

# Exploring safety and risk

## Peer support practice guide four



# Welcome to the Exploring safety and risk practice guide!

The fourth in a series of four, this practice guide is a useful tool for anyone developing and delivering peer support for people affected by mental health challenges and suicide.

The practice guides are developed to help people involved in peer support groups and services to: learn from shared experience, reflect on practice, and develop confidence and experience by providing accessible and practical advice and tips. They are based on the experiences of peer workers, groups and services across Scotland.

Throughout this guide we will share examples of the ways peer workers support people experiencing distress.

Thanks to East Dunbartonshire Health & Social Care Partnership, Hope Point Dundee (Penumbra Mental Health and Dundee Health and Social Care Partnership), Mindspace and all the fantastic peer workers across Scotland who continue to develop, deliver and champion peer support.

This practice guide was originally co-developed as part of the Creating Hope with Peer Support project.

We refer to people delivering peer support as peer workers, whether paid or unpaid. Peer workers are people with lived experience of mental health challenges who are trained and employed to use their lived experience intentionally to support others in their recovery.



# Understanding safety and risk



Peer support creates spaces where people can speak honestly about what's going on, including things they may not feel safe saying elsewhere. This openness is a strength. It can also raise questions about safety and risk for both the person and the peer worker.

In peer support, safety and risk are shaped by relationships and context rather than by something a person 'is'. This guide explores how we work with safety through presence, honesty and shared responsibility. Peer workers work across many settings, including community groups, third sector organisations and NHS services. While contexts differ, peer practice is grounded in shared values including lived experience, mutual relationships and a recovery focus.

This practice guide brings together learning from peer workers around responding to safety concerns in ways that strengthen trust, reduce isolation and help people stay connected during difficult times.

## How we define safety and risk

### Safety

Creating the conditions where harm is less likely and people feel heard, validated and supported. In peer support, safety is not only about preventing harm, but about building relationships where people feel listened to and respected.

### Risk

The chance that someone could be harmed depending on what's happening around them rather than something they 'are'. This can include experiences such as suicidal distress, self-harm, abuse, neglect, coercion or loss of support.

**“Safety isn't about me keeping someone safe. It's about building enough trust that they feel able to tell me when they are not.”**

## A peer approach to safety and risk



Safety and risk are shaped by the world people live in. The outer layer in this diagram illustrates their relationships, circumstances, the services they encounter and wider society. These can influence how safe someone feels and whether asking for help feels possible.

The inner layer is how peer support works by creating a relational space where honesty, trust and shared responsibility are central. When concerns grow, ‘widening support’ means bringing others into the conversation transparently and, wherever possible, alongside the person - not handing them over, but expanding the circle of support.

**“Peer support complements other roles by offering a relational, lived-experience lens.”**



# What safety looks like

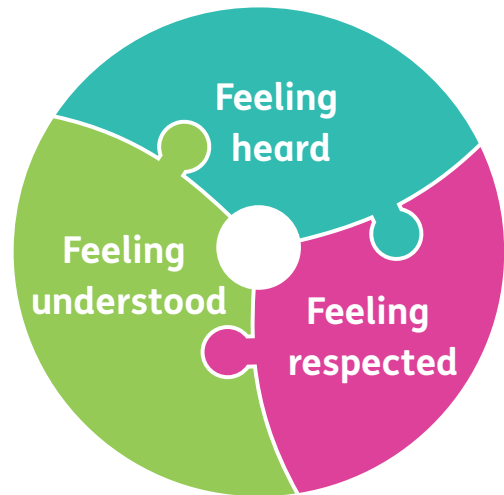


Safety is personal and shaped by people's experiences and circumstances. Peer workers talk about safety together with people rather than defining it for them. What feels safe for one person may feel unsafe for another, especially for people who have experienced trauma, discrimination or having decisions made for them without consent.

In peer support, safety includes emotional and relational safety. Feeling heard, understood and respected are all important parts of this. When expectations are clear and relationships are consistent and transparent, trust grows.

Peer workers often talk about safety by asking:

- What feels safe for you right now?
- What has felt unsafe in the past?
- Who or what helps you stay connected?



Safety can come from many places including relationships, routines, creativity, community and spiritual or cultural practices.

Relational safety also supports peer workers. When responsibility is shared and boundaries are clear, peer workers tell us they are less likely to carry fear alone or feel the need to control outcomes.



Relational safety is explored further in Peer Support Practice Guide 1: [Creating Safe Spaces](#)

# What risk looks like



In peer support, risk is shaped by what's happening in an individual's life, their relationships and how services and society respond to them. Peer workers have described how risk can be influenced by experiences such as:

**Sexism**  
**Poverty**  
**Housing/homelessness**  
**Immigration stress**  
**Abuse**



**Racism**  
**Transphobia**  
**Restrictive services**  
**Coercive care**  
**Violence**

These experiences, and many more, influence how safe someone feels, how much they trust services and whether asking for help feels possible or risky. Peer workers tell us that understanding this context helps them to respond with curiosity and compassion.

Instead of asking, "What is wrong with this person?" peer workers get curious and explore:

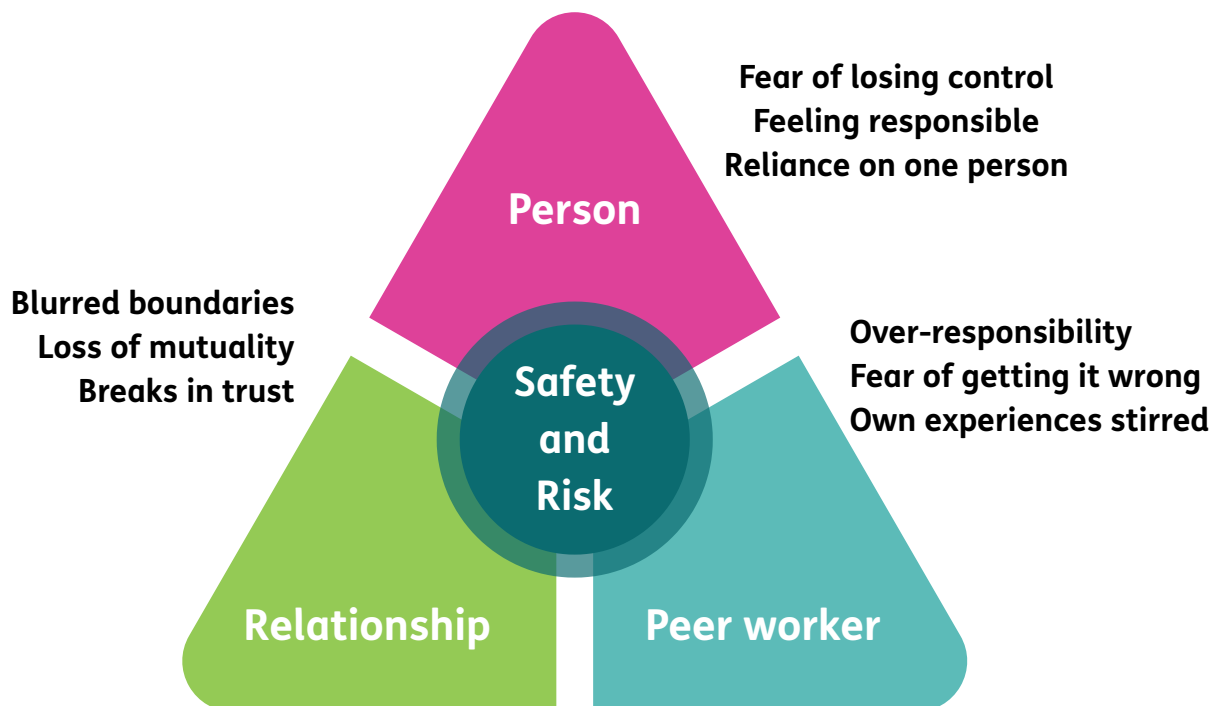
- What has happened?
- What is happening around them?



**“Naming where risk is showing up helps peer workers respond with curiosity and compassion.”**

# Risk within the peer relationship

These wider dynamics can also affect the peer relationship itself and how risk may show up.



These are not signs that something has gone wrong. They are normal tensions in relational work that involves closeness, trust and shared vulnerability. Naming where risk is showing up - in the wider context of someone's life, in the relationship or in the peer role - helps peer workers pause, reflect and involve others where needed.

Responsibility is shared through honest conversation, clear boundaries and supervision.



Further exploration of these relational tensions is included in Peer Support Practice guide two: [\*\*Navigating Discomfort in the Peer Relationship\*\*](#)

# What this means for peer practice



Peer support is built on shared responsibility within relationships. When concerns go beyond what the peer role can hold, peer workers describe how they widen support.

## Create space for honesty

People can speak openly, even about things that feel hard or unsafe to say elsewhere. Naming what's going on often reduces isolation and fear

## Stay alongside

Be present and honest. Listen without judgement. Slow things down rather than rushing to fix.

## Respond with compassion

Being heard and taken seriously can ease shame and intensity. Calm care shows these conversations are welcome, not a burden.

## Be clear and share responsibility

Be transparent about your role and boundaries. Involve people in decisions. Use supervision and team support when concerns grow.

# Safety concerns can take many forms

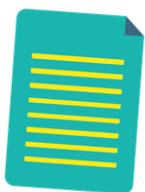
Questions about safety can also arise when, for example, someone: feels unsafe at home or in a relationship, is experiencing abuse, exploitation or coercion, is facing housing insecurity, poverty or immigration stress, is using substances in ways that feel hard to control, feels overwhelmed they are unsure what they might do.

Whatever the situation, the heart of peer practice stays the same. Peer workers listen, explore what safety means for that person, stay honest about our role and share responsibility when wider support is needed. Here are some examples from peer workers that may help you explore safety with someone:

- Can you share what has led to these thoughts?
- What has helped you through difficult moments before?
- Who feels safe to involve right now?



When someone feels heard and taken seriously, the intensity of the moment can soften. Thoughts may feel less overwhelming, options can become clearer and people are often more able to stay connected and consider support. For many, not being alone with these thoughts is what makes the difference.



Further exploration is available in Practice guide two: [Supporting People Experiencing Distress](#) and the Creating Hope with Peer Support Pathway featured in the [Creating Hope with Peer Support](#) resource.

# Shared experience



Lucy Dill, a peer support worker within a Community Mental Health Team, reflects on her experiences of safety and risk within peer relationships.

As a peer support worker, I have to be mindful that I don't rush in with solutions when someone mentions something that could be deemed a risk.

It's a natural reaction to do so. Through our own lived experience, peer workers have a lot of compassion and empathy for the people we work with. We have the right intention, but I've realised this can shut down conversations - it can make a person stop sharing.

Through experience I have built a self-awareness that I can often panic when risk is mentioned and immediately go to worst case scenarios or consequences if I get it wrong. It is important I remember I am part of a multi-disciplinary team - this is not a burden for me to carry on my own, but it does not mean I am not equipped to have difficult conversations.

I don't enjoy conversations about suicide - but I don't think you're meant to. Keeping the person at the centre of everything is imperative. They have trusted me enough to share that they are feeling suicidal, or that they may be planning suicide. Maybe I am the only person they have shared this with.

It can be difficult to quiet my own mind when suicide is mentioned - rather than go into a mode of thought of what I need to ask, who I need to speak to, how much time I have to do this.

Giving a person that space to speak is what is important in that moment. Yes, I know how to escalate concerns and protocol, but just being a human for a moment and not questioning my ability to be what that person needs at that time is what I am trying to get better at. And remembering that conversations about suicide will never be easy or enjoyable.

# Widening the circle of support



If it becomes clear that someone needs more support than a peer relationship can safely hold, peer workers focus on widening the circle of support. The circle of support has four segments. Honesty (including clarity), Choice (making sure you involve the person), Respect (avoiding judgement or assumptions) and Connection (staying alongside). This is not about handing someone over. It is about bringing more people into the circle.

Wider support might include managers, other health professionals or services. What matters most is how this happens.



Peer workers describe the importance of focusing on how they widen support as much as who they involve. Keeping the person and the peer relationship central.

The relationship does not end when others become involved. Wherever possible, peer support continues. Keeping the door open helps reduce shame and reassures people that they are still welcome.

# Supporting peer workers



Peer support can be emotionally demanding work, and peer workers' wellbeing matters. Working closely with questions of safety and risk can have an impact. Safety is shared. Safe peer practice relies on reflective supervision, supportive teams and organisations that value honesty over blame.

## Peer worker

- Uses lived experience intentionally
- Notices impact
- Has permission to pause

## Team

- Reflective space
- Shared thinking
- Emotional support

## Organisation

- Clear boundaries
- Honesty over blame
- Supports peer values

“Mindspace peer support workers have ongoing access to support and supervision, which I refer to as “supervision on tap.” This flexible approach is essential for promoting safe and effective practice in the peer support relationship, particularly when working with risk or navigating emotional impact.

Peer support workers are encouraged to reach out for support when necessary. This may be in the moment, or afterwards, to reflect, debrief and to ensure they do not carry the emotional weight of a challenging session home with them. All support is delivered with peer values at the forefront: openness, honesty, and transparency. These principles guide every conversation and ensure that both the peer and the peer worker remain central to the process and are always respected.”

Kelly Gilmour, Mindspace,  
Peer Support Development Worker

# Top tips



## Safety and risk in peer relationships

Peer workers share these practical tips for working with safety and risk. They can be useful when conversations feel intense or uncertain, boundaries feel unclear, concerns about safety increase, you're reflecting in supervision, or service responsibilities feel at odds with peer values.

These tips won't remove all uncertainty, but they can help you stay grounded, relational and supported.

### Start with clarity and shared understanding

#### Be clear about your role from the start

Explain what you can offer, where the boundaries are, and when you might need to involve others. Clarity builds trust and avoids surprises.

#### Ask what safety means for this person

Explore what helps them feel safer and what has felt unsafe before. Don't assume, safety looks different for everyone.

#### Use lived experience with care

Share only when it supports connection or understanding. Notice if sharing starts to feel too close or shifts focus away from the other person.

#### Keep boundaries kind and clear

Check in with yourself: Am I becoming the only support? Am I carrying too much? Boundaries protect both people and keep the relationship mutual.

## **Stay relational when the conversation feels intense**

### **Stay with the conversation**

Listen calmly and without judgement. Slow things down.  
Avoid rushing to fix or shut things down.

### **Name concerns early and openly**

If something feels worrying, say so gently and honestly. Early conversations reduce fear and help prevent reactive steps later.

### **Hold hope without pressure**

People don't have to 'grow' from crisis. Being met with dignity and care can create space for change.

## **Share responsibility and widen support**

### **Widen the circle of support**

When things feel heavier, don't hold it alone. Use supervision, your team and wider networks. Involve others openly and, wherever possible, with the person's knowledge and consent.

### **Protect the relationship when others become involved**

Explain what's happening and why. Talk through next steps together. How you involve others matters just as much as who you involve.

### **Remember safety is shared**

You are not responsible for managing risk by yourself. Safe peer practice depends on supervision, team support and organisations that back relational work.

### **Keep the door open**

If other services are involved, continue offering connection where possible. Ongoing availability can reduce shame and help people stay connected.

# Peer support in practice: Hope Point

In this podcast Abigail Clark, Team Lead, and Darren Sayer, Operations Manager at [Hope Point Dundee](#) (Penumbra Mental Health and Dundee Health and Social Care Partnership) discuss how peer practitioners approach safety and risk in their peer support practice.

After listening to the podcast, choose from the discussion prompts below to reflect on and explore how you explore safety and risk in your peer support practice.



[Listen to the podcast](#)

[Download the transcript](#)

## Podcast reflective questions

### Creating welcoming and safe spaces

What have you found creates a safe space for people you offer peer support with?

### A peer approach

What is it about a peer approach that makes a difference?

### Working with safety and risk

What are the similarities and differences to your approach to safety and risk?

### Supporting peer workers

What do you think you could add to supporting yourself /peer workers?

Hope Point Dundee is a Penumbra Mental Health and Dundee Health and Social Care Partnership service. Read their [Two Year Review](#) to find out more.

# Reflective practice - individual



**This activity is for individual reflection.**

Throughout this practice guide we have been exploring how peer workers understand safety and risk in peer relationships.

Working with safety and risk can bring up uncertainty, responsibility and strong emotional responses. Peer workers tell us that taking time to reflect supports both their wellbeing and the quality of peer relationships.

Reflections can be used within groups and/or supervision to share insights and learning.

Take some time to pause and consider the following:

## Impact

What impact is this work having on me right now?

## Carrying

Am I carrying responsibility that needs to be shared?

## Support

Where do I feel supported, and where do I need more support?

## Supervision

How am I using supervision and reflective spaces?

## Grounded

What helps me stay grounded and connected in this role?

# Reflective practice: group



Reflection questions for peer workers and teams. These questions can be used individually, in peer reflection, in supervision, or team discussions. Think of a recent peer support conversation and use the questions as a reflective exercise.

## Understanding distress and safety

What does safety mean for this person, at this time?

How might their past experiences shape what feels safe or unsafe now?

What might be missed if we focus only on risk?

## In the peer relationship

How is trust being built or supported in this relationship?

Are there ways honesty is being encouraged or unintentionally limited?

How are boundaries helping to protect the relationship?

## When concerns arise

How can concerns be named openly and respectfully?

What would it look like to widen the circle of support?

How can the person be involved as much as possible in next steps?

## For peer workers

What support do I need right now?

Am I holding responsibility that needs to be shared?

How am I using supervision or reflective space?

# Peer Recovery Hub

On the [Peer RecoveryHub](#) you'll find more tools, events and opportunities to inspire you to develop and champion peer support.

This includes the Peer2Peer online toolbox, a reflective, strengths-based group training course designed for you to deliver. It supports the learning and development of peer workers by building their knowledge, skills and confidence in peer support values and practice.

## Get in touch

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If you require information in a different format, please contact us.

## Practice guide series

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