

PHAROS

Guidebook for Peer-to-Peer Support Networks



PHAROS project consortium
PHAROS – Mental health support for migrants and refugees – A lay mental health
advisor approach

PHAROS – Guidebook for Peer-to-Peer Support Networks

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Introduction to the Guidebook

The Pharos project takes its name from the ancient lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, which stood as a beacon guiding sailors through uncertain and dangerous waters towards safe harbour. Like that lighthouse, the Pharos project aims to offer direction, reassurance and light to those navigating the unfamiliar landscape of life in a new country. This Guidebook has been developed as part of the Pharos project, and it has been designed to support you, as a newly trained lay mental health advisor, in the practical work of establishing and managing peer-to-peer support networks in your community.

Completing the lay mental health advisor training programme prepared you with knowledge of common mental health challenges, trauma-informed communication, self-care practices and the referral pathways available to migrants and refugees in your country. This Guidebook takes that foundation and builds upon it. It addresses the relational, organisational and ethical dimensions of peer support work, offering guidance on how to promote your peer network, recruit participants, develop essential facilitation skills, manage sensitive conversations, navigate crisis situations and collaborate effectively with mental health professionals.

Each chapter of this Guidebook is written with the recognition that peer support work is personal, contextual and evolving. The experiences of newly arrived migrants and refugees vary enormously, and no single script or approach will work for every situation. The guidance offered here is therefore intended to be adapted thoughtfully to your own community, language and cultural context. You are encouraged to use what is useful, modify what needs to be changed and remain open to learning from each interaction you have as an advisor.

Across the chapters, you will find explanations of key concepts, practical steps, case vignettes, templates and reflection prompts. These are tools to support your practice, not rules to be followed rigidly. The most important ingredient in peer support is your genuine care for the people you serve, and that is something no guidebook can provide. What it can do is help you to carry that care into your work in a way that is thoughtful, safe and effective.

Tips for Using These Guidelines

Before working through the individual chapters, it may be helpful to spend a moment considering how to make the best use of this resource. The following suggestions will support you in getting the most from the Guidebook:

Read at your own pace

This Guidebook does not need to be read all at once. You may prefer to focus on the chapter most relevant to where you are in your work as an advisor. If you are just beginning to set up your peer network, Chapters 1 and 2 will be the most immediately useful. If you are already running sessions and want to develop your facilitation skills, Chapters 5 and 6 may be your starting point.

Return to it often

This resource is not intended to be read once and set aside. As your experience as an advisor grows, different sections will become more relevant. Returning to chapters after some months of practice will allow you to engage with the content in a more grounded way, informed by the real situations you have encountered.

Use the templates as a starting point

The scripts and templates included in each chapter are designed to give you language and structure for situations that may feel unfamiliar at first. They are not intended to be read verbatim. Adapt the words to feel natural in your own voice and appropriate to your community. A script that sounds rehearsed will always feel less reassuring than one delivered with warmth and authenticity.

Reflect regularly

Each chapter includes reflection questions for advisors. Making time to use these, whether in a journal, in conversation with a fellow advisor or simply during a quiet moment at the end of a session, will help you to notice patterns in your practice, identify areas for growth and acknowledge what is going well.

Seek support when you need it

This Guidebook provides guidance, but it does not replace the support of the adult educators, migrant support workers or mental health professionals who are involved in the Pharos project in your country. If you encounter a situation that feels beyond your experience or capacity, please reach out. Knowing when to involve others is one of the most important skills an advisor can develop.

Work with your peers

Where possible, meet with other lay mental health advisors in your country or through the online platform developed as part of the Pharos project. Shared reflection, peer consultation and the exchange of practical ideas are some of the most effective ways to grow as an advisor. You do not have to carry this work alone.

Keep confidentiality at the centre

Many of the conversations you will have as an advisor involve personal and sensitive information. Before each session, remind yourself of your commitment to confidentiality. This

commitment forms the ethical foundation of peer support and must be treated as non-negotiable.

This Guidebook is organised and presented as a series of six (6) chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter contains learning outcomes, key concepts and definitions, tips, vignettes and case examples so that you can see applications of the tips, and accompanying templates for you to use in your lay advisor sessions. The six (6) chapters relate to the following topics:

1. Chapter 1 – Strategies for promoting the Peer-to-Peer Support Networks among newly arrived Migrants and Refugees.
2. Chapter 2 – Recruiting Participants, and Building Trust and Rapport in New Communities.
3. Chapter 3 - Referral Processes and Collaborating with Mental Health Professionals.
4. Chapter 4 – Peer Networking Essential Skills and Code of Conduct.
5. Chapter 5 - Conducting Peer-to-Peer Support Sessions and Facilitating Group Sessions.
6. Chapter 6 - Crisis Intervention and Emergency Protocols.

