

Navigating Discomfort in the Peer Relationship

Peer support practice guide 2



Welcome to the Navigating Discomfort in the Peer Relationship practice guide!

[Creating Hope with Peer Support](#) is part of the Creating Hope Together [Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan](#). The project highlights the unique and powerful role peer support contributes to suicide prevention.

The second in a series of four, this guide is designed to complement the [Creating Hope with Peer Support](#) resource and relates to the Explore stage of the Creating Hope with Peer Support Pathway. It's also a useful tool for anyone developing and delivering mental health peer support.

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 supporters, groups and services across Scotland. We have used the term peer supporter throughout this practice guide. This is inclusive across one-to-one support and peer group facilitators.



Throughout this guide we will share examples of the ways peer supporters navigate discomfort. Thanks to Bipolar Scotland, Self-Harm Network Scotland, Moray Wellbeing Hub, and all the fantastic peer supporters across Scotland who continue to develop, deliver and champion peer support.

Understanding discomfort in the peer relationship



Peer relationships provide a valuable sense of connection, understanding and support which we know are key factors in promoting hope, healing and wellbeing.

Peer supporters bring their lived experience of mental health recovery into their role. Sharing experiences enables a deeper connection, empathy and trust, but it can also bring a level of emotional complexity to the peer relationship.

This practice guide (the second in our series) focuses on navigating discomfort in peer relationships. Discomfort is not only common, both for the peer supporter and the people supported, but also an expected and important part of the work!

Discomfort in peer relationships is a learning experience because it reveals personal and relational dynamics that may otherwise go unnoticed. It can be a sign that something important is going on. Maybe it's a boundary being pushed, a past experience being activated or a need not being met.

Noticing discomfort and taking time to understand it can create space for more open conversations, shared understandings, meaningful support and respectful relationships.

This practice guide shares learning from peer supporters on how to navigate discomfort compassionately and intentionally.

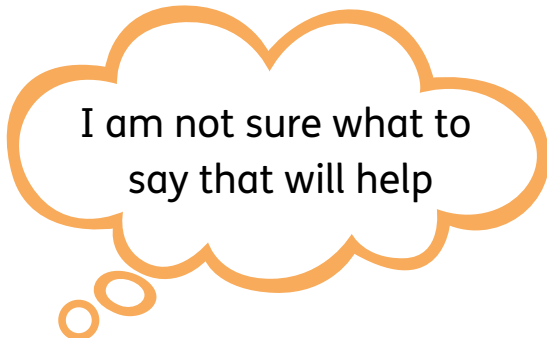
Personal discomfort

Personal discomfort is what 'I experience' in the peer relationship and is a common experience. It arises when something 'feels off' and can show up as tension, emotional overwhelm or a gut feeling during or after a connection with someone.

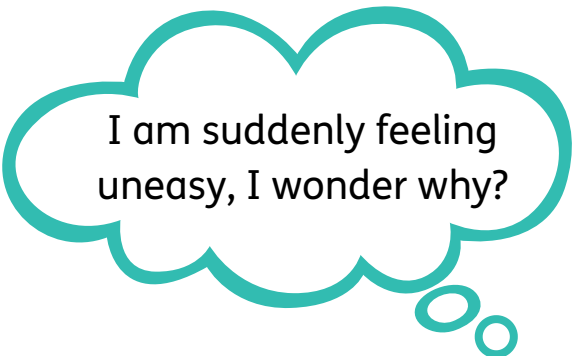
Personal discomfort can show as:

-  **Cognitive** e.g. not sure about how to respond
-  **Emotional** e.g. feeling drained or overwhelmed
-  **Physical** e.g. tension in the body

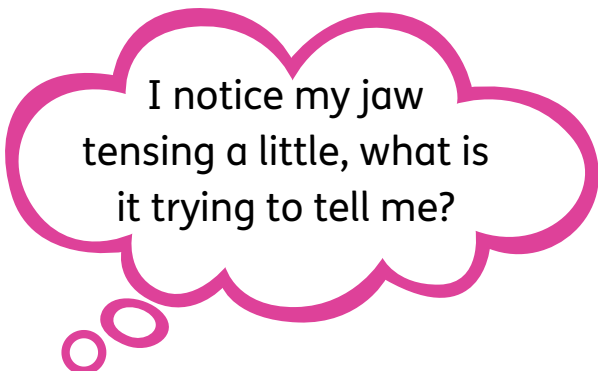
Personal discomfort can be linked to many things: an experience that echoes your own, not being sure about how to respond, feeling overwhelmed or points where your values, boundaries or needs feel stretched.



