

Supporting People Experiencing Distress

Peer support practice guide 3



Welcome to the Supporting people experiencing distress 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 third in a series of four, this guide is designed to complement the [Creating Hope with Peer Support](#) resource and relates to the Support 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 support people experiencing distress. Thanks to Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action (DVVA), Families in Trauma and Recovery, Penumbra Mental Health, SAMH (Sam's Fife), Self-Harm Network Scotland, The Neuk and all the fantastic peer supporters across Scotland who continue to develop, deliver and champion peer support.

Understanding distress



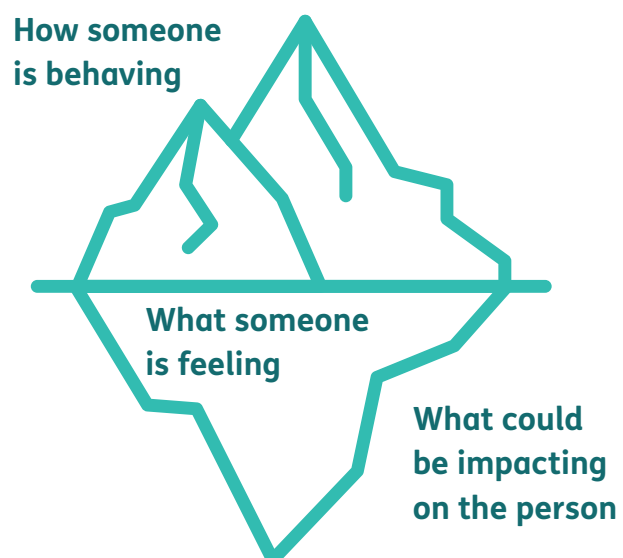
Peer support is a relational approach that values the humanity in each of us. We see a person with life experience, strengths and resilience.

In developing the Creating Hope with Peer Support Pathway (connect, explore, hope, support*) peer supporters reflected on their own experiences of distress and how that shapes their understanding. For some distress is loud and emotional, for others quiet and withdrawn. A shared understanding emerged of distress as a deeply human experience of feeling overwhelmed, unsafe, or disconnected.

From a lived experience perspective, it can feel as though our mind, body, and spirit are overloaded or shutting down. Through a peer support lens distress is not seen as a ‘symptom of illness’ or a ‘crisis’ but a signal that something important in a person’s life needs care, attention, or change. Rachel Middleton, Distress Brief Intervention (DBI) Network Manager, at [Penumbra Mental Health](#) reflects on this human approach to distress:

“We've got a very clear vision in DBI of connected compassionate support and it's very much cultivated an ethos really of collaboration and importantly, the de-medicalisation of distress with a focus on people as people, enabling that sense of ownership and inclusion and compassion at the heart of it.”

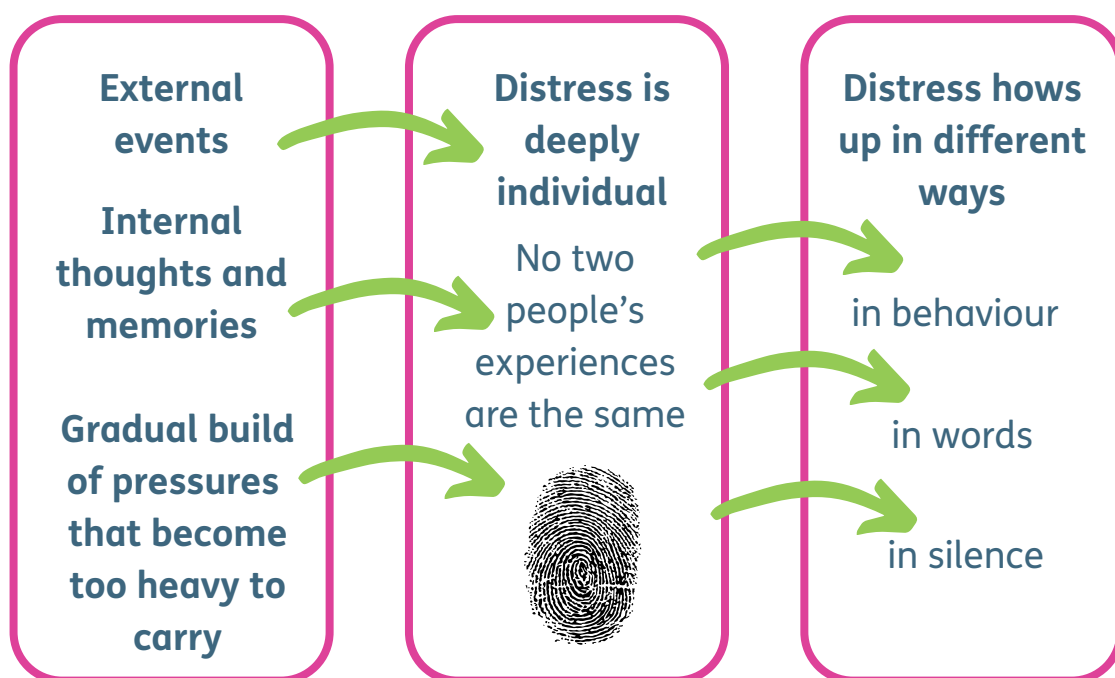
In Creating Hope with Peer Support, the iceberg metaphor enables us to understand how distress is shaped by life experiences, trauma, and the world around us.