We hope you find this Guidebook to be useful when engaging your peers in advisory sessions. Best of luck with your peer mentoring.

Strategies for Promoting the Peer-to-Peer Support Networks among Newly Arrived Migrants and Refugees

Introduction

A peer support network can only achieve its purpose when the people who need it most are aware that it exists and feel genuinely welcomed to take part. Promotion is therefore not a peripheral activity in the work of a lay mental health advisor. It is central to the entire process. Without thoughtful and sustained outreach, even the most carefully prepared peer network will remain empty. This chapter explores how you can raise awareness of the peer support network within your community, how you can communicate its purpose in a way that feels accessible and safe, and how you can develop partnerships with local organisations and spaces that will allow you to reach newly arrived migrants and refugees effectively.

Promoting a peer network among people who may have experienced displacement, trauma or mistrust of new systems requires sensitivity, consistency and creativity. The aim of this chapter is to support you in developing a promotion strategy that suits your context while remaining grounded in respect for the dignity and autonomy of the people you hope to reach.

Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, lay mental health advisors will be able to identify the key spaces and channels through which newly arrived migrants and refugees can be reached, communicate the purpose and structure of the peer support network in a clear and welcoming way, develop simple promotional materials adapted to the needs of their community, and build relationships with local organisations that can support the promotion and sustainability of the network.

The specific learning outcomes can be described as knowledge you will gain, skills you will be able to apply and attitudes that you will adopt throughout this work. These are summarised as follows:

Knowledge

- Understand why promotion matters and how it differs from simple advertising.
- Identify the community spaces and networks most likely to reach newly arrived migrants and refugees.

- Recognise common concerns that may prevent people from engaging with a peer support network.

Skills

- Develop simple, accessible promotional materials tailored to your community.
- Communicate the purpose and boundaries of the peer network clearly in conversations and group settings.
- Build informal partnerships with local organisations and spaces to support outreach.

Attitudes

- Approach promotion with patience and a long-term perspective.
- Remain sensitive to the fact that some people may need time before they feel ready to engage.
- Show respect for the diversity of communication needs and cultural backgrounds within your community.

Context and purpose

Promoting a peer support network is not the same as advertising a product or a service. People who have recently arrived in a new country often arrive carrying experiences of uncertainty, loss and disrupted trust. Some may have had previous encounters with services or systems that did not treat them well. Others may worry that sharing personal information could have consequences for their immigration status or their safety. For all of these reasons, promotion must be approached not as a campaign but as a relationship-building process.

The goal is not to attract as many participants as possible in the shortest amount of time. It is to reach the right people in the right way, at the right moment for them. This means being visible in the spaces where newly arrived migrants and refugees spend time, using language they can understand, working through trusted community figures and communicating clearly about what the network is, what it is not and who it is for.

Key concepts

Key concept	Definition and application
Community mapping	Before beginning outreach, it helps to identify the places, organisations and people through whom newly arrived migrants and refugees can most naturally be reached. This might include language schools, integration programmes, faith communities, community cafes, food banks or cultural associations. Mapping these networks gives you a starting point for outreach.
Accessible communication	Promotional materials and conversations should be easy to understand, free from professional jargon and available in the languages spoken in your community. Visual formats, short sentences and clear descriptions of what participants can expect all contribute to accessibility.
Word of mouth as a primary strategy	In many migrant communities, personal recommendation is more powerful than any printed flyer. When someone who has already attended the network speaks positively about their experience to a friend or neighbour, this creates a more trusted form of promotion than formal channels alone.
The role of trusted intermediaries	People are more likely to engage with something when it is introduced by someone they already trust, such as a teacher, a community leader, a religious figure or a support worker. Building relationships with these individuals and organisations can significantly strengthen the reach and credibility of the peer network.

Practical steps and approaches

Effective promotion of the peer support network requires a combination of approaches. The following practical steps can be followed when beginning to raise awareness of the network in your community. Each step is accompanied by a case vignette which shows how the step might unfold in practice.

Mapping your community

Before distributing any promotional materials or reaching out to organisations, spend some time mapping your local community. Identify the places where newly arrived migrants and refugees are likely to spend time and the organisations that serve them.

Consider which of these spaces allow for informal, unhurried conversation. A community cafe is likely to be more welcoming than a busy government office. A language class creates more opportunity for connection than a one-off information session.

Case vignette: Mapping as a first step

Nadia begins her outreach by spending two weeks simply visiting the main community spaces in her area. She notes which language classes are held in the local community centre, which cultural associations meet weekly and where the largest informal gatherings of newly arrived residents tend to occur. Using this information, she draws up a simple plan for which spaces to prioritise in her first month of promotion. This preparation means her outreach is targeted and avoids duplication of effort.