I am not sure what to say that will help



I am suddenly feeling uneasy, I wonder why?



I notice my jaw tensing a little, what is it trying to tell me?

Relational discomfort

Relational discomfort is where there are challenging dynamics impacting on the peer relationship, it is experienced between people. We are all unique and our worldviews are shaped by different life experiences, beliefs and values. It is natural that this may cause points of discomfort to arise in the peer relationship. It is not because anyone is doing anything wrong.

Discomfort in the relationship signals that something in the peer relationship needs attention. This could be in relation to mutuality, power or communication. It can be experienced as:

-  Misunderstanding
-  Tension in a conversation
-  Not feeling safe or heard
-  Blurred boundaries
-  Power dynamics playing out

Environmental discomfort

Sometimes discomfort in peer relationships comes from the setting. The environment can powerfully shape how peer relationships are experienced as safe, supportive and equal. We explored this in [Creating Safe Spaces](#) practice guide 1. Examples that can create environmental discomfort include:

-  Lack of privacy for an open conversation
-  Noisy, crowded or overly clinical spaces
-  Group or organisational policies that clash with peer values
-  Limited time or workload pressures
-  Power dynamics shaped by the setting

Shared experience



Laura is a Peer Practitioner with [Self-Harm Network Scotland](#)

Laura shared some thoughts and experience on navigating discomfort in the peer relationship.

I talk with people about self-harm on a daily basis and generally feel comfortable having these conversations. Occasionally, though, there will be a part of someone's story that resonates with me personally and I recognise that I am having a bit of a different reaction than I normally would. When I am aware of this happening, I can start to worry and ask myself, "Is this emotional reaction changing the way I relate to this person? Am I going to miss something? Am I going to do or say something wrong because I am in my own head about this?"

Depending on the nature of the relationship, I may name that to the person I am working with and say, "That's resonated with me in a way that's brought up some strong feelings for me." I would use that as a way of empathising and saying, "If I'm having this emotional response, I can only imagine how you must be feeling," using it to deepen the conversation. However, it doesn't always feel appropriate to do that. There is a line between saying, "I am having an emotional reaction," as a means of connection (relational), vs. making it about me and my own 'stuff' (personal).

I can notice a bit of a cognitive thought spiral, particularly when what is shared touches on a level of risk while also closely resonating with me. I am having my own emotional response, but I am also thinking about my duty of care. I need to ensure I am responding appropriately to risk. Did I miss something? Am I taking the steps I need to, or am I focused on myself? That is where I draw on other support and checking-in with others. At Self-Harm Network Scotland we have a robust support system in place. I can go to my manager afterwards to process, ask one of my colleagues if they have a bit of space, or take it to practice reflection.

Navigating discomfort

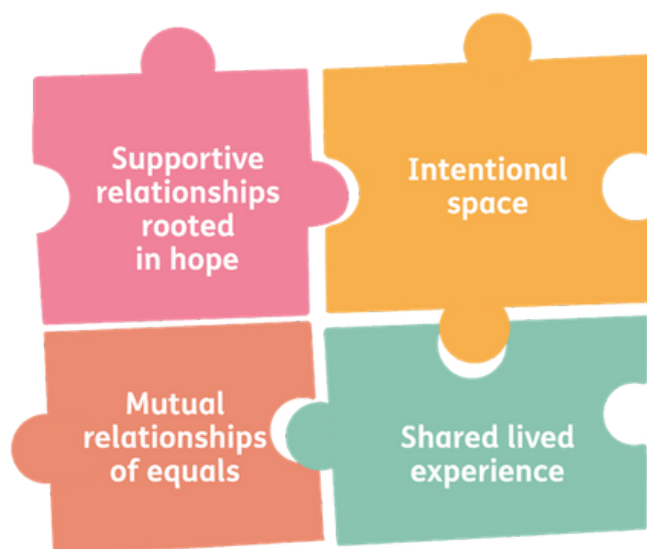
We know that peer supporters skilfully balance their own feelings and the dynamic of the peer relationship. Whilst vulnerability can be high in the peer relationship, navigating discomfort requires a level of honesty, openness and empathy. Discomfort doesn't need to be avoided or ignored.

Peer supporters tell us it takes courage and compassion to work through discomfort. They describe how modelling ways to navigate discomfort becomes an opportunity for growth, both for themselves and those they are in relationship with.

Peer relationships start with values

We explored this in the [What makes peer support unique?](#) animation in the [Creating Hope with Peer Support](#) resource. Using the key elements of peer relationships enables us to find ways of acknowledging and responding to discomfort with intention. This deepens the peer connection and supports everyone's wellbeing.

Peer support is mutual and grounded in shared lived experience. It is about holding space, listening and validating, not 'fixing'. Discomfort can arise from boundaries, differing experiences, emotional intensity or when something evokes a strong reaction due to personal experiences.



Moray Wellbeing Hub



Heidi Tweedie, Champion and Director at [Moray Wellbeing Hub](#) describes the powerful role values play in their peer approach.

As peers we are choosing a path of discomfort, we reject a binary view of people and focus on relationships. Using learned and lived experience is something like being on a wobble board: we are balancing many different tensions simultaneously, ensuring we are alongside someone rather than in a helper role.

To enable us to do this, we have peer-values based tools for planning, facilitating and reflection. This gets us thinking about what can minimise discomfort in that space for us and those attending. Being led by peer values means we are more open to the emerging opportunities in the space to create connection and hope, making recovery possible.



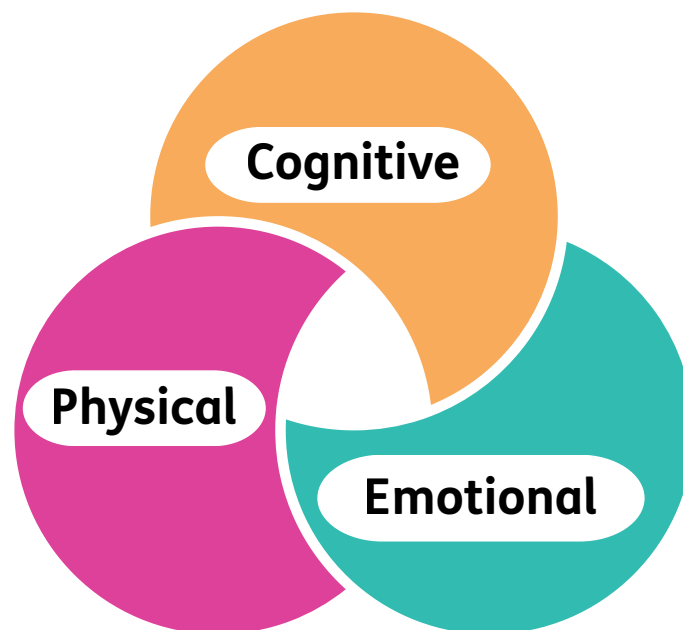
Top tips

Recognise discomfort

It's important to recognise discomfort. Get curious - explore how the discomfort shows up for you - is it cognitive, emotional or physical? Is it the environment?

- ✿ Normalise it: name it 'this feels hard'
- ✿ Ask yourself: are my feelings about my experiences or are they about the relationship?
- ✿ Ask yourself: what is this discomfort trying to tell me?
- ✿ Think about: where do I feel this in my body? Our body often provides clues that there is tension

Remember discomfort isn't a sign of doing something wrong. Navigating authentic, mutual relationships means it's natural to experience points of discomfort.



Focus on mutuality

Discomfort can tempt us to withdraw, fix, rescue or take control. Focusing on mutuality reminds us to keep the focus on 'being with' the person/group that we are in the peer relationship with. This means we share power, acknowledge everyone's experiences and needs with openness and honesty.

Peer supporters have shared some questions they ask when they notice a discomfort:

"I noticed I am starting to feel myself tensing up a bit. Seems like we have different perspectives and that's ok. How is it for you? I value our relationship so I'd like to hear how it feels for you?"



"Would it be okay if we checked in about how this conversation is going?"

"I feel like I am offering all these solutions as I want to make it better for you but really I am feeling a bit stuck! Feels a bit like I am wanting to feel useful rather than what you would find helpful. What would you find useful just now?"



Check boundaries (yours and theirs)

We know that healthy peer relationships involve clear, flexible and compassionate boundaries that protect and support everyone in the peer relationship. Discomfort can sometimes arise from unclear or crossed boundaries.

Here are examples from peer supporters of ways that might help you navigate a conversation around boundaries:

“I just picked up the message you sent a few nights ago. For my own wellbeing I don’t check messages outside my working hours.

Would you like to discuss other ways to access support when something urgent comes up for you?”



“That’s a bit of a tough subject for me just now. I want to keep supporting you, so I am wondering if we can look at who else you could discuss this with for now?”

“I feel this is developing into a really intense discussion. My heart is beginning to pound. I want to keep the group comfortable for everyone. Can we take a moment to check in together?”



A peer friendly environment

Peer supporters speak of the importance of creating warm and welcoming spaces but also recognise that options may be limited. Peer supporters suggest making small changes such as adding soft lamps, moving to a quieter space, adding comfortable chairs, removing a table, offering refreshments and having sensory gadgets available can all make a difference to supporting and connecting.

There may be times when peer supporters are limited with the time they have available or encounter policies that don't align with a peer approach. This is where it is worth exploring if there are ways to advocate for change? For example, outlining why a community space would be more appropriate than a health clinic as a place to meet or negotiating with management the need for more sessions to take into account the relational approach and needs of those attending a peer group.

Self-compassion

Remember that compassion in peer relationships includes self-compassion! Suggestions from peer supporters are to treat yourself with the same care, understanding and respect that you offer others.

Being self-compassionate can enable peer supporters to stay grounded, preserve their own wellbeing and strengthen their ability to be present in the peer relationship. A great antidote to self-criticism and burnout!



“We all matter!”

Reflection and support

Peer supporters tell us that reflection and support is important. Discomfort can be an insightful learning experience. Making the time and space to intentionally reflect on points of discomfort provides peer supporters with the opportunity to understand what may have led to discomfort, build resilience and grow in their peer role.



Reflecting with others can help peer supporters understand something from a different perspective. Ways that peer supporters have found useful include self-reflection, journaling, peer reflection with other peer supporters and within support and supervision. The peer reflective circle above can be useful for this process. More on how to use this tool on pages 15 and 16.

“Peer support is relational and so is processing it!”



Reflective practice 1

Film & discussion

In this short film Maja Mitchell-Grigorjeva and Lynsey Mackenzie of [Bipolar Scotland](#) explore navigating discomfort from their different perspectives as Manager and Peer Support Worker.



Lynsey, Peer
Support Worker



[Press to play.](#)

[Download film transcript](#)



Maya, Impact
and Development
Manager

After watching the film, choose from the discussion prompts below to reflect on and explore how you navigate discomfort in your peer support practice.

Individual/group reflection

- What are the key messages for you from this film?
- What did it validate for you?
- How do we respond, individually and collectively, when discomfort shows up in your peer support relationships?

Manager/team reflection

- What would enable peer supporters to feel safe to raise, explore and feel supported when things are uncomfortable or challenging?
- As a group or team, what conversations are we not having because they feel uncomfortable? What would make them safe to have?

Reflective practice 2

Exploring together

Discomfort is a natural and expected part of peer relationships. Reflecting on moments of discomfort can strengthen peer practice, deepen mutuality and keep hope at the heart of peer support.

This activity has been co-developed for paired or group reflection. It can however also be used individually. For this reflective practice use the question prompts below followed by the worksheet on page 16.

Setting the scene

In your pair or group, one person describes a situation where they experienced discomfort in their peer relationship. Ask this person:

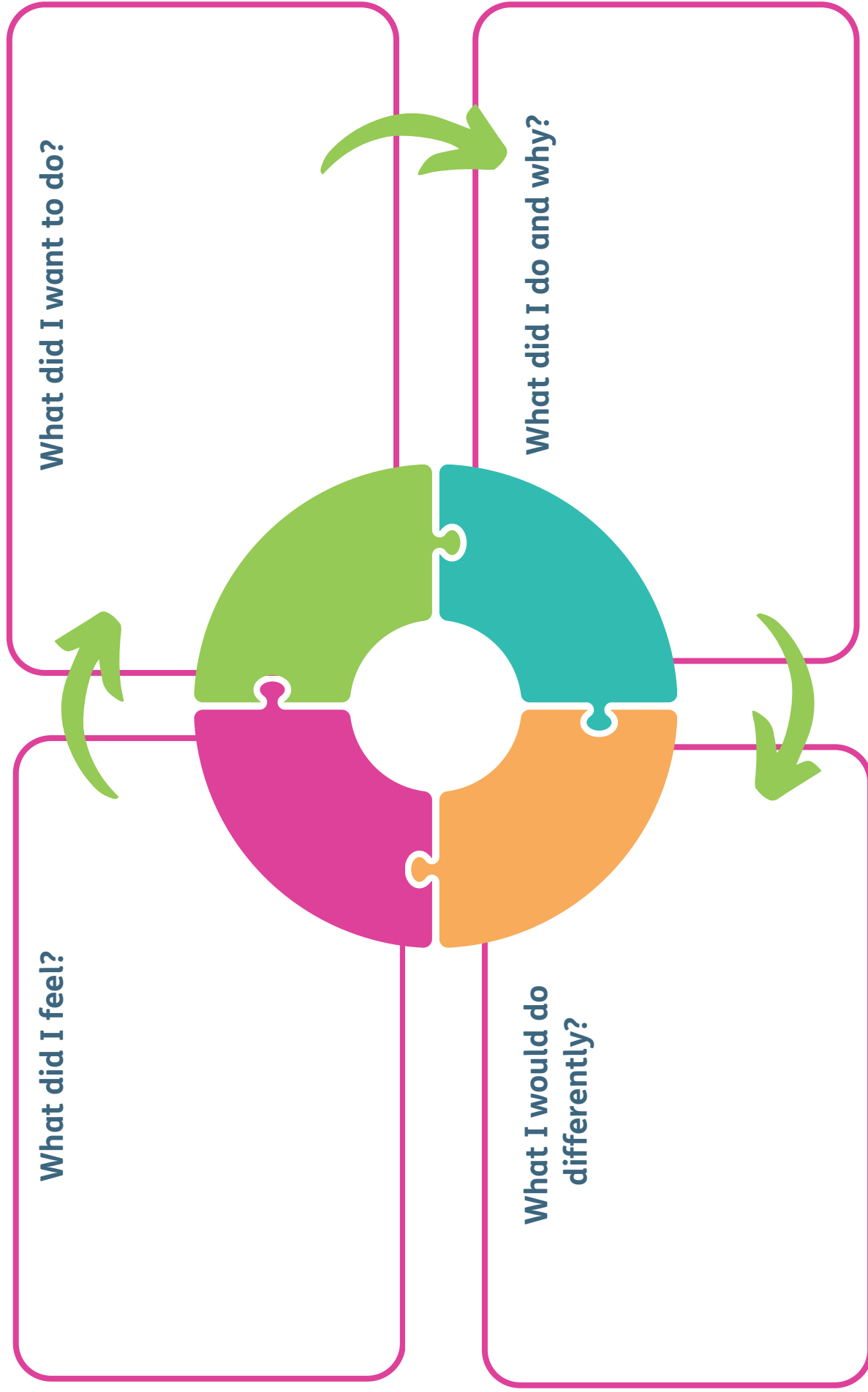
-  What happened?
-  What they think may have been going on for the other person?
-  What were your initial feelings or reactions?

Using the peer reflective circle

Building on the activity above use the peer reflective circle worksheet, on page 16, to guide a conversation with the person sharing their experience. This is an opportunity to give space and time to understand the nuances of the peer relationship and together deepen your peer practice.

This isn't about finding or agreeing on the 'right answer'. It's taking the opportunity to think things through and reflect with ourself, our fellow peer supporters and learn from the discomfort.

Navigating Discomfort in the Peer Relationship: reflective circle worksheet



Reflective practice 3

Grounded in the four key components of 'What makes peer support unique', either individually or with others use the following prompt questions to guide your reflection on your discomfort experience. Use reflective practice worksheet 2 on page 18 to note your responses.

Supportive relationship based on hope and belief

-  When discomfort shows up, does it shrink or grow my sense of hope - for myself, for the other person, or for the relationship?
-  Did I react from fear or respond from possibility?
-  Is this discomfort part of a meaningful turning point?

Intentional space where people explore together and work towards recovery

-  Is this space still intentional, or was I sliding into reaction or role confusion
-  Was I able, as the peer supporter, to hold space for this person/group?
-  Am I over-extending, rescuing, or disappearing?

Shared lived experience which builds trust and empathy

-  Am I sharing from a place of mutual understanding or trying to lead the way?
-  Do I feel the pressure to perform being 'further along' in my recovery?
-  Is my story a bridge, or a barrier, in this moment?
-  How did I share any feelings of discomfort?

Mutual relationship of equals where people walk alongside rather than fix

-  Am I holding power, or sharing it?
-  Where might I be slipping into 'fixer' mode?
-  How do I honour the other person's autonomy - especially when I disagree or feel uneasy?

Navigating Discomfort: four key components reflective practice worksheet

Mutual relationship

Supportive
relationships
rooted
in hope

Shared lived experience

Mutual
relationships
of equals

Supportive relationships

Intentional
space

Intentional space

Shared lived
experience

What I have learned...

Free resource

The [Creating Hope with Peer Support](#) resource was co-designed and piloted by groups and organisations already delivering peer support for people impacted by suicide. Download your copy from our website.

Peer Recovery Hub

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

Get in touch

Tel: 0300 323 9956 | [Contact Scotland BSL](#)

Email: info@scottishrecovery.net | www.scottishrecovery.net



#CreatingHopeTogether #PeerSupportScot

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

Coming soon

Peer practice guide 3:
Supporting People in Distress.

Get it straight to your inbox
by signing up to our [newsletter](#)