*Find out more about the Creating Hope with Peer Support Pathway by ordering this [free resource](#)

In peer support we understand distress as not something to 'fix'. Painful experiences are normalised and space created for them to be met with empathy, curiosity and respect. Distress is something to be with, to listen to and to learn from.

Peer supporters listen without judgement and remind people they are not alone. As one peer supporter described **'it is meeting distress, recognising the humanity within it and holding space with compassion'**. Healing happens in community and peer support plays a valuable role in making that possible.



Language

Understanding distress from a peer perspective is also about looking at the language we use. People are often described as 'distressed'. This can sound as though distress defines who a person is, rather than being something they are going through or experiencing.

Peer supporters understand that the person is separate from their experience and talk about making space for 'when distress shows up' in the peer relationship. Separating the person from the experience opens space for hope and the notion that distressing periods can be moved through.

Distress and suicidal feelings

Distress can sometimes feel so overwhelming that a person may have thoughts of not wanting to live or that life feels too painful to continue. From a peer perspective these thoughts are understood as part of the spectrum of human distress.

Having suicidal feelings doesn't mean someone is broken or beyond help. These thoughts are not unusual and many people will experience them at some point in their lives. Often they are reflective of the depth of pain, hopelessness or disconnection a person feels at that moment. Normalising these suicidal feelings doesn't mean minimising the risk, it means seeing them as valid human responses to overwhelming circumstances and approaching them without judgement or shame.

In peer support, we are alongside people and hold space for distressing feelings that enables a person to share openly and safely. We listen and remind people that their experiences are real and important. By responding with calm presence, respect and hope, peer supporters reduce the isolation and stigma that can make suicidal distress hard to bear.

“Time and space is about allowing people to speak no matter what they feel like and really, really listening to them and the compassion part is about having your heart in that conversation even if you are listening or not speaking, have your heart in it.”

Maggie Wright, Founder of [Families in Trauma and Recovery](#) talking on the [Suicide Prevention Scotland podcast](#)

Why peer support works



A human approach

Distress is a human experience and not just a symptom of illness. Many people accessing mental health services and peer groups are there because of overwhelming distress. Peer supporters can offer a more holistic understanding.

Peer supporters are experts by experience

Peer supporters bring unique empathy and credibility. Having 'been there' enables peer supporters to sit alongside someone in ways that feel less hierarchical, less judgemental and more validating. This helps people feel seen and less alone in their difficult periods.

Connection and hope are powerful

Being with someone in their hardest moments reminds them they are not alone. Being present and sharing experiences shows that ways through and out of distressing periods are possible. Responding with patience and respect shows that recovery and healing can be part of their future.

Accessible and immediate

With long waiting lists for mental health support, community-based peer support groups and services provide a more immediate response and support at the times people need them. They are likely to have been established to meet a need identified by local people to meet their particular situations.

Evidenced

There is clear evidence of the ability of peer support to hold space for distress. [The Neuk](#) and [Penumbra Mental Health](#) DBI services both evidence the high numbers (97% and 85%) of people accessing their services who do not need connected into statutory or clinical support.

In this short film Wendy Given, Chief Operating Officer and Louise McQueen, Lead Mentor talk in more detail about how peer support works in their crisis service at The Neuk.



[Press to play.](#)

[Download film transcript](#)

Whatever the type of peer group or service, at the core are peer relationships holding space for distress with empathy, curiosity, and respect. Peer supporters listen for the story beneath the distress and recognise the person's strengths and resourcefulness, even in their hardest moments.

Check out Scottish Recovery Network's [YouTube channel](#) for a range of films and webinars exploring the role of peer support in different types of mental health support and services.