Developing clear and simple promotional materials

A well-designed flyer or information card can help people understand what the peer network offers before they speak with an advisor directly. Materials should be written in plain language, free from clinical terminology and available in the languages most commonly spoken in your community. They should describe the network as a friendly and voluntary space for people who are settling into a new country, rather than as a mental health service, which may carry stigma for some communities.

Case vignette: Creating accessible materials

Kwame works with a local community worker to produce a short information card about the peer network. It includes the meeting time and location, a brief description of what the group involves and a note that participation is voluntary and confidential. The card is translated into three languages. Kwame leaves a small stack at the reception desk of a language school and places several on a noticeboard at the local community centre. Within a week, two people contact him asking to know more.

Building partnerships with local organisations

Individual outreach is important, but the peer network will reach far more people if it is supported by local organisations that already have relationships with newly arrived migrants and refugees. Approach these organisations with a clear explanation of what the network offers and how it might complement their existing work. Avoid asking them to promote something they do not fully understand. Invite them to learn more, visit a session if appropriate and make a considered decision about how they might support the network.

Case vignette: A partnership with a language school

Fatima speaks with the coordinator of a local integration programme about the peer support network. She explains the purpose of the network, reassures the coordinator about confidentiality and offers to answer any questions. The coordinator agrees to mention the network at the end of a language class and to display a flyer on the noticeboard. Over the following month, four participants from the class attend their first session.

Using digital channels carefully

Where community members are comfortable using digital platforms, social media or messaging groups can be useful for sharing information about the network. Care must be taken, however, not to share personal information or anything that could identify participants. Any digital promotion should be simple, positive in tone and clearly describe the network as a voluntary and supportive space. Always ensure that participants have given their consent before including any reference to them in digital communications.

Sustaining visibility over time

Promotion is not a one-time activity. The peer network will benefit from ongoing visibility in the community. This might mean returning regularly to community spaces, speaking briefly about the network at the start of a community event or simply being present and available in places where newly arrived migrants and refugees gather. Consistent visibility builds familiarity, and familiarity builds trust.

Ethical considerations

Promotion must always respect the autonomy of the people being reached. People should never feel pressured to attend or to share personal information in order to find out more about the network. Any promotional materials should clearly state that participation is voluntary and that no personal information will be shared without consent. Be careful also about the framing used in promotional materials. Language that implies that newly arrived migrants and refugees are inherently struggling or in need of help can feel stigmatising. Focus instead on connection, community and support as values that benefit everyone.

Summary

Effective promotion of the peer-to-peer support network requires patience, creativity and a commitment to building genuine relationships within the community. By mapping the spaces where newly arrived migrants and refugees spend time, developing clear and accessible materials, building partnerships with local organisations and maintaining consistent visibility, lay mental health advisors can create the conditions for a network

that grows in a sustainable and inclusive way. Promotion rooted in respect and honesty will always be more effective than promotion driven by urgency or numbers.

Templates for Chapter 1

Template 1: Community mapping worksheet

Purpose: To help advisors identify the key spaces and organisations through which to reach newly arrived migrants and refugees.

Instructions: Complete the table below by listing the spaces, organisations and contact people you identify through your community mapping activity.

Space or organisation	How does it serve migrants / refugees?	Contact person / next step

Template 2: Introductory script for speaking with organisations

Script for approaching a local organisation or community space

Purpose: To support advisors in approaching organisations as potential promotional partners.

Hello, my name is [Name] and I am a trained lay mental health advisor working as part of the Pharos project. I am reaching out to tell you about a peer support network that we have set up for newly arrived migrants and refugees in the area.

The network is a friendly and voluntary space where people who are settling into a new community can come together to share experiences, support each other and access information about local services. It is not a clinical service. It is run by peers, meaning people who have themselves experienced migration and who have been trained to support others.

I would love to explore whether there is a way we could work together to let people in your community know about the network. Would you be open to a short conversation about how we might do that?

Template 3: Advisor reflection questions

Purpose: To support advisors in reflecting on their outreach and promotion activities.

- Which spaces or organisations did I reach out to this week?
- Which conversations went well, and what made them effective?
- Did I encounter any hesitation or questions I was not sure how to answer?
- Is there a community space or trusted figure I have not yet approached that could expand the reach of the network?
- How am I maintaining consistency in my outreach without placing pressure on people?

