

Purposeful Peer Support Groups

"We are all social beings by nature – connectedness and community are necessary if not vital to our wellbeing. The very existence of positive social relationships can be a source of healing for many psychological wounds."¹



Tautoko Tāne
Male Survivors Aotearoa

Purposeful Peer Support

Purposeful Peer Support is peer support with a purpose – developing authentic, trust-based relationships that support you in your journey towards wellbeing.

Many survivors of sexual harm face relationship challenges, whether with friends, family/whānau or workmates. Relational difficulties can also play out in social interactions within the wider community. This can add to a sense of isolation, as well as making survivors more vulnerable to addiction, re-victimisation and further harm.

Purposeful Peer Support focuses on building and practicing what we need to have authentic, trust-based relationships in our lives. We concentrate on relating in ways that provide physical and emotional safety for survivors; respect for individual cultural values and beliefs; and support for each person's unique wellbeing journey.

At the heart of these collaborative relationships is our belief that positive change towards wellbeing is possible for everyone.

This comes from the first-hand, experiential knowledge of our peer workers, who draw on their own experience of what it means to live with and overcome trauma and adversity.

"Peer support is based on the belief that people who have faced, endured and overcome adversity can offer useful support, encouragement, hope to others facing similar situations."²

Purposeful Peer Support Groups

Purposeful Peer Support groups expand the opportunities for connecting with other survivors – to build meaningful relationships that offer empathy, understanding, encouragement and hope to support them in their journey towards wellbeing.

Group participants can share their life experiences, in confidence, with other survivors in ways that help them to see their world differently; to appreciate their individual human potential and their capacity for making changes in their life; to learn new ways of relating to others and connecting with their communities; and to build the confidence and determination to live their life 'on purpose'.

"I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."

– BRENÉ BROWN

Commonly reported benefits for people who participate in effective peer support groups:

- ✓ Meeting with people who speak your language – people who have been where you are

- ✓ Feeling less lonely, isolated or judged

- ✓ Receiving practical, helpful and supportive feedback from other survivors, including learning new skills to cope with challenges

- ✓ Increased self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of purpose

- ✓ An ability to talk more openly and honestly about your feelings

- ✓ Increased resilience and quality of life – reduced distress, depression, anxiety or fatigue

- ✓ A greater sense of wellbeing, an increased ability to cope and increased motivation to make life changes

- ✓ Increases in the quality and number of relationships – an expanded social support network

- ✓ Increased ability to communicate with and deal with other support services

- ✓ An opportunity to 'give back' by helping others

Outcome intentions for Purposeful Peer Support Groups

Our Purposeful Peer Support groups take different forms. They may be centred around shared social activities; or a facilitated wellbeing support group. Some sessions may focus explicitly on growing useful skills and knowledge for wellbeing.

All our groups are based on the same principles of Purposeful Peer Support, but with slightly different, although complementary, intentional outcomes.

Social Activity Groups

These gatherings can be one-off sessions, ongoing regular meetings, or project-based. Social activity groups offer a way to build a sense of community between survivors through doing something together. Some examples include sports-based activities, walking/hiking groups, barbeques, social and entertainment groups, or other special interest activities.

Social activity groups are our most informal groups. Their intended outcome is to reduce feelings of isolation, shame or judgment by providing a supportive environment to interact safely with others in a shared activity. Survivors greatly value the opportunity to know they are not alone, and can connect and have fun with other people, despite what they've been through and might be struggling with.

These groups are also a chance to make new connections, and often new friendships, to extend your support networks. These new relationships can often be key in allowing you to balance or replace other unhelpful community connections that perhaps are not supporting, or distracting you from, your wellbeing objectives.

Education Groups

Sometimes survivors want to focus on improving their skills or knowledge about topics relevant to the challenges that many survivors encounter. Examples could include dealing with trauma, navigating difference and diversity, managing addictions, working with social and/or community service providers, or interacting with professional therapists.

This kind of education and skills-building can take place in the Social Activity group format, e.g. as a one-off or series of workshops that present information, and promote discussion between survivors to increase understanding. Education groups may also include guest speakers with particular expertise about the topic/s.

There can also be a focus on growing knowledge and skills within Wellbeing groups, perhaps as part of the regular format, or with guest speakers from time to time.

Wellbeing Groups

Wellbeing groups are facilitated by trained peer worker/s and follow a similar structure for each regular (usually) weekly or fortnightly meeting.

The focus is on supporting you on your journey towards wellbeing, in an ongoing group setting. The facilitated process means survivors can share their experiences – past or present – in a safe, non-judgmental and strictly confidential environment. Through group interactions and discussions participants have the opportunity to learn from each other and to appreciate the understanding, empathy and support that comes from being with other survivors who are on similar life journeys.

All our Wellbeing groups are guided by the principles of Purposeful Peer Support but the group will develop its own flavour and feel within that framework, depending on who makes up the group at any given time. For instance, participants may set the agenda by deciding on topics to explore that are of interest to them for their wellbeing journeys overall.

Part of the power of a group process comes from working through some typical challenging group dynamics – for example, learning to be open and developing trust or dealing with difference and diversity. These relational experiences can feel scary but are a chance to develop and practise, in a supported space, your ability to work through relationship challenges that you can then apply in other aspects of your life.

Other potential outcomes from participation in Wellbeing groups include increased energy for making important life changes; building self-confidence and determination; and a sense of connection that supports you to live a life with purpose and meaning.

“Sometimes we just need someone to simply be there... not to fix anything or do anything in particular but just to feel that we are supported and cared about.”

– UNKNOWN

The difference between Purposeful Peer Support and Psychotherapy Groups

Purposeful Peer Support Groups

Peer – Relationship Focus

Are composed of people who have a common life experience or challenge and who participate in the group as peers

The group may have an identified facilitator, leader or host whose status is not significantly different from the participants

Because group leadership, hosting or facilitation is more informal, the participants enjoy more shared ownership of the group meeting and its outcomes

Attendance and participation is voluntary and can be terminated by the participant at any time

There is usually no cost to attend peer support groups or any cost is voluntary

The main benefits accrue from conversations that build meaningful and supportive relationships between the participants

The difference between Purposeful Peer Support groups and psychotherapy groups (as an example of a clinically-led therapy group) can be briefly summarised as follows:³

Psychotherapy Groups

Patient – Therapy Focus

Include one or more registered clinicians who create and manage a formal clinical experience for a group of their patients

Groups are always led by one or more registered clinicians whose status and role is significantly different from the attendees

Because leaders are registered professionals, they are responsible for leading the group according to professional standards and are accountable for group outcomes

While attendance may be voluntary there may also be financial or clinical expectations between the leader and the attendees

There is usually a participation cost paid by attendees and/or via a health support service

The main benefits come from either discussion between the attendant patients and/or comments and guidance provided by the professional leader



How do I join a Purposeful Peer Support Group?

To join with a Purposeful Peer Support group, you will have first engaged at least once with a peer worker. This is important to ensure that we, have some understanding of your circumstances and what you're hoping for from the group. This understanding enables us to assure everyone involved that the purpose, integrity and confidentiality of the group will be sustained with your participation.

In the case of **Social Activity** groups or **Education** groups an invitation may come from a peer worker or an existing member of the group, but it is usual that the invite is also cleared with the peer worker who is hosting the group.

With **Wellbeing groups**, you can expect to have a series of one-on-one engagement meetings with a peer worker first so that you can understand what the group involves, and you can both be confident that you're ready and able to participate fully.

This engagement process is likely to start with conversations about any particular challenges you're working through, and clarifying your expectations and intentions for joining the group. There will also be a focus on identifying a wellbeing goal or goals and discussing how the group might help you achieve this.

The next step is meeting the peer worker who facilitates the group you want to join (if this is not the same person you've already been talking to) so you can hear more about the group's culture and current focus. Wellbeing groups typically invite new members to a particular session every four meetings or so. We do this so that group participants have space to deepen their trust and connection over a few meetings, before welcoming in new people.

The process for joining groups takes time and is done in a considered and purposeful way. Experience has taught us that the effectiveness of peer support Wellbeing groups relies on us taking care to sustain the group's culture, connections, and focus.



“I could walk a mile in your shoes, but I know that they are just as uncomfortable as mine. Let’s walk next to each other instead.”

– LINDA MEYERS