Shared experience



Ross Reilly is a Peer Practitioner with [SAMH \(SAM's, Fife\)](#). Ross shared some reflections on creating space for distress in his peer practice.

I wonder if there are words that can truly explain what peer support brings to people in moments of distress. I would suggest that I approach with a gentleness and compassion that can only be informed by one's own lived experience.

It is the way I am in the space with the person, the words I choose, my nodded understanding and the genuineness of one's eye contact. I meet the person where they are at in the moment. I value that the person has a lifetime of experiences and resilient moments to draw on when the time feels right for them.

I support the person to navigate the distress to the point where they can in the moment of distress, anchor onto past experiences of resiliency and coping skills. This affords the time to compassionately invite the person to consider their own safety, wellbeing and begin to plan forward from this anchored moment.



Distress navigation gently develops into wellbeing mapping, where sharing lived experience and mutuality can journey forward.



You can hear more from Sam's Fife in this Suicide Prevention Scotland podcast discussing how they collaborate with local crisis services.

[Unscheduled care](#) - Season 02, Episode 02

Holding space for distress



Peer support is more than sharing stories, it's about being alongside people in their hardest moments. Distress can arrive suddenly or it can build up over time. Peer supporters are often the ones holding space when life feels overwhelming.

It's important to consider the peer support environment. Peer support is more than a friendly chat or a cup of tea (though those things can help too!). Our Creating Hope with Peer Support practice guide 1 explores the what, why and how of making a space feel physically, emotionally and relationally safe.



Download your free [Creating Safe Spaces](#) practice guide

Peer supporters we work with shared how they approach and hold space for distress. This Holding Space for Distress Framework is a way to bring this knowledge and expertise together.



To think about the Framework in practice, we have included reflections from Paul Byrne, Peer Development Worker with [Dundee Volunteer and Voluntary Action \(DVVA\)](#).

Acknowledge

Acknowledge the distress! Make space for distress to be seen and felt. Accept people and where they are at. Distress is a reasonable response to challenging and difficult life situations.

“There is often an emphasis on emotional regulation whereas I like to give space for distress. In peer support we allow feelings. Once distress is expressed it gives us that mutuality. I witness how powerful it can be to listen and validate what someone is feeling. That it is understandable why someone would feel the way they do. Accessing support and being vulnerable with a stranger can be very challenging. One thing I do is acknowledge the strength and effort it takes to reach out for support. I know it has been something I have struggled with.” - Paul, DVVA

Peer supporters have shared some of the phrases they use in acknowledging distress:

I am so sorry that happened to you

It makes sense you are angry

That sounds really hard



I can see why you feel that way

Thanks for trusting me with this

I can see how painful this is for you

Frankee Fouin, Training Officer at [Self-Harm Network Scotland](#) shared examples of ways to both acknowledge and build connection through shared experiences in peer relationships:

I've had times when I've struggled too, though it may not be the same. What helps you most when things feel overwhelming?

From my own journey, I've learned that different things work for different people. What have you found makes even a small difference for you?

I know for me, being judged made it harder. What kind of support feels safe and non-judgmental for you?

I remember wishing people would just listen. What do you wish others understood about your experience?

Be curious

Curiosity shows that we value the person's perspective and want to understand what this experience means for them. Remember curiosity should always be invitational. Always ask with permission and avoid assumptions. Peer supporters do this in ways that people feel heard, believed, valued and validated. Here are some examples of curious questions:

Would you like to talk about what is happening for you?

Would you like to share what feels most difficult for you right now?

I am wondering if something painful happened recently? Would you like to share a little bit more...



In this short blog on Medium '[Holding Space for Distress](#)' Paul from DVVA reflects on being curious in the peer relationship.

“When I listen with genuine curiosity and interest, I listen to what is being said, how it's being said and what's not being said. When I listen for how this person has learned to think/see/understand things in this way, the person feels validated and understood.” - Paul, DVVA

Shared strengths

In peer support, we often talk about shared strengths. Shared strengths are the collective skills, resilience and wisdom we build and hold between us. When distress shows up, it can be hard for someone to recognise their own resources or abilities.

By reflecting both personal and shared strengths, peer supporters remind people they are not alone and that resilience grows in connection and community. Sometimes this means noticing what has helped before, remembering who has been supportive, or exploring what small steps might feel possible now. Peer supporters shared some of their curious, strength-based questions with us:

What's helped you get through times like this before?

Are there people or places that feel supportive or grounding for you?

What feels like the next small step you could take?

What do you usually draw on when things feel overwhelming?



“A way I build on our shared strengths is to share that there are a few things that have helped me and ask if it would help if I shared what some of them are. This helps build mutuality.

From my experience not everyone has people in their life that they can reach out to for support. It can feel shaming to express this. Be gentle. I share that I too have had periods in my life when I have felt alone and not wanted to ask for help. Ultimately it took me a lot of courage to reach out for support. Acknowledge the reaching out as that takes great strength. Culture can teach people that they need to rely on themselves and trauma that there is no-one safe to rely on.” - Paul, DVVA

Hold limits with care

Peer support takes many forms. In some settings, peer services are specifically designed to support people through crisis, offering connection, safety, and solidarity at times of acute distress. In other settings, such as peer support groups, the role is not to manage crisis directly but to offer presence, understanding, and mutual connection.

In all contexts, being alongside someone in their distress is central to peer support. For many people, that presence is enough. For others, additional support may be needed. Peer support complements statutory and clinical services. When more immediate or intensive support is needed, peer supporters will explore options with the person.

Holding limits with care means recognising what is possible in your role and context, while responding with honesty, compassion, and respect. It is not a withdrawal of support but an acknowledgment that keeping both people safe sometimes requires reaching beyond the peer relationship for extra help. Here are some questions that peer supporters have found useful:

What support do you think might help right now?

Would you like me to sit with you while we look at what's available?

I'm feeling concerned about your safety.

Can we think together about who else could support you?



Below are some practical examples from peer supporters of how to hold limits with care

- ✚ Co-create safety agreements as a group or service, so everyone is clear about if, and when, it might be appropriate to involve statutory or clinical services
- ✚ Get to know your community: have an up-to-date contact list and connections with local crisis and appropriate services

-  Be honest and transparent: share your concerns directly with the person (e.g. “I’m worried about you because...”)
-  Explore together how to approach additional support, while keeping the person’s choice and voice central.

“I have often explored with people how to access different services. A little bit of support can make a big difference. Whether that is helping make the initial connection or accompanying someone to a first meeting. In peer support we don’t just signpost or pass on a leaflet. We discuss what would be helpful and from our knowledge of what is available we offer choices.

At times, it is clear that someone is not able to keep themselves safe and we need to bring in additional support. I would always be clear on why I was doing this and always look to ensure the person has as much control as possible.” - Paul, DVVA

Follow up

Distress isn’t a one-off conversation. It is something that may be held over time. Agree together how you will check in again. This is especially important when additional support has been sought. It isn’t one thing or another.

Support

Creating space for distress does bring with it an emotional impact. Distress is human but it can also be heavy to hold. In peer support, looking after ourselves is part of looking after each other. Peer supporters need space for reflection, debriefing and mutual support.

In practice guide 2 [Navigating discomfort in the peer relationship](#) we explored ways to sit with others painful feelings and experiences especially when they can be similar to our own.

Activity: Peer supporters



Throughout this practice guide we have understood that experiencing distress is part of being human, it comes in many forms and to respond with presence, curiosity and shared strengths.

This reflective activity is for individuals or groups. There are four parts. Work through them in order and note down your responses using the Holding Space for Distress Framework worksheet to guide you (page 17). If engaging with this activity as a group/team, share your responses with each other and reflect on your understanding.

Remember

Think of a time when you, or someone you supported experienced distress:

How did distress show up (quiet, loud, withdrawn, emotional)?

What helped you or them feel less alone in the moment?

Were there strengths or resources (personal, relational, community) that supported you moving through it?

Reframe

Think about how the distress was understood at the time:

Was it treated as a symptom to be fixed or managed or as a human experience to be with?

What difference might it have made to separate the person from the distress?

How does using peer support language such as 'when distress shows up' rather than 'being distressed' shift the perspective?

Rehearse

Imagine you are alongside someone right now who is showing distress:

What would you say to acknowledge their feelings?

What curious, invitational questions might you ask to understand their experience?

What strengths or connections could you gently reflect back?

Pairs/group reflection: skills practice

Invite people to practice peer support conversations in pairs using the Holding space for distress framework.

Debrief together about what felt natural, what felt challenging and what you learned.

Resource

Reflect on your own needs and limits as a peer supporter:

How do you know when you might need support yourself?

What practices, people or communities help you stay grounded after holding distress?

How can you build these into your peer support practice?

Holding space for distress

Remember

Reframe

Acknowledge

**Be
curious**

**Holding space
for distress**

Resource

Rehearse

**Hold limits
with care**

**Shared
strengths**

Reflective practice

Creating space for distress is an integral part of peer relationships and groups.

Reflecting on how we create space for distress to be heard 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 19.



Setting the scene

In your pair or group, one person describes a situation where they created space for distress in their peer relationship. Ask this person:

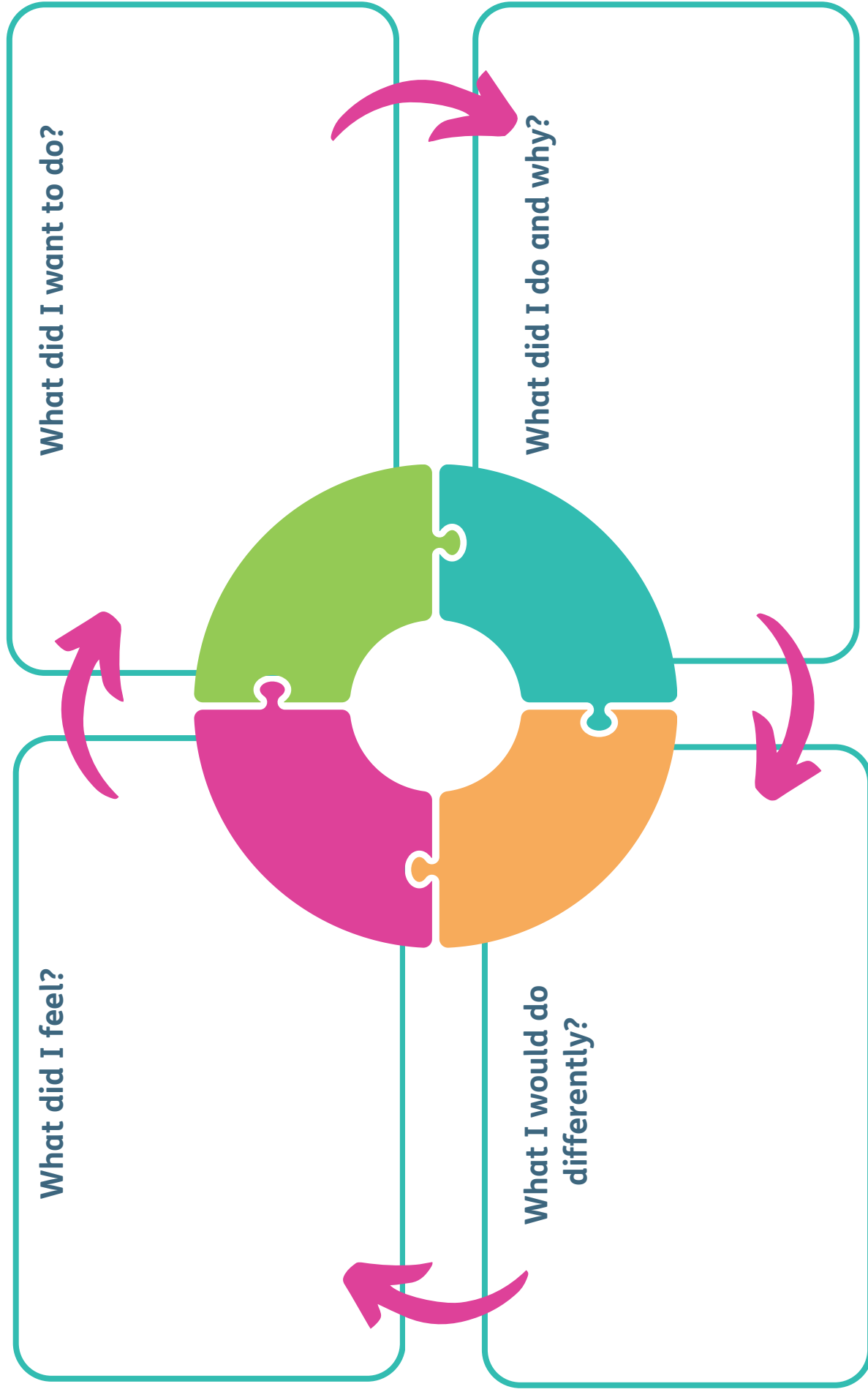
- What happened?
- What do they think may have been going on for the other person?
- What were your initial feelings or reactions?

Using the peer reflective circle

Building on the activity above use the peer reflective circle worksheet, on page 19, 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 delve into creating space for distress.

Creating Space for Distress: reflective circle worksheet



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. Order your free 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 4: Redefining safety and risk in the peer relationship

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