Recruiting participants and building trust and rapport in new communities

Introduction

When entering a new community, it is completely normal to experience a range of different, and oftentimes conflicting, emotions. Such a change can bring a mixture of hope, uncertainty, excitement and vulnerability. For newly arrived migrants and refugees, these feelings are shaped by a journey that may have included loss, fear and the weight of separation from familiar surroundings. As a peer advisor, when you get to the stage where you are ready to reach out to invite people to join a peer support network, you should also be aware that you are entering this emotional landscape. This chapter aims to give you support in managing this process, by outlining how advisors like you can form meaningful first connections that encourage participation and create conditions for trust, respect and safety.

The work of building trust takes time, patience and genuine presence. As an advisor, remember that you do not need to be an expert in every topic. What matters is your ability to listen, to show care and to communicate in a manner that respects the lived experiences of those you will meet and engage with through these networks. This chapter provides guidance for approaching new community members, forming relationships and explaining the purpose of peer support in a way that feels reassuring and accessible. It also presents templates and scripts that advisors like you can use when planning your outreach activities in your own community.

Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, lay mental health advisors will be able to understand the cultural and emotional factors that influence trust building, communicate with clarity and sensitivity, create safe first interactions and reflect on how your presence shapes the tone of the peer support network.

The specific learning outcomes can be described as knowledge you will gain, skills you will be able to apply and attitudes that you will adopt throughout this work. These are summarised as follows:

Knowledge

- Understand the social, cultural and emotional factors that influence trust building.
- Recognise common concerns that newly arrived migrants and refugees may hold.

Skills

- Communicate with clarity and sensitivity when speaking with new community members.
- Create safe and supportive first interactions.

Attitudes

- Demonstrate patience, empathy, and reliability.
- Show a willingness to learn from each community's experience.

Context and purpose

When migrants and refugees arrive in a new country, they step into environments that tend to be unfamiliar to them in every respect. Systems of housing, healthcare, employment and education may differ significantly from those they knew before. Many people carry memories of displacement, loss of routine and separation from loved ones with them also, which adds a significant emotional burden to their search for new routines and a sense of belonging in a new community. Some may feel cautious when meeting new people or might worry about how their information will be used, especially if offered to a stranger – like a lay advisor.

Recruitment for the peer support network is not a simple invitation to join a group. It is a process of forming early relationships that reduce fear and help these people to feel safe enough to take part. These relationships give participants a sense of belonging and show them that someone in the new community is willing to support them. Through gentle outreach and respectful communication, advisors can lay the foundation for a network where people can come together to share experiences and learn how to navigate their new environments in a supportive way.

Key concepts

The following table presents some key concepts which will be important for you to get to know and remember when applying the content of this chapter:

Key concept	Definition and application
Trust as a relationship rather than a single moment.	Trust develops from consistent behaviour. Newly arrived migrants and refugees may have experienced uncertainty or broken trust in the past, so steady and predictable interactions are key. You can build trust as an advisor by keeping promises, showing patience and communicating clearly.

Rapport through presence, empathy and respect.	Rapport is created when people feel valued and understood. As an advisor, you can develop rapport by listening with care, acknowledging the emotions you hear and showing interest in the person's perspective. Rapport encourages participation and helps people to feel ready to join a group
The importance of cultural awareness.	Culture shapes communication styles, expectations and comfort levels. As an advisor, you are not expected to know every cultural detail, but you can show curiosity, respect and willingness to learn. This invites openness and reduces hesitation.
Safety through clarity.	People feel safer when they understand what will happen, who will be involved and what they can expect. Clarity about the peer network supports informed decisions and lowers anxiety.

Practical steps and approaches

Reaching out to newly arrived migrants and refugees should always begin with a gentle awareness of the emotional journey that many people carry with them. People step into new communities with hopes for safety and stability, yet they also come with uncertainty about whom to trust or where to turn for support. As an advisor, you can create moments of comfort through simple, human interactions that show warmth, patience and genuine interest.

As an advisor, you are not expected to ask personal questions or raise sensitive topics immediately. The early focus should be on connection through kindness, steady presence and attentive listening. Approaching each encounter with openness and sincerity will support you in the long-term to create the conditions for deeper engagement and for participation in the peer support network.

The following practical steps can be followed when making this initial contact with members of the peer support networks. Each step is followed by a short case vignette (scenario) which will show you how each step might be approached, and some potential outcomes from each practical step:

Making first contact in community spaces

Many newly arrived migrants and refugees gather in accessible and familiar places including language classes, community centres, cultural associations and integration programmes. Advisors can build a presence in these settings by attending regularly, participating in informal conversations and learning the rhythms of the community. In

these early moments, as an advisor, you should not work at promoting the network just yet. Your aim should be simple: to be present, approachable and sincere. When people see an advisor regularly, they will come to recognise you as a familiar figure.

Case vignette: A gentle beginning

Amara attends a literacy class three times a week. She tends to arrive early and wait quietly in the hallway. An advisor begