



GUIDEBOOK: HOSTING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP FOR IMMIGRANTS

Finnish Refugee Council

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FOREWORD: NEW BEGINNINGS WITH PEER SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

Dear reader, welcome to the fascinating world of integration and peer support activities! This guidebook will provide you with information on the basic concepts of peer support group activities that support integration and their theoretical framework. In addition, you will learn about the role of a peer supporter, planning the evaluation of groups and their activities, hosting peer support groups and solving the most common problems. This information will give you a good start in hosting a peer support group. However, we highly recommend participating in our Training for Peer Supporters, where knowledge and practice meet. You can try hosting a group during the training, as well as receive important information. Still, you can only learn the most important lessons by hosting a real group and reflecting on your own activities as a peer supporter.

As far as possible, the guidebook has been written in plain language. The text in the first chapters is narrative and descriptive. From the third chapter onwards, the text becomes more instructive. This content is a good match for a style that addresses the reader directly, which improves the plain language. We have changed the text type deliberately.

Background of publishing the guidebook

This guidebook is a revised version of the previous guidebook for peer supporters by the Finnish Refugee Council. In this new guidebook, we define peer support groups in a new way and in more detail than before. The way we talk about peer support activities has changed over the years, and we are now transferring the tried-and-true expressions into this publication, too. We emphasise the areas that we have developed the most in recent years. Interaction and hosting skills and the responsibility of the peer supporter in particular play a more prominent role in this version.

The publisher of the guidebook

The Finnish Refugee Council is Finland's largest expert organisation specialising in the issues of displacement and migration. We support individuals, families and communities in integration and strengthen well-working community relations. For over 50 years, our work has had a positive impact on lives in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Europe in addition to Finland. We already started to develop the peer support activities to support integration in 2001. The revised guidebook is one way to celebrate our long-term development work and highlight our expertise.

The Finnish Refugee Council supports organisations and peer supporters nationwide. We train organisations in starting and developing peer support activities that promote integration. For peer supporters, we offer training that develops their expertise as well as support services. Our services are free of charge with the support of the Finnish national gaming company Veikkaus.

Enjoy your reading!

Helsinki, March 2021

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1. PEER SUPPORT AND INTEGRATION

Being a peer, peer support, peer support activities and integration are basic concepts related to hosting a peer support group, and a peer supporter must know the basic information about them. The peer supporter must also understand the differences in the planning, hosting and evaluation of different kinds of groups.

1.1 WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

In the experience of the Finnish Refugee Council, **being a peer** means having a shared strong feeling or experience between two or more people and understanding the other person. Often, a similar situation in life or similar previous experiences are a connecting factor between peers that makes it easy to understand the other person. In a new or challenging situation in life, people can easily feel like they are completely alone with their thoughts. But when another person talks about having similar experiences, being peers together can bring about a very positive emotional reaction in those who are having a discussion. They realise that they are not alone. The strong feeling and mutual understanding bind peers together like glue.

Support and help are different things. Helping can be described as carrying a person who cannot walk from one place to another. As for support, it means giving that same person crutches. The crutches help the person to move around by themselves. In peer support, supporting people on their way towards coping and acting independently is emphasized.

Peer support means people, who are peers amongst themselves, giving each other support. This support can take many forms. The support usually takes place during a discussion and it is mutual, meaning that sometimes the peers give support and sometimes they receive it. The peers share information, thoughts and experiences with each other, but they also laugh together and comfort and encourage each other. In peer support, people learn from each other, and their view about themselves often also changes. All this results in the feeling of being accepted.

Peer support activities is a general concept that refers to all work done on making a change that is based on or takes advantage of being a peer. Goal-oriented, hosted discussions about topics that are important to the participants are characteristic of peer support activities. If necessary, the experience of being a peer can also be nurtured through activities, such as by cooking food or spending time in nature together. In these cases, the discussions take place during the activities. The goals of high-quality peer support activities meet the participants' needs, and the activities are hosted by a trained peer supporter or a pair of supporters who are committed to following the ethical guidelines. Peer support activities can be targeted at individuals or groups, and they can be implemented both face-to-face and virtually.

1.2 WHAT TYPES OF PEER SUPPORT GROUPS ARE THERE?

Peer support group activities support the participants in making a positive change in their thoughts, attitude or behaviour. Because the needs can be very different, the one and the same group model will not work in every situation. Here at the Finnish Refugee Council, we have created a new division of groups based on our years of experience. We divide our hosted peer support group activities into two main categories: peer support groups and peer groups.

The parties organising the activities and the peer supporters must choose the right group format based on the participants' needs. However, it is important to note that group activities cannot meet all types of needs – sometimes the most useful thing to do is to refer the participants to individual support or professional help.

In a peer support group, the mutual support between the participants is emphasised. A lot of time is reserved for free discussion, and the discussion takes place at a more personal level. Peer support groups are usually closed, meaning that only those who have registered to the group in advance or participated in the first meeting can join the group. A safe atmosphere and a feeling of team spirit are essential. In general, the peer supporter is more like someone who facilitates discussion and listens actively than for example someone who distributes information. In a peer support group, one of the goals is always that the participants support each other. The peer supporter must assess whether this is realised. This means that the participants must be ready to share their own experiences, but also listen to others.

In a peer group, communality, activities or information to be learned are emphasised based on the needs and wishes of the participants. Peer groups are usually open, meaning that new participants can always join. The discussions are focused on talking about the information shared by the peer supporter and the participants at a general level. The peer supporter does not actively steer the discussion towards sensitive topics or, for instance, questions related to identity. On the other hand, the peer supporter will not prevent deeper discussions on the topic, either, if the participants are ready for it. Often, an activity that started out as a peer group can change into more of a peer support group, as the trust grows and the participants want to discuss matters on a more personal level. Peer groups are an especially good fit for people who are for example lonely or just recently moved into Finland.

A peer group and a peer support group are not too different from each other, and the format of the group may change during one season as a group. However, the important thing is that the peer supporter plans the meetings in a way that suits each group and evaluates the aspects that are important to the group in question. For example, the peer supporter can consider before the start of the group season whether they expect the group to be more of a peer group or a peer support group. Both groups are strongly linked by a goal-oriented approach and taking advantage of the peer supporter's own experiences. In this guidebook, we mainly use the more common term 'peer support group', unless there is a need to emphasise the special characteristics of the specific type of group.

1.3 WHAT DOES INTEGRATION MEAN?

In Finnish, the term **integration** is 'kotoutuminen', which has been derived from 'koto', the poetic form of the word 'koti', which means home (Länsimäki 1999). The Finnish Refugee Council has summarised integration as a process during which a person who has moved into a new country finds their own place to live and function in society. In other words, the person feels at home in their new place of residence. Balancing between your own past and present is often also mentioned when talking about integration. Integration requires the person to have the skills and knowledge needed in society.

