

# Part I of Peer Support Group Facilitation Skills



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# Learning Objectives



- Discuss steps to take when developing your Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) peer support group.
- Discuss elements of a group comfort agreement.
- Discuss use of a personal recovery story.
- Discuss verbal and nonverbal behaviors that promote conversation in your group.
- Practice facilitating a peer support group.



# Planning Your Group: Questions to Answer

- What type of peer support group do you want to facilitate?
- Who are your target participants?
- Who will be your supervisor?
- Where and when will your group occur?
- How will you market your peer support group?

# Types of Peer Support Groups

Generally, there are three models for structuring a peer support group:

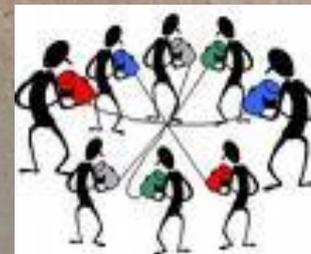
➤ Curriculum-Based



➤ Topic-Focused



➤ Open Forum



# Curriculum-Based Peer Support Group



A curriculum-based peer support group is highly structured and includes the following components:

- There are several planned topics to discuss over time (Ex. Vet-to-Vet Group; Illness Management & Recovery).
- Topics are arranged in a pre-determined order of presentation.
- Books, articles, and/or handouts related to the topics are handed out to read and discuss.
- Discussion focuses on each topic in relation to the group members' recovery.

# Topic-Focused Peer Support Group

A topic-focused peer support group can be structured in one of the following ways:

- Group focuses discussion on recovery in relation to one topic area (Ex. Pain self-management; post-traumatic stress disorder; diabetes self-management; goal development; etc.).
- Topics for discussion can be rotated based upon the interests of the group members.



# Topic-Focused Peer Support Group (Continued)



Here are two approaches you can use to stimulate discussion regarding an introduced topic.

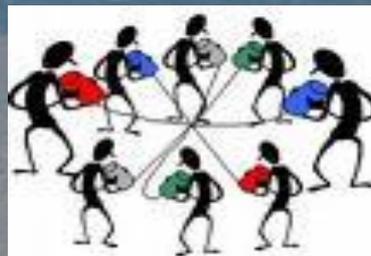
- Ask the group members questions related to the topic.
- Share written materials related to the topic for group members to read and discuss.
  - Ask group members to share their opinions about the written material.
  - Ask group members to share their personal experiences with recovery as related to the topic in the written material.

# Sources for Written Materials



- If you choose to facilitate a peer support group which uses books, articles, and/or handouts, it will be your responsibility to find appropriate literature and make copies to bring to the group meetings.
  
- You can use the following resources to find materials:
  - Ask your VA supervisor for suggestions.
  - Ask a reference librarian for help at a local library.
  - Use an Internet search engine like Google.

# Open Forum Peer Support Group



- An open forum peer support group does not include the structure of the other two models.
- Usually, there is no pre-arranged agenda for the meeting.
- There may not be rules regarding attendance (Ex. Drop-in peer support meeting).
- Discussion evolves based upon the interests and needs of the group members.
  - “What do you want to talk about today?”



# Logistics



Once you determine what type of peer support group you will facilitate, it is time to begin answering the following questions:

- Who are your target members for the group?
- Who will be your supervisor?
- Where will the group meetings occur?
- When will the meetings occur?
- How will you inform staff and Veterans about the group?
- What strategies will you use to obtain staff and Veteran support for the group?



# Date & Location of Group



Determining who your target participants are will help you to decide where and when your peer support group will occur.

- Peer support groups on a locked inpatient unit would need to be held on the unit and at a time that does not conflict with the unit's other required treatment services.
- Groups for Veterans who are employed in the Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program would need to be held in the late afternoon or evening after the Veterans finish their jobs.
- The schedule of peer support groups for outpatient Veterans would need to take into consideration the schedules for shuttles and public transportation accessible near the location where the group will occur. You do not want a Veteran to be stranded at the facility without a way to get home after the group meeting.



# Date & Location of Group

## (Continued)



Here are a few tips to help you plan the time and place for your peer support group:

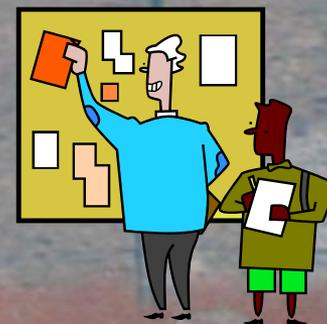
- Choose a location that is free at the same time each day/week so that your group members have a consistent place to go for the meetings.
- When scheduling the time for the group, take into consideration the schedules of all of the following parties:
  - You and your co-facilitator (if you have one)
  - Veterans' work, treatment, and/or transportation issues
  - Program's treatment services (to ensure that your group is not scheduled at a time that competes with a mandatory treatment activity for Veterans in the program where your group will be held)

# Marketing Your Peer Support Group

After choosing the type of peer support group and scheduling a date and time for it, you need to advertise your group to staff and Veterans. Here are a few marketing strategies:

## ➤ Flyers

- Post on bulletin boards.
- Leave copies on tables in waiting areas and break rooms.
- Give copies to staff members.
- Leave copies at nurses' stations.



## ➤ Announcements

- Community meetings
- Program intercom system (if there is one)

## ➤ In-Person Advertising

- If your group is located on a VA hospital unit, arrive early and talk with Veterans who are nearby (potential group members).
- Ask Veterans to tell other Veterans about the group's existence.



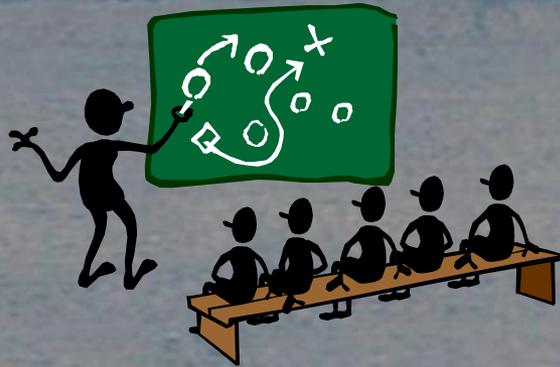


# Strategies for Staff Support

Here are a few strategies you can use to try to obtain clinical staff buy-in for your peer support group.

- If possible, obtain a supervisor from the VA program where your peer support group will occur.
- Ask staff members for their suggestions on topics that could be helpful in your peer support group.
- Ask staff members for their suggestions on the time and place for your peer support group.
- On a regular basis, meet with a program/staff liaison for consultation about your peer support group and help with trouble-shooting issues.
- Ask which staff members are the first point of contact if there is an emergency situation in your peer support group.

# Strategies for Veteran Support



Here are a few strategies you can use to try to obtain Veteran buy-in for your peer support group:

- Be available before the group meeting to allow Veterans time to talk with you and get to know you.
- Spend time crafting your recovery story and determining how you will share parts of it to help Veterans in your group.
- Ask for feedback from group members regarding topics and their experiences with the group.

# Other Logistics



- Ask your supervisor or program/staff liaison about the program's policies and rules (Ex. Limits of confidentiality).
- Work with staff to pre-plan what you need to do if there is an emergency situation in your peer support group.
- Ask your supervisor or program/staff liaison if you need to do any documentation regarding the group meetings. If so, ask specifically what is required.
- Be sure to arrive early for the group meetings so you can arrange the chairs in the room, if needed.
- After the group meetings, put chairs back in their original places and throw away any garbage left by the group members.
- Plan time to debrief with your co-facilitator after each group meeting. Meet in a location where you will have privacy.

# Other Logistics

## (Continued)



- Determine what components to include in the group comfort agreement (group rules).
- Be sure to discuss the comfort agreement when you begin a new peer support group and when new members are introduced into your group.
- Arrange a time for weekly supervision with the staff member who will be supervising your work in the peer support group.
- Ask your supervisor for advice in planning your group and dealing with challenging situations.
- When in doubt about what to do, consult with your supervisor.

# Group Facilitation: Overseeing Group Experience

The peer support group facilitator oversees the direction of the group experience using both content and process.

## ➤ Content/Dialogue

- What the group discusses

## ➤ Process/Facilitation

- How the discussion is helped to occur



# Group Content



The peer support group facilitator helps the group decide its focus.

## Examples of Group Content

- Planning recovery goals
- Navigating the VA health care system
- Group members' thoughts and feelings about an issue

# Group Process

The peer support facilitator helps the group keeping moving forward by:

- Maintaining comfort agreement rules about respect for group members
  - Starting and stopping groups on time
  - Stopping interruptions or a group member talking over another person
- Asking open-ended questions
  - “What do the rest of you think about what was just said?”
  - “How do you (the group) feel about this?”
- Listening attentively

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# Focus on Needs & Experiences of Group Members

The peer support group facilitator models facilitation skills by focusing on the needs and experiences of group members.

- Use listening and question-asking skills
- Use “I” statements
- Work with silence
- Timely self-disclosure
- Maintaining the comfort agreement rules



# Comfort Agreement



Guidelines are set by the group members and peer support group facilitator(s).

- Promotes safety
- Supports the group's overall goals
- Identifies rules of etiquette
  - Courtesy and respectful actions

# Elements of Comfort Agreement

A comfort agreement includes:

- Role of peer support group facilitator—what it is and what it is not
- Start and stop time for group meetings
- How members will be informed about group cancellation in case of emergency
- Attendance expectations (if any)
- Confidentiality and its limits



# Elements of Comfort Agreement

## (Continued)



- Individual and group safety expectations
  - What can and cannot be said or done in meetings
- Documentation about meetings (if required)
  - What is included and what is not included
- Group etiquette
  - What can and cannot be said or done in meetings

# Examples of Comfort Agreement (Continued)

## Examples of Comfort Agreement Content

- No personal attacks
- Start and end on time
- Bathroom breaks
- One person talks at a time
- Avoid cross-talk and side-talk
- No threatening behavior
- What is said here, stays here\*\* (There are limits to confidentiality)
- Discuss limits of confidentiality



# Limits of Confidentiality

- Threat of harm to oneself (suicidal)
- Threat of harm to others (homicidal)
- Suspected child abuse
- Suspected elder abuse
- Weapon on VA property
- Suspected alcohol or drug abuse\*\*

\*\*Depending on the VA program where you are working, you may be required to report suspected or known substance abuse.



# Sharing Your Personal Recovery Story: Developing Your Recovery Story

- One of the major “recovery tools” that peer support providers bring to VA mental health services is their own experience and recovery story.
- The major reason why the recovery story is such a powerful tool is that it is your own personal story in the way it happened.
- Veterans you are supporting can be inspired by the truth, hope, and possibilities implicit in your recovery story.



# Differences Between Illness Story & Recovery Story

One of the roles of a peer support group facilitator is to share his/her personal recovery story with group members in brief increments.

## Illness Story

- Focuses on the impact of the diagnosis
- Features some of the following components:
  - Disabling effect of the diagnosis
  - War stories
  - Medications
  - Bad times
  - No hope
  - Belief that this is the way life will be

## Recovery Story

- Focuses on change as possible
- Features some of the following components:
  - Health
  - Wellness
  - Overcoming (what has worked)
  - “Changing” process

# Benefits & Risks of Sharing Your Personal Illness Story



## Illness Story Benefits

- Connectiveness
- Shows understanding about what another person is going through

## Illness Story Risks

- May keep the person stuck in thinking of him/herself as being sick
- Person hearing illness story may believe the illness story is not as bad as his/her own story

# Benefits & Risks of Sharing Your Personal Recovery Story

## Recovery Story Benefits

- Recovery/change is possible
- Recovery is not linear
- Promotes/instills hope

## Recovery Story Risks

- May seem as if promoting “my way” is the only way toward recovery
- Unfair expectations; setting the bar too high or too low
- Focusing on “me” and not the person I am supporting
- Your level of success may seem unattainable to a person in distress



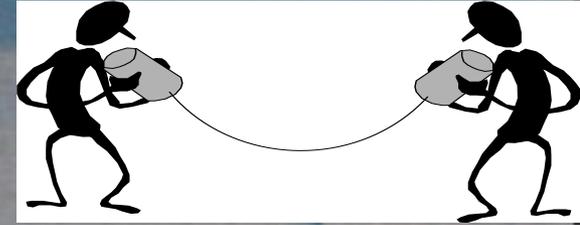
# Components of Your Recovery Story

- What were some of the early indications that you were beginning to have difficulties?
- Describe yourself and your situation when you were at your worst.
- What helped you move from where you were to where you are now?
- How did you accomplish this? What did you do? What did others do to help you?
- What have you had to overcome to get where you are today?

# Components of Your Recovery Story (Continued)

- What have you learned about yourself and your recovery?
- What are some of the strengths you have developed?
- What types of supports have you developed and used?
- What are some of the things you do to stay on your wellness path?

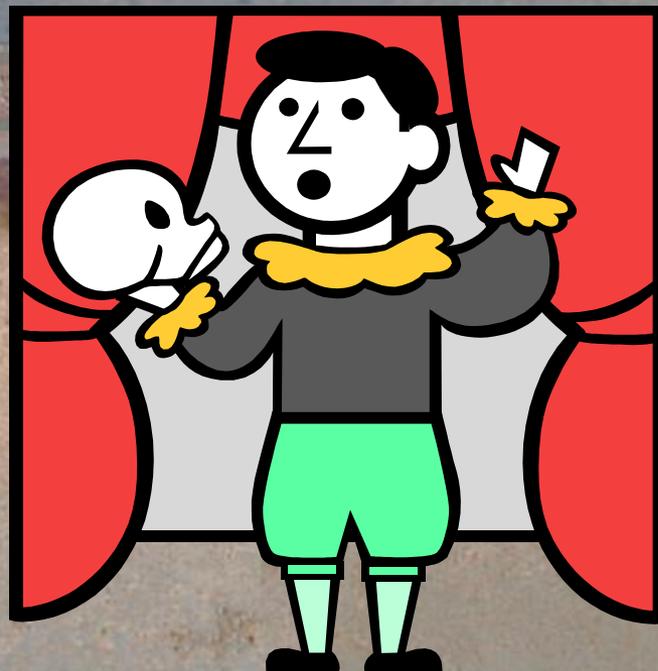
# Communicating Your Recovery Story



- What is the other person willing to hear?
  - Use where the Veteran is in his/her recovery as a guide to which part(s) of your story to share.
  - Give careful consideration to the part(s) of your recovery story that may be helpful to the Veteran at this time in his/her recovery.
- Am I involving the Veteran in the conversation, or am I talking at him/her?
- Find a balance between the benefits of sharing your illness and recovery stories!
- Use brief snippets of your recovery story as applicable. Remember though, the purpose of sharing is to help others, so the focus should not stay on you for long.

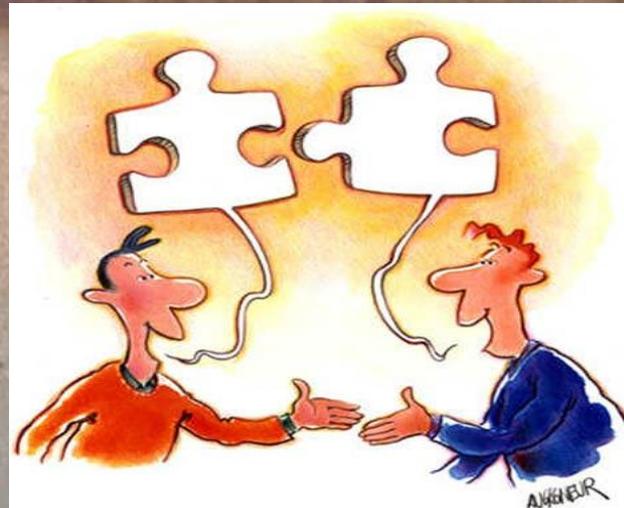
# Recovery Story Role Play

(Refer to Part I Peer Support Group Facilitation Skills  
Role Play Handout)



# Peer Support Group Facilitation: Effective Communication

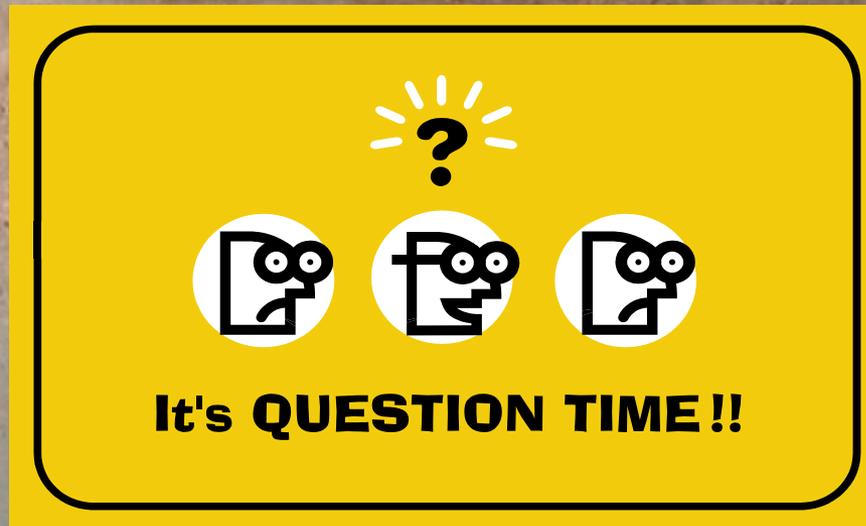
- Communication is a combination of talking, questioning, and listening.
- We can only tell another what we heard and not what the other person said.



(Bolton, 1979, p. 49)

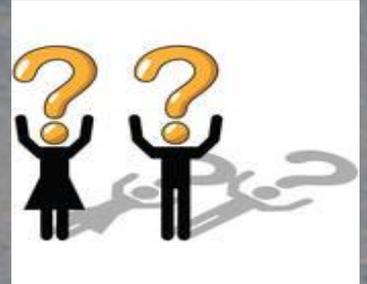
# Questioning Skills & Techniques

- Asking questions shows our willingness and ability to understand the true meaning of what others say.
- Open-ended questions encourage the person responding to provide richer answers that often include more information and deeper explanations than the types of answers that would be provided in response to closed-ended questions.



# Questioning Skills & Techniques

## (Continued)



- Ask one question at a time.
  - Asking too many questions or multiple questions at the same time can move the direction of the conversation away from the original topic when you do not want that to occur.
  
- Questioning skills need to be paired with effective listening skills.

# Close-Ended vs. Open-Ended Questions

## Closed-Ended Questions

- Tends to elicit short answers: true/false; yes/no; or multiple choice responses
- Could sound like passing judgment, interpreting, or analyzing the situation
- Could cut off a conversation

## Open-Ended Questions

- Similar to essay questions—allows expansion on answers
- Shows desire to understand what the other person is really trying to say
- Non-judgmental
- Tend to keep conversation going because they ask for information needed to help or about feelings to share

# Close-Ended vs. Open-Ended Questions

## Close-Ended Questions

- Ask questions beginning with
  - Why...
  - Is...
  - Are...
  - Were...
- Usually calls for a “yes” or “no” answer
- “Why” questions call for a rationalization and could put a person on the defensive
- May cut off a conversation

## Open-Ended Questions

- Ask questions beginning with
  - Where...
  - When...
  - What...
  - Which
  - How...
- Ask for information needed to help clarify an issue or inquire about feelings to share
- Tend to keep a conversation going

# Open-Ended Questions Examples

- What's on your mind?
- How can I help you?
- What happened next?
- When do you remember first having this problem?
- How do you feel about that?
- What helped? What did not help?
- What do the rest of you think about what was just said?



# Why is it important to be a good listener?

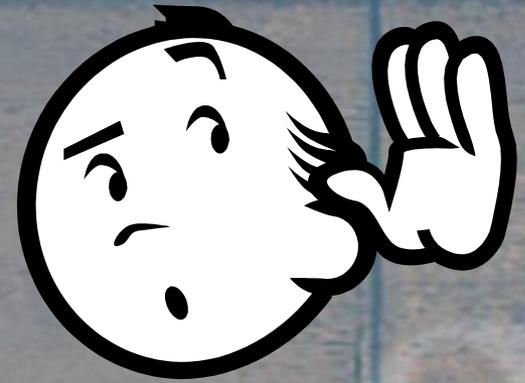
- What a person says deserves attention.
- People feel valued and important when they feel heard.
- Feelings, beliefs, and opinions need to be shared in order to develop closeness and mutual respect.
- Helps to sort out problem-ownership.
  - Helping a person to cope is giving a gift of self-reliance.



# Peer Support Group Facilitation: Ways to Enhance Listening Skills

## Attending Listening Skills

- Maintain a relaxed posture.
- Lean forward.
- Nod your head occasionally.
- Maintain culturally appropriate eye contact.
- Keep your tone of voice neutral, positive, and relaxed.
- Sit facing the group participants.
- Sit with your arms at your sides.
- Keep a friendly expression.
- Move away from any physical barrier (i.e., desk; table) between you and the group participants.
- Use minimal encouragers (ex. “Uh-huh,” “Tell me more,” etc.) to keep the conversation going.



# Ways to Enhance Listening Skills

## (Continued)

### Avoid distracting motions and gestures

- Fiddling with pens, pencils, or keys
- Jingling coins
- Fidgeting nervously
- Drumming fingers
- Frequently shifting weight
- Crossing or uncrossing legs often
- Other nervous mannerisms



(Bolton, 1979, p. 37)

# Ways to Enhance Listening Skills (Continued)



## Remain silent

- Gives the Veteran time to think about what to say.
- Gives space for the Veteran to experience his/her feelings.
- Gives time for the Veteran to deal with any ambivalence about sharing his/her story with the group.
- Can serve as a gentle nudge to encourage the Veteran to talk with you and the rest of the peer support group members.

(Bolton, 1979, pp. 46-47)

# Ways to Enhance Listening Skills

## (Continued)

Use minimal encouragers to keep conversation going

- Tell me more
- Oh?
- For instance
- I see
- Right
- Then?
- And so?
- Yes
- Really?
- And?
- Go on
- Sure
- I hear you
- Uh-huh (with head nod)

# Peer Support Group Facilitation: Ways to Enhance Responding Skills

- Listen carefully to what is being said rather than who is saying it.
- Determine who owns the problem.
- Respond to facts and the other person's feelings.
- Do not immediately react to your own feelings.
  - Remember the person's feelings are not directed at you.
  - Do not take what is said personally.



# Ways to Enhance Responding Skills (Continued)



- Pay close attention to the other person's viewpoint.
- You do not have to have all the answers. It is OK to say, "I don't know."
- Avoid interpreting or assuming.
- Wait until the other person is finished speaking before you start talking.

# Ways to Enhance Responding Skills (Continued)

- Use “ I” statements.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Use open-ended questions/responses.
- Discuss and decide what is the most important issue to resolve first.
- Help the group member(s) decide on a course of action.
- Provide encouragement versus praise.



# Components of an “I” Statement

1. Describe a behavior you want to address.
  - Simply describe a behavior with no blaming
  - Example: “When I see the gas tank empty and dirty dishes left out.....”
2. State your feelings about the possible consequences of the behavior.
  - “I feel anxious, down, sad, upset, angry, frustrated...”
3. State the possible consequences of the behavior.
  - “because I have to get the gas and I might be late for work.”
  - “because ants or mice will come into the house.”

# **“I” Statement Formula**

## **“I” Statement Formula**

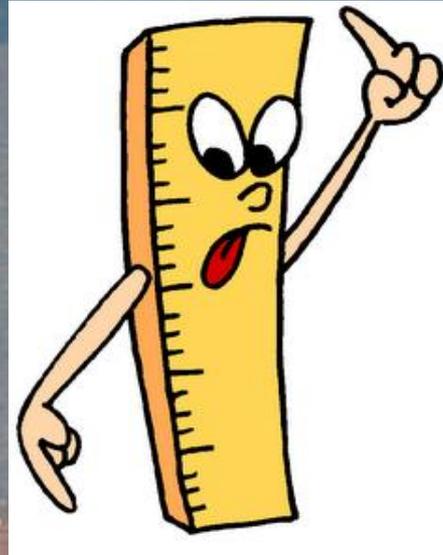
**“When \_\_\_\_\_, I feel  
\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”**

# Communication Role Play

(Refer to Part I Peer Support Group Facilitation Skills  
Role Play Handout)



# Golden Rules of Group Facilitation



- When in doubt about what to do, ask the group!
  - “What do you want to talk about?”
  - “What should we be focusing on right now?”
- Group members should talk more than the group facilitator.
  - 20-30% Facilitator Talk vs. 70-80% Group Members Talk

# 4 “B’s”: General Tips for Success

- **Be on time** for your peer support group meetings and supervision.
- **Be respectful** in your interactions with everyone.
- **Be responsible**
  - Give advance notice to your group members, co-facilitator, and supervisor if you cannot attend a meeting.
  - Get VA clinical staff members involved when you are concerned a Veteran group member is in crisis.
- **Be dependable**
  - Show up when and where you are expected to be for meetings.

# **Group Facilitation Practice Exercise**

**(Refer to Part I Peer Support Group Facilitation Skills  
Training Series Practice Exercise Handout  
and Practice Exercise Feedback Sheet)**



# Group Discussion of Peer Support Group Facilitation Practice Exercise



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