colleague. Learn more at [www.mhfa.ca](http://www.mhfa.ca)

Visit

[www.ruralmentalwellness.com](http://www.ruralmentalwellness.com)

# TAKING YOUR PEER SUPPORT EDUCATION FURTHER

Rural Minds Matter Peer Support Training is designed to give you a basic foundation of understanding of the concept of Peer Support and how you may implement a Peer Support Group in your community. You may be interested to take your education and credentials for Peer Support further. Here are some ways:

## **SARA RIEL INC.'s COMPASSIONATE PEER SUPPORT SPECIALIST TRAINING PROGRAM**

Building Connection: Compassionate Peer Support Specialist Training is a more detailed and extensive breakdown of the Fundamentals of Peer Support – as recommended by Peer Support Accreditation and Certification Canada (PSACC) and the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) – provided through a lens of Compassion, Respect and Recovery.

The objective of this program is to provide individuals with lived-experience:

- the knowledge, skills and abilities that are essential and necessary in order to provide effective peer support;
- the motivation, encouragement and understanding that they have a role in the health and wellbeing their community;
- the belief that the opportunity to “give back”, establishes greater purpose and meaning to their own recovery;
- the required criteria necessary, should they choose to obtain national accreditation or certification

Learn more at Sara Riel Inc.'s website ([sarariel.ca](http://sarariel.ca))

## **PEER SUPPORT CERTIFICATION (PEER SUPPORT CANADA)**

Peer Support Certification through Peer Support Canada is a confirmation of one's knowledge, skills, and experience as a peer supporter. Certification verifies one's alignment with the nationally-endorsed Standards of Practice and is recognized across Canada. Certification is an assessment, it is not a training program. Learn more at [peersupportcanada.ca](http://peersupportcanada.ca).

# GLOSSARY

The following glossary defines some of the terms that were used in this document surrounding concepts of Peer Support and Peer Support Groups:

**Accessibility:** Accessibility refers to how well something accommodates access and use by all types of people including those with and without physical, cognitive, and other limitations or considerations.

**Alternative healing pathways:** Alternative healing may be any form of healing that does not fall into traditional ways of practicing healing. Some examples of alternative healing practices/pathways in the Indigenous community are energy therapy, ceremonies, plant or animal-based medicines, etc.

**Anonymity:** The quality of being anonymous or unidentified. Anonymity may be necessary to reduce bias and maintain confidentiality when facilitating groups.

**Closed group:** Closed groups are those in which all members join the group at the same time.

**Mental Health First Aid:** Mental Health First Aid is knowledge of identifying, understanding and responding to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders.

**Needs Assessment:** A community needs assessment provides information about the health needs in a community. It will help you identify populations with unmet needs (priority populations), health issues and concerns and gaps in programs and services.

**Open Group:** Open groups are those in which new members can join at any time.

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[www.ruralmentalwellness.com](http://www.ruralmentalwellness.com)