Pasi Saukkonen (2016), a well-known Finnish researcher of integration, has highlighted the importance of local integration. In addition to Finland, immigrants also integrate into their own area where they live their everyday lives and create

new social networks. A shared identity with the other people of the municipality, such as being a resident of Turku, can strengthen the experience of inclusion in Finnish society as a whole.

Bidirectional or multidirectional integration refers to the interactive progress of the individual and society. Surrounding environment is an important factor among the issues that affect an individual's integration. How does the new society receive the immigrant? Do the social structures work? Is diversity seen in a positive light? Other factors that influence integration on an individual level include, for example, the person's own past, reasons for leaving, state of health, age, educational background and level of activity.

1.4 WHY MAY IMMIGRANTS NEED SUPPORT WITH INTEGRATION?

Moving into a new country is always a big life change or even a crisis. Many different things change. In addition to the environment, things like social networks, the language and ways of interacting in general, the functioning of society and its values often also change. Understanding a new culture does not happen automatically. An immigrant may feel very lonely when confronted with all the new things, and they may feel homesick. In fact, adjusting to a new living environment often takes a lot of time. The more obstacles against integration there are in the structures of the local society, the more difficult it is for the immigrant to move forward in their integration process.

Support can make integration faster and easier. This benefits not only the immigrants themselves, but also Finnish society as a whole. The effects of support received by an individual can often also

be noticeable in their family and circle of friends. A visible positive change in a close friend or family member also encourages other people to be active and improve their quality of life. However, it must also be noted that not all immigrants need support with integration.

Peer support activities that promote integration make it easier for immigrants to understand their own new identity, the Finnish way of life and the way the system functions and become active themselves in their own expanded living environment.

1.5 HOW CAN A PEER SUPPORT GROUP AFFECT IMMIGRANTS?

Peer support activities cannot solve all challenges related to integration. However, the results from dozens of groups by the Finnish Refugee Council show at least three positive changes that match the theory of psychological empowerment by Marc Zimmerman (1995).

1. Self-knowledge and self-confidence
2. Knowledge, skills and friends
3. Activities

When participants in a peer support group share their feelings and experiences, they develop a sense of solidarity between themselves that strengthens a positive self-image. Through peer support, they can discover and identify their own strengths and resources. Participants receive new points of view on their situation, which brings their own problems and experiences into a new per-

spective. This increases the feeling that problems can be solved and reduces the feeling of inability and powerlessness. Peer support strengthens the motivation to influence one's own life. Participants benefit from peer support the most when they already want to improve their lives when joining the group. This means that, in a peer support group, participants can learn to know themselves better and gain self-confidence.

In a peer support group, participants receive information that helps them to make better decisions and choices in their own lives. Discussions make it easier to understand the information. The essential thing is to learn what kind of resources are needed to achieve your own goals. A critical awareness of society develops through the information received: the participants understand their possibilities and their limits as members of the new society. In addition to information, they can learn new skills in the group and have the opportunity to expand their social networks. Including the group members in the planning, development and evaluation of the group allows them to develop their decision-making and problem-solving skills. The participants can apply the skills they learn independently in their everyday lives.

People are encouraged to actively pursue their goals when they have a positive self-image, a realistic picture of their abilities, enough knowledge and a critical awareness of society. In a peer support group, they learn concrete options related to their own lives, and they can choose the ones that suit them best from among these options. In an ideal situation, this knowledge turns into action. Through peer support, the participants gain operating models and information that help them protect their own rights better.



2. THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF A PEER SUPPORTER

The duty of a peer supporter is to support others. They use their own experiences, factual information and open questions. Peer supporters may not necessarily have a degree in the field of social work and health care, but they must act professionally and follow the ethical guidelines. Different people benefit from different types of support, which sets many kinds of requirements for peer supporters. The peer supporters can develop their activities in different roles when they are ready to know themselves and start to become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.

2.1 WHAT KINDS OF ROLES MAY A PEER SUPPORTER NEED TO TAKE?

In group situations, the peer supporter meets different kinds of people, who are all connected by being peers to some degree and having a shared major goal. Regardless of the connecting factors, all of them have their own starting points, ways of interacting and wishes – both towards the group and the peer supporter. All this is combined with group dynamics, meaning the chemistry between the people in that specific group and the roles the group members themselves take towards the other group members. The peer supporter's job is to stay on top of things and try to take every person into account individually and in a situation-specific way. A bit like a chameleon, the peer supporter must feel the mood and take up the role that suits the situation best. Some roles are more natural for the peer supporter than others, but all of them can be improved with practice.

At first meetings and in unexpected situations, the peer supporter is clearly a leader. The peer supporter creates a safe atmosphere and sometimes needs to make quick decisions. As the group season progresses, the peer supporter acts the role of a leader less and less.

While teaching, the peer supporter must pay special attention to ensuring that the information shared is reliable and up-to-date, and naturally also to responsible interaction: the peer supporter checks whether the participants have understood the information. The better the peer supporter knows the participants and the initial level of their skills, the better the peer supporter is able to adapt the teaching to suit the participants. Adaptation applies to things like the level of detail and the speed of progress.

Some group members need a lot of **encouragement**, which is a natural part of peer support activities aiming for change. However, sometimes the peer supporter must be careful not to encourage a group member to do things that the group member does not have enough resources for.

Acting as a **mediator** in conflicts is often challenging, but also rewarding. It is not unusual for a well-managed conflict to make the atmosphere of the group even safer. Luckily, serious conflicts are fairly rare in peer support groups. In mediation situations, it is important to stay calm and help the parties to agree to stop the argument.

The peer supporter acts constantly as an **evaluator**: how many participants are present, does the topic spark discussion, do the group members support each other, how well has the peer supporter personally acted, and have the goals been met. Of course, the role of the evaluator is emphasised at the end of the group season when all evaluation data is gathered and analysed.

Walking side by side someone means being mentally present, offering empathy and going at the participants' pace. The peer supporter responds to the emotional upsets of the participants with understanding and actively demonstrates that showing your emotions in the group is accepted. The need for this role is emphasised especially in those groups with participants who have difficult life situations.

Many may feel that the role of **setting limits** is challenging. How can you set limits on an adult politely? Often, anticipating situations can help. When the peer supporter says in advance that unfortunately, they may sometimes need to interrupt the speaker, the participants understand it better. A gentle and friendly smile helps

in these situations. When the peer supporter interrupts someone, they may also thank the speaker for being active.

Another important role is **influencer**. In addition to influencing the group members directly, the peer supporter can also influence matters on the societal level. If the peer supporter notices that the group's participants constantly face a specific problem, the peer supporter and their organisation together can try to correct the problem by for example writing an opinion piece or meeting politicians.

Vilén, Marika; Leppämäki, Päivi & Ekström, Leena 2008. Vuorovaikutuksellinen tukeminen.

2.2 WHAT DO THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A PEER SUPPORTER INCLUDE?

Peer support activities means goal-oriented work towards change. The aim of the activities is to strengthen the self-confidence and social networks of the participants as well as their social skills and knowledge. As a joint effect, the participants often become more active and involved in their new living environment. This means that the role of a peer supporter in supporting immigrants includes partial responsibility for the direction of the individuals' change. The peer supporters trained by the Finnish Refugee Council are committed to promoting the integration of the participants. In the worst case, a peer supporter that violates the ethical guidelines and code of conduct may isolate the participants from the rest of the population and make them dependent of the peer supporter.

Peer supporters are trusted. Both the background organisation and the participants trust them. The trust gives them both power and responsibility. Versatile

language skills make it possible to use power. Peer supporters can and must make choices. How do they talk about things, is there something they do not mention, and how do they ask questions? Sensitive hosting of a group that takes the individual characteristics of the participants into account is a key factor in balancing power and responsibility.

One important factor of hosting a peer support group is the peer supporter's ability to separate their own integration story and coping methods from the path and solutions of the persons in the group. Integration is an individual process, and the peer supporter cannot present their own operating methods or successes as the only or best option. Each participant should make the choices that suit their own individual situation.

Through individuals, peer supporters also have responsibility towards different communities. Up-to-date factual information from the peer supporters often spreads through the participants to their own communities, which means that peer support activities can influence the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of the whole community. Indirectly, this influence can also be visible on the level of Finnish society as a whole in the relationships between population groups.

Peer supporters also have responsibilities towards their own organisation and the potential funder of the activities. For this reason, evaluation and reporting are an important part of the duties of peer supporters. Sometimes, the promises to the funder and the needs of the participants in peer support activities do not meet. In that case, the peer supporter should notify the organisation about the issue. The organisation can then contact the funder about the changes needed in the activities.

Perhaps the most concrete responsibility of the peer supporter in group situations is related to all interaction between the peer supporter and the participants. On one hand, peer supporters must check if the participants have understood the peer supporter's message correctly, but on the other hand, they also need to check whether the peer supporters themselves have understood the thoughts of the participants correctly. In addition, the responsibility is visible in the peer supporter participating actively in establishing and maintaining the interaction. The interaction and interpersonal skills are emphasised especially when hosting a group with participants who are in a vulnerable position.

2.3 WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT SUPPORT PEER SUPPORTERS IN THEIR WORK?

Even though peer supporters are responsible for preparing for meetings and they support the participants in reaching their goals, the participants themselves have the main responsibility for their activities. They are the experts of their own lives. They make their own choices and decisions themselves. Understanding this may relieve the peer supporter's sense of responsibility and reduce the stress related to the task.

The organisation arranging the activities carries the main responsibility for supporting the peer supporter. A peer supporter agreement, good introduction to the task, regular communication and having a peer supporter pair create the prerequisites for hosting a peer support group successfully. It is not always possible to find a pair, and in that case, regular support from the organisation is an absolute requirement. Supervision

should also be available, especially to those peer supporters who support people in difficult life situations.

In addition to many other support materials, the Finnish Refugee Council has created a peer supporter agreement template on the vertaistointijat.fi website (in Finnish) that the peer supporter and their organisation can fill in before the start of the group season. All the duties of the peer supporter, among other things, are in detail in the agreement. We also offer organisations training on how to start and develop peer support activities. The training can be tailored to suit the organisation's needs, and one of its aspects can be the development of support for peer supporters, for example.

The Finnish Refugee Council supports peer supporters with further training, get-togethers, a Facebook group, a peer supporter bank, general advice, and by sharing useful information. We share information with peer supporters on issues such as training related to hosting a peer support group, new multilingual materials, and jobs and volunteer positions suitable for peer supporters. The Finnish Refugee Council coordinates the VeTo network, in which more than 90 organisations develop peer support activities to promote integration together. In 2017, the network drew up ethical guidelines for peer supporters. They help peer supporters in challenging situations where there is no one single clear solution. In addition, we at the Finnish Refugee Council have drawn up a code of conduct for peer supporters that strengthen the professional activity and behaviour of peer supporters.

Naturally, the peer supporters themselves play an important role in maintaining their own ability to cope. It is

good for peer supporters to reserve themselves enough leisure time to recharge their batteries. Doing something you like brings more energy and fresh ideas. Many peer supporters have listed meeting friends, physical exercise, reading, listening to music, going to sauna or praying as energising leisure time activities. If there are too many tasks, one good method is to reserve time specifically for relaxation in your own calendar. This ensures that other things will not interfere with relaxation. Setting limits for yourself is an important part of promoting a peer supporter's well-being. Peer supporters should clearly separate their personal lives from their work in hosting a peer support group.

Careful preparation before each group meeting makes it easier to steer the discussion. Advance preparation is often visible during hosting in the peer supporter's self-confidence. In that case, the discussion progresses more logically and it is easier to participate in it. The best way for peer supporters to develop their own activities is to ask for feedback. If the peer supporter has a pair, they should stay behind after the meetings to unpack the discussions together. In this way, the peer supporter can open up about their concerns and questions confidentially, and the potential worries and concerns do not follow them home so easily. If there is no pair, calling an employee of the organisation on the following day can be a good practice.





3. PLANNING OF THE PEER SUPPORT GROUP AND THE EVALUATION

Needs, objectives, activity and group format, topics, experts, time and place of meetings, meeting frequency, meeting scripts and evaluating the activities as a whole are all aspects of peer support group planning. Reserve plenty of time for the planning and involve all essential parties, especially the group participants. They commit to the activities better when they have opportunities to influence matters.

Activating the participants to join in the planning also implements the main idea of increasing inclusion in connection with peer support activities to support integration. The participants are not objects of the activity at any point; they are involved in it. However, people often talk about target groups in the organisation sector, because peer support groups must be targeted at a specific group of people so that they can have the experience of being peers. A better word for target group could be 'beneficiaries', for example.

3.1 WHERE DO I START THE PLANNING?

The idea of a peer support group usually comes up when you notice the need for group activities. Customers, residents, visitors, students or patients themselves talk about issues such as loneliness, lack of skills or knowledge or the desire to talk about their own situation in life. Sometimes the need comes up even without the person themselves being aware of their need or at least actively presenting it. For example, an employee may notice in their everyday work that several customers with the same life situation do not know how to use online services. If the need can be met with peer support activities, the planning can start. Initial plans are made based on a few known and assumed needs related to the challenge or situation in life in question.

An essential part of evaluating the compatibility of needs and peer support is also taking account of the overall life situation of the potential participants. Are the people motivated? Is it possible for them to participate in the activities in their life situation at that time? Is the support group format suitable for them, or would individual support be a better option? For some people, implementation as a remote group works better, because they can participate from home. For others, face-to-face meetings are the only viable option.

3.2 HOW AND WHEN DO I DRAW UP AN EVALUATION PLAN?

The purpose of evaluation is to develop the activities and hosting a group and show the effects of the activities. Evaluating work done with people is not easy, but the Finnish Refugee Council and oth-

er actors have developed different kinds of methods for evaluating peer support activities. We are constantly developing new evaluation tools with different types of emphasis and for different groups of beneficiaries.

Draw up an evaluation plan before the first meeting of the group and any interviews of the participants. We recommend that you draw up the plan in writing together with an employee of the organisation, if any, in order to avoid misunderstandings and to give the evaluation the importance it needs. The plan does not have to be long or heavy. At its simplest, the evaluation plan answers these questions: who, when and how. The following are stated in the plan: a) who makes the evaluation, b) when is which issue evaluated, and c) what kind of tools are used by the evaluator. Also record in the plan what will be done with all the evaluation data. Who compiles the data, analyses it and reports to the potential funder?

The most common evaluation targets include the number of participants, changes in the group dynamics, reaching the goals, how individual group meetings went and the peer supporter's own actions. The group format also has a significant impact on the evaluation targets. As the peer supporter of a peer support group, you evaluate the realisation of support between the participants separately, while in a peer group you evaluate issues like understanding the information discussed or how the feeling of inclusion has been strengthened.

The most traditional evaluation tools include a list of participants, interview form, survey form, observation form and feedback form. Using all of these is not recommended, because that would make the evaluation too strenuous. However, you

should take both your own and the participants' views into account in the evaluation. In the groups of the Finnish Refugee Council, the peer supporters fill in their own evaluation form after each meeting, so that all important observations are recorded, and the peer supporters can also monitor their own development. Digital tools, such as Kahoot! and Quizizz, can be very useful in evaluating the learning of the participants and, in addition, the results are automatically recorded in them. Ask the Finnish Refugee Council for tips with planning the evaluation and designing evaluation tools – we are happy to help peer supporters.

3.3 WHERE CAN I FIND PARTICIPANTS?

When the decision to start a peer support group has been made, the search for participants begins. In the best case, a few participants are already known, and they should definitely be involved in searching for additional participants. Do they know other people in the same situation? In the experience of the Finnish Refugee Council, people active in language communities are also good partners in cooperation. Who knows people in the area or language group in question? Who is a trusted and respected person in the community? If you can find such a person and they are interested in the activities, reaching potential participants becomes much easier.

In general, you can reach immigrants in places such as educational institutions teaching the Finnish language, immigrant associations, immigration services and units, language groups in social media (such as Hello Espoo), reception centres for asylum seekers and resident houses. Flyers for the group should be shared during encounters so that details of the group

will not be forgotten. In addition to the language used in the group, you should also draw up the flyer in Finnish so that Finnish-speaking employees know what it is about. In that case, you can give the same flyer directly to the potential participants as well as the people working with them.

Finding participants in the activities is the easiest when you meet people face-to-face and tell them clearly about the basic idea of the group. People become attached to nice people rather than activities. Simply getting a good impression of the peer supporter can get a person to come to an interview or a first meeting.

The Kotoutumisentukena.fi service (in Finnish and Swedish) gathers activities offered to immigrants on the same website. The peer support groups reported to the service can also be seen on the vertaistointijat.fi website. Organisations should report their own peer support groups to the service, because it gives them a lot of visibility. The employees of the Finnish Refugee Council can also spread information about peer support groups in their own networks.

3.4 WHY IS IT GOOD TO INTERVIEW THE PARTICIPANTS?

The Finnish Refugee Council recommends interviewing all participants before the start of the group season and, if possible, also after the end of the activities. The initial interviews give peer supporters important information about the initial situation of the participants and their wishes. If the participants are given almost the same interview at the end of the group season, the answers can be compared to each other. This makes it possible to determine the effect that the group has had on the participants. The interviews

are also a good way to involve the participants in the planning of the group.

When designing the interview form, you should use your assumptions about the needs related to the participants' life situation. However, do not focus on them too much. The interview form can have a list of potential topics, and the participants can vote on which ones they find the most interesting. However, they can also present other pressing topics in the interview. The peer supporters will present these new topics at the first meeting. If they find support, they can be included in the group season's programme. If you ask the participants about their wishes without a list, the answer may often be "I don't know". A discussion group is a new concept for many, and it is not immediately clear what kind of topics they can wish for.

If you cannot interview the participants, ask them to fill in an initial survey form at the first meeting and a final survey

form at the last meeting. These will help you to evaluate the impact of the group. You should also talk with the participants about their needs and wishes at the first meeting. You can only draw up the final version of the group season's programme after that.

One alternative for interviews is an information event, where you can describe the idea of the group in general and ask the people present to talk about their own needs and wishes at the same time. We warmly recommend contacting the participants in advance at least in some way.

3.5 HOW DO I STATE THE OBJECTIVES?

When you know the needs and wishes of the participants, you need to draw up the objectives for each meeting and the entire group season. Each objective must describe a change that occurs in the par-



ticipant. One option is to use a verb that describes change, such as learn, grow, increase, or strengthen. Another option is to state the objective so that it describes the situation after the change, such as: "The participants know how to write a good job application." This means that the objective does not describe the activity or tell what you as the peer supporter will do.

The objectives must always be realistic and measurable in some way. They can be related to self-knowledge, self-confidence, knowledge, skills, social networks, and activity. In the objective, you always need to state who is changing. If the beneficiaries are not mentioned, the target

of the evaluation remains unclear. When you measure the realisation of an objective with an interview or a survey form, for example, do not forget to ask if the effect is due to the group. Or did some other factors influence the participant's situation? If there are a very large number of participants, you can also add an estimate of how many of them will reach the objective. For example: 90 % of the participants will send two good job applications during the group season.

If stating the objectives seems difficult, write out the participants' needs on paper or on the computer. You can add the objectives directly after the needs.

Examples:

Need: The participants do not believe that they will find a job.

→ **Goal:** The participants' self-confidence in job seeking is strengthened.

Need: The participants are not familiar with the Finnish holidays.

→ **Goal:** The participants can describe the most important Finnish holidays.

Need: The participants do not have any hobbies.

→ **Goal:** The participants start a hobby through the group.

3.6 HOW DO I PLAN THE PROGRAMME FOR THE GROUP SEASON?

On the vertaistointijat.fi website, the Finnish Refugee Council has created a group planning template that all peer supporters can use freely. Filling in the template ensures that you will not forget any of the important parts of planning the group season. You should include all parties in the planning: the employee of the organisation, as well as the participants. This creates a stronger shared understanding

on what kind of a season the group will have and what the objectives for the season are. In addition, it will be easier to take the factors affecting the activities into account from different points of view. For example, the employee may have information that you do not have, and vice versa. As for the needs and views of the participants, they are the basis of all planning.

There should be approximately ten meetings during one group season, because often the most fruitful discussions are only held after the participants know each

other better. Peer support activities promoting integration are temporary, which means that the group cannot continue indefinitely. Typically, one group lasts for 1–3 seasons (such as spring–autumn–spring).

You can finish the planning for the group season completely before the first meeting if the participants' needs are known, or you can continue the planning during the first meeting. We have often asked again for the participants' current wishes on topics at the first meeting when they have had time to think about them after the initial interviews. This gives them an even stronger feeling of inclusion and the ability to influence matters in connection with the group planning. It increases the motivation to participate and commitment to the group. Time must still be reserved in the first meeting for proper introductions, creating the rules for the group, reviewing the group's ideas and objectives and explaining the peer supporter's role.

3.6.1 TOPICS

Choose topics that link as many participants as possible for the group season's programme. In this way, you can ensure that the topics are useful for the participants and their active participation in all meetings is more likely. As a point of view, also keep strengthening the self-knowledge and self-confidence of the participants in mind.

Typical topics of peer support groups promoting integration include, for example, Finnish society, the history of Finland, local services, rights and duties, problem situations, integration, leisure time, recycling, a healthy lifestyle, raising children, the Finnish education system, the Finnish working culture, and one's own strengths and dreams. We recommend integration

as a topic for all groups with participants who already have a residence permit. The Finnish Red Cross has created an integration timeline exercise (*Kotoutumiskaari*) for discussing the topic. We warmly recommend it.

In the experience of the Finnish Refugee Council, it is not necessary to have a completely different topic for every meeting. It may be useful to have two consecutive meetings on the same topic, but from two different perspectives. For example, if the topic is education, different kinds of educational institutions can be discussed at the first meeting while the discussion at the second meeting involves what kind of a student or learner each person is. This makes it possible to get to a deeper level of the topic in thoughts and discussions. Participants often think of additional questions after the meeting. When the topic is the same at the next meeting, the discussion can be continued through the participants' questions.

3.6.2 GUEST EXPERTS

As a peer supporter, you cannot know everything about everything. And you cannot always find out about everything, either. We warmly recommend taking advantage of experts in peer support groups. Outreach work is a part of the job description of many employees, and they are happy to visit groups. Of course, if the group meets in the evenings or on weekends, arranging a visit may be more difficult. Today, experts can have very versatile language skills, and therefore you should ask a person who speaks the language used in the group to visit, if possible. This means that no time is needed for interpretation. A guest expert also gives you a moment to breathe, because you need to talk less at the meeting in question.

In principle, you can invite anyone with information that could benefit the group's participants as a guest expert to a peer support group. For example, the expert can be a police officer from a unit doing preventative work, a social worker, school social worker, dental hygienist, sexual advisor, nutritionist, trade union employee, expert by experience in immigration trained by Väestöliitto, the Family Federation of Finland, a Finnish mother or father, a volunteer worker or an employee of the Finnish Refugee Council. You can also find good guest experts from the member organisations of the VeTo network. It is important that the person represents a reliable organisation and that you can trust that the shared information is accurate.

When you ask an expert to visit, tell the expert clearly what you want from them and to whom they will be talking. In the invitation, describe in detail what kind of group it is, exactly what kind of content and perspective you are hoping for, and what the objective of the meeting is. Also remind the expert to use clear language. The guest does not need to be present for the whole meeting. It is good if you can ask the participants for feedback about the expert at the end of the meeting after the expert has already left. The feedback should also be shared with the expert afterwards.

3.6.3 VISITS

Peer support groups can make two kinds of visits. The visit can be strongly linked to the group's objectives, or it can be used to strengthen its team spirit. For example, the group can visit an educational institution, a workplace, or an exhibition about Finnish society. A visit that strengthens the team spirit often in-

volves an activity or other relaxing event together, such as bowling or having a picnic in the park.

You should not plan too many visits. There can be 1–3 visits during one group season, unless there is a good reason to have more. On one hand, visits are a nice change for the meetings, but on the other hand, they can also cause concern for people who are not very familiar with the area. For this reason, it is very important to agree together where exactly you will meet and when. We recommend arranging the visits at the same time and day of the week as the other meetings. This helps prevent misunderstandings.

We also recommend not making visits during the first few meetings to ensure that the participants can build a routine for coming to the meeting place.

3.6.4 PLANNING AN INDIVIDUAL GROUP MEETING

Preparing for each group meeting is an essential part of hosting the meetings. When you are well prepared, the hosting will also be easier. Prepare at least three things for each meeting: the important facts, open questions to activate discussion, and your own experiences related to the topic. If you wish, you can also prepare functional exercises and supplementary material for the meeting. Coffee and tea are always served at the Finnish Refugee Council's own group meetings.

One group meeting usually lasts for 1.5–2 hours. The suitable time varies based on the group size, for example. If the time is longer, weekly participation can be difficult for the participants. However, if you still decide to have longer meetings, short breaks are recommended. At re-

mote group meetings, there should be breaks approximately every hour.

Start each group meeting by welcoming everyone and stating the topic and objective of the day out loud. You can motivate the participants with the objective, and they understand what is expected of them. It is also advised to let everyone share how they are feeling already at the start of the meeting. When everyone can say something right at the start of the meeting, the threshold to speak again becomes lower. The end of each meeting must also be clearly planned. For the end, always plan to do a summary, ask for feedback, remind people about the next meeting and thank them for their participation.

Excluding visits, the meetings of the Finnish Refugee Council's own peer support groups always have a written script that the peer supporters follow. The script includes all information and questions for the meeting as well as how much time is spent on each section. The minutes marked on the script help the peer supporters to stay on schedule, at least for the most part. The vertaistomijat.fi website has a 'Tulevaisuuspaja' (Future Workshop) peer support group package in Finnish; you can find examples on meeting scripts there, for instance. You can use the scripts as they are or include the sections that best suit your group.

You should not draw up scripts for the whole group season, because plans may change. Sometimes the participants' life situations may change suddenly, and it is better to change the topic of the next meeting into a more current issue. The peer supporters should react flexibly to the changes, because the whole activity is based on the participants' needs.

3.7 HOW DO I COMPLETE THE EVALUATION PLAN?

When the participants have been interviewed and the group plan is almost ready, specify in the evaluation plan what the group is finally like and what exactly is being evaluated. Were your assumptions correct, or is the focus of the group different after all? Have the initial objectives changed? For example, if it was discovered during the interviews that the participants need a lot of discussion on their own identities and life situations, one of the evaluation targets must be support between the participants. This can be assessed through the observations recorded by the peer supporter and based on the feedback from the participants, for instance. Mutual support between participants is strongly linked to the realisation of a safe atmosphere, which can be evaluated at the same time.

When the evaluation plan is completed, review it with your peer supporter pair, if any, as well as a representative of the organisation. This ensures that all parties share a common view of everything related to evaluation. Tell the organisation regularly during the group season how the evaluation plan has worked in practice and ask for corrections, if necessary.



4. HOSTING A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

The basic idea of hosting a group is to help the group to reach the desired objective. When you host a group, you release its hidden powers: in a group, 1+1 suddenly equals 3. The support the group provides to individuals is important in many ways. Many things would not be learned, done or discussed alone. In a peer support group, you can also feel 'normal', because all the other participants are in the same situation. In individual support situations, these new support mechanisms cannot work as strongly through the peer supporter alone and are not realised as strongly by the participant.

In addition to actual hosting situations, an important part of hosting a group is preparation, which prevents problems related to hosting situations considerably. The Finnish Refugee Council always recommends using the expressions 'hosting a group' and 'to host a group', because 'leading' and 'to lead' give the wrong impression about the activity. They are more suitable for courses and workshops. The verb 'to host' focuses more attention on the discussion and the participants.

4.1 HOW DO I CREATE A SAFE ATMOSPHERE?

Safety is related to things like trust, acceptance, becoming vulnerable, providing support and commitment. However, safety and the feeling of safety are two different things. As a peer supporter, you must aim to ensure that everyone feels safe. By ensuring everyone's feelings of safety, the participants commit to the activities and the objectives can be met.

In a peer support group, you can identify a safe atmosphere by the participants identifying and expressing their feelings and receiving acceptance for this from others. When it is easy for the participants to be themselves, they feel good. This is often also visible to the outside. Addressing sensitive topics personally also shows that the participant feels safe.

Start building the feeling of safety by interviewing all participants. They will learn to know you and understand better what the group is about. If the participants can also influence the group's content in the interviews, they can already establish a strong commitment to and sense of ownership of the group at that stage. For lonely participants, simply meeting a nice new person can be a sufficient reason to participate in the group. Without the interview, they would not know what kind of a person is hosting the group, and they might not necessarily come to the first meeting.

Choose a nice place for group meetings that is easily accessible. Peer support groups should meet in places where they can have private conversations without being interrupted by outsiders. Start the group season in a clear way, meaning that you should think in advance how you will tell the group everything as easily as possible. Reserve the whole first meeting

for getting to know each other. The rules of the group should also be drawn up during the first, or at the latest, the second meeting together with the participants. It is important that at least confidentiality and respecting the others are mentioned in the rules.

Always use a similar structure in planning the meetings. For example, you can start each meeting with a round of speaking turns about how the participants have been doing and end the meeting by collecting feedback. Remember to be fair and friendly towards everyone in all situations. A smile is a strong sign for the participants, showing that they are accepted. Keep the goal emphasized and limit the discussion accordingly, if necessary. Stop and discuss any conflicts that may occur or are too big to leave alone. Keep a sensitive approach in mind in everything you do. This means that you cannot assume anything about anyone; instead, you should try to take each person into account as an individual.

Aalto, Mikko 2002.
Turvallinen ryhmä.

Silvennoinen, Markku 2004.
Vuorovaikutukseen avaimet.

4.2 WHAT DO I DO WHEN HOSTING A GROUP?

Activate discussion – do not teach using the question–answer style.

In the best-case scenario, the group members talk with each other instead of just taking turns to answer your questions. Especially at the start of the group season, you as the peer supporter may need to facilitate the discussion separately, because the group's atmosphere is not yet very safe or confidential. In order to facilitate discussion, you can talk about your own experiences and ask

open questions addressed to everyone that start with words such as what, how and what kind. The best way to activate the participants is to ask them to comment on each other's thoughts. In that case, they often start to talk to each other more, and you as a peer supporter simply need to monitor the discussion. Peer supporters with a background as a teacher in particular can easily talk too much, because they are used to talking a lot in their own profession.

Listen actively.

Show that you are actively listening to the participants. Nod, make small, agreeable sounds showing that you are listening (hmm, yeah) and maintain appropriate eye contact with the speaker. At suitable intervals, you should also repeat what the participant said in your own words. In this way, you can check if you have understood the participant correctly. In addition, you are showing the participant that you have really listened to them. The participant feels that you are genuinely interested in their thoughts and that they are important.

Break up small groups and make sure that everyone is doing well.

As a peer supporter, you can mix things up by having pair discussions so that participants who are not yet familiar with each other can talk to each other, for example. If one of the participants remains outside discussions, address the situation immediately.

Connect stories and experiences to factual information.

Especially in a peer support group, sharing the group members' experiential knowledge is important. However, it is also good to think about how much the experiences can be generalised – not everything is suitable for everyone. Shar-

ing experiential knowledge and reliable information in the group has a positive effect on the group dynamics.

Plan different kinds of content for different parts of the meeting. It is good to have facts, questions and experiences at the start, middle and end of the meeting. Facts should be combined with your own and the participants' experiences, thoughts and questions. The participants may have joined the group for slightly different reasons. Someone wants to talk, another person wants to listen and a third wants to learn something new. When discussion, facts and experiences come up at regular intervals, nobody gets bored.

Focus on the present, the future and the group members' strengths.

Peer support groups that support integration talk about living in Finland and one's own future in this new country. Past issues can be touched, but as a peer supporter you need to turn the discussion towards the present and the future. In all discussions, it is good to focus on the strengths and successes of the participants, because these things empower them. They learn to know themselves and their own situation better and from different points of view.

Motivate the group members to make concrete plans.

When the participants make plans for their own lives, their experience of being in control of their lives is strengthened. It gives them power and self-confidence. Their own dreams are more likely to become reality through plans. Dreams often require many steps, and a plan helps with focusing on the step that is currently being taken. This means that the dream does not seem to be so far away and the motivation is stronger. Especially at the

last group session, you should make sure that each person has some kind of a further plan in mind or on paper for the time after the group.

Bring up the freedom of opinion often.

Not everyone needs to agree in a peer support group. It is good if the participants have the courage to talk about their different views and justify them. This makes the discussions deeper and richer. However, you must make sure that no one's opinion makes another participant feel guilty or hurts them. If that happens, you can thank the person for their opinion, mention the rules of the group and move the discussion forward.

Ask actively for opinions and their backgrounds.

Show your interest towards the participants' opinions. Use open questions and treat even opinions that are "harmful" to integration with an interested and understanding attitude. If an opinion hurts other participants or makes them feel guilty, continue the discussion with the person alone, if possible, after the group meeting. When a participant feels valued, they start to trust you and value listening to your thoughts more. They also commit to the group more strongly. This helps you plant the seeds for change that promote integration.

Correct wrong information and ideas.

In addition to wrong information, you need to address the spread of ideas that delay integration. For example, if someone says that they think all Finns are racists, you can state statistics on the issue either immediately or at the next meeting. In this way, wrong ideas do not get the chance to affect the participants' ways of thinking.

Make sure that everyone has the chance to speak if they want.

In a peer support group, no one has to talk about things they do not want to talk about. However, you as the peer supporter must make sure both in the planning and during hosting the group that everyone has the opportunity to speak. Therefore, you should reserve enough time for discussion and ask quiet people if they want to say something. When you find out which group members are quieter than others, you can start with them in the future. This ensures that they will not accidentally miss their chance to speak.

Niemistö, Raimo 2000.
Ryhmän luovuus ja kehitysehdot.

4.3 HOW DO I TAKE THE PARTICIPANTS' DIFFERENT ROLES INTO ACCOUNT?

The participants take or receive different kinds of roles in the group in relation to each other. People can also drift into a role or feel conflicted about it. The conflict may be within the person, or in relation to the roles or expectations of others. At its best, thinking about roles can help the group move forward and the participants to observe their own behaviour. As a peer supporter, identifying roles helps you understand what happens in the group. However, you should remember that no one is simply trapped in a single role – the situation in the group and one's own personality influence the roles that each person ends up playing in each situation.

A **clown** helps you in situations, where lightening up the mood and relaxation are needed. It is easier for relaxed people to be themselves and open up about their issues. Humour is a factor that increases community, and it can help

strengthen the participants' commitment to the group and create connections between people. Thank the clown for lightening up the mood and put into words the feelings related to it. On the other hand, humour that is insulting or said in the wrong context may cause conflicts between the group members. Make sure that if the clown wishes, they can also be serious and that they are not expected to make jokes all the time.

A critic can present views that the others have not thought about. With the help of the critic, you can demonstrate the freedom of opinion that applies to the whole group in a concrete way. However, excessive criticism may make democratic decision-making more difficult and create a negative atmosphere in the group. Talk with participants who are overly critical about their life situation (alone, if necessary). Ask them to give concrete positive suggestions in situations in which too much criticism affects the group negatively.

An innovator has a lot of ideas, but they are not necessarily ready to do anything about them. **An initiator** is ready for something concrete. You may have difficulties with the innovator in situations in which the decision or options are already complete, but they still want to present their new ideas. The innovator can also take up space and speaking turns from quieter people. As for the initiator, they may prevent insecure participants from trying out things themselves.

A doer is a person who wants to help the peer supporter with things like setting the table or wanting to bake something for the group. They often express themselves through physical activity. It is important to give them an opportunity to do this so that they can also feel that

they are important for the group. You can even ask if someone wants to help with setting the table or cleaning up.

With the **quiet** participants, it is important to check if the person wants to be quiet. Participation by listening is allowed. Sometimes, a person may be quiet at the start of the group but gains the courage to speak later.

An attention seeker often turns the discussion to themselves and their own experiences. They can often be a person who starts the discussion, which also encourages the others to talk. If no one else says anything, the attention seeker will. However, during sensitive moments, the attention seeker may disregard other people's feelings and only present their own experiences. You need to comfort or encourage the participant who is in a delicate condition and set limits on the attention seeker. Otherwise, the attention seeker can take up a lot of the discussion time.

A mediator can be a great help to you. However, sometimes certain mediator types want to dismiss conflicts completely and keep talking about the day's topic. In that case, you need to assess whether mediation is needed in this situation. The mediator may ignore their own needs for the benefit of the group. You should encourage the mediator to not be shy and express their own opinions.

Vilén, Marika; Leppämäki, Päivi & Ekström, Leena 2008. Vuorovaikutusellinen tukeminen.

4.4 HOW DO I TAKE THE DIFFERENT PHASES OF THE GROUP INTO ACCOUNT?

The common objective is one of the most important things that turn individuals into a group. The participants must also know and feel that they are part of the group. Group dynamics refer to the way people act with each other in a group. If the group dynamics work well, it is easier to reach the group's common objective. During the different phases of the group season, the participants may act a bit differently, which is why you as the peer supporter must be prepared to act in the way required by each phase of the group. The theory of five developmental phases by Bruce Tuckman and Mary Ann Jensen (1977) is used very commonly in group theories.

In the forming phase, the participants may wonder if the group is right for them. In that case, you need to be a clear leader, establish a warm contact with the participants and build a safe atmosphere in the group. **In the storming phase**, participants often think about their position and role in the group in relation to the others. As the peer supporter, you need to strengthen the team spirit, break up small groups and emphasize the importance of each participant.

In the norming phase, the group participants already feel safe, because everyone already knows each other well. Discussions can easily go off topic, when news about the other people's lives start to become more interesting. You need to remind the group of the objective and steer the discussion back to the topic.

In the performing phase, the participants are already empowered and can contribute more to the group. Give the participants space and an opportunity to

share their own expertise with the others, for example. In the adjourning phase, the group prepares to separate and does a recap. Tell the participants about your own feelings related to the end of the group and encourage them to do the same.

4.5 HOW DO I SUPPORT THE PARTICIPANTS WITH INCLUSION AND INDEPENDENCE?

Peer support groups that support integration are temporary. After being in a successful group, the participants are able to be more active in their own community and Finnish society. Through the experience of inclusion, the participants' experience of their own role as an important and equal part of society is strengthened. To make all this reality, you can do the following things as a peer supporter:

1. Choose a meeting place that also has other activities for the participants.
2. Do not do anything on behalf of the participants. Teach them to do things themselves.
3. Give the participants a suitable amount of responsibility during the season.
4. Arrange opportunities for the participants to contact Finns.
5. Talk with the participants about their rights and duties.
6. Together, think about the participants' opportunities and resources as well as ways to strengthen them.
7. Give encouragement, praise and constructive feedback.
8. If possible, support the group's continuation as a different kind of group.

4.6 HOW CAN I SOLVE PROBLEMS IN A PEER SUPPORT GROUP?

Difficult situations are an opportunity for you to develop your own skills as a peer supporter. People learn best when they are outside their own comfort zone, i.e. when they need to think about things and try out new methods. Difficult situations can also be good for the group, because if they are managed well, they can

- 1.** clear the air between the group members,
- 2.** improve a safe atmosphere, and
- 3.** clarify the objective of the group.

As a peer supporter, you may face many kinds of problems – some of them major, but most of them fortunately minor. In conflicts, meaning problems between people, you need to mediate. In group conflicts, the participants may argue, strongly disagree with each other or exclude others from the group. In a conflict situation, you need to remain calm, give both parties an opportunity to state their own views and then steer the discussion towards reconciliation.

A group situation may often feel rushed, in which case people try to solve complicated problems they face quickly. Typically, decisions that are made too quickly are not good. The problem-solving phases provide support in solving complicated or otherwise difficult problem situations:

- 1.** Identify the real problem and its cause.
- 2.** List ways to solve the problem and try them out. Be creative!
- 3.** Solve the problem together with the participants, if possible.

- 4.** Learn from your mistakes.
- 5.** Participate in training in which you can strengthen your self-knowledge and interaction skills.

Remember that common problems should be solved together with the participants, especially after the group has progressed from the initial phases. However, you should consider on a case-by-case basis whether the conflict should be discussed with the whole group, just with the parties involved, or with each party separately. You can ask for the opinion of the parties to the conflict if you wish. If the other participants have suffered from the conflict, they need to know that the issue has been discussed between the parties. This increases the feeling of safety in the group.

Crisis Management Initiative (CMI):
Ahtisaari Days.



5. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

In this chapter, you can find answers to questions that peer supporters have often asked us. In all cases, the situation of the group and the participants' backgrounds and situations in life affect the potential solution options. This means that there is no one single right answer. We want to encourage you to prepare well for the meetings and constantly develop your own skills as a peer supporter, because it will help you prevent many problems.

In 2019, the Finnish Refugee Council held a get-together for peer supporters that was dedicated to finding different solutions for difficult situations in particular. In these answers, we have used the notes from that get-together in addition to our own expertise.

5.1 WHAT CAN I DO IF A PARTICIPANT TALKS TOO MUCH?

- Discuss the rules again with everyone.
- Thank the person for being active and say politely that you also want to hear what the other people are thinking.
- Use an hourglass to allot each person a specific amount of time to speak, or use a ball, for instance, to show whose turn it is to talk. Give the ball or hourglass to quiet people first.
- At the end of the group meeting, ask the participants to assess their own participation: "How did you participate in the group today?"

5.2 HOW CAN I GET THE PARTICIPANTS TO COMMIT TO THE ACTIVITY?

- Learn to know the participants in advance and tell them about yourself.
- Be friendly when meeting each participant and give them time.
- Let the participants influence the rules and content of the group.
- Remind the participants about the objectives and benefits of the group.
- After the meeting, call those who were absent.
Ask them how they are doing.
- Actively tell the participants that they are important.
Tell them that you value them.

"Thank you for coming to the group."

"You are an important part of this group."

"It's too bad that you weren't there today. I missed you."

"Your thoughts are important to me. Thank you for talking about them."

- Listen actively, meaning that you should show that you are listening.
Maintain appropriate eye contact.
- Give everyone an opportunity to speak so that everyone feels that they have been heard.
- Find out what the participants want to eat and drink during the meetings.
- Reward the participants or tempt them to join with nice things.

"You will receive a certificate if you participate actively in the meetings."

5.3 WHAT CAN I DO IF THE GROUP MEMBERS' LANGUAGE SKILLS ARE AT VERY DIFFERENT LEVELS?

- Prevent this problem in advance by only including people, whose situations are similar to each other.
- Everyone speaks plain or easy Finnish in the group.
- Use examples, pictures and stories.
- Discuss things stage by stage.
- Move forward at the pace of the weakest link.
- Let the other participants help those who do not understand something and explain it to them.
- You are responsible for ensuring that everyone has understood everything correctly.

5.4 WHAT CAN I DO IF I DO NOT LIKE ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE GROUP?

- This is fine – you do not need to like all participants.
- You should keep in mind, however, that everyone must be treated fairly.
- The participant must not notice that you do not like them.
- Stop and think about your own actions.
 - "Have I asked everyone's opinion?"
 - "Have I looked at everyone when I speak?"
 - "Have I given everyone the chance to speak?"
 - "Have I listened to everyone equally?"
 - "Have I smiled at everyone?"

5.5 WHAT CAN I DO IF THE PARTICIPANTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND ME?

- Before the meetings, think about how and in what order you will say things.
- Use images, videos and explanatory texts.
- Tell things in the form of a story.
- Participate in plain language training.
- Ask a peer supporter pair, or an assistant supporter who can speak different languages, to join the group.



6. IN CONCLUSION

Throughout all these years, roughly twenty employees of the Finnish Refugee Council from different kinds of backgrounds have been involved in developing peer support group activities that promote integration. We want to warmly thank all of them. The years have included many kinds of peer support groups and cooperation experiments, trainings, network meetings and consultations. Every employee has given their own valuable contribution to developing the activities and strengthening the expertise of the organisation.

Of course, we also want to thank all peer supporters, the employees of the VeTo network member organisations and our other partners in cooperation. Together, we have brought peer support activities that promote integration to a completely new level. Now even more parties recognise peer support group activities as a professionally implemented activity that patches up major holes in the Finnish integration system. Today, peer support activities play a very important role in supporting the integration of immigrants on the national level.

With the support of Veikkaus, and previously Finland's Slot Machine Association (RAY), we have been able to do high-quality work and achieve good results. This is what we will aim for in our own future activities, too. We will continue to develop peer support activities strongly together with all our partners. In a few years, we will certainly be able to update this guidebook, too, as the development work progresses. Hooray for peer support activities promoting integration!

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The Finnish Refugee Council has developed peer support group activities promoting integration since 2001. The experiences and lessons learned over the years are collected in this guidebook, which is intended to support people who host peer support groups for immigrants. The guidebook opens up the terminology and theoretical framework of peer support activities promoting integration, planning and hosting a peer support group, as well as the role of a peer supporter and the related responsibilities.

Fin**i**n**ish**
Refugee Council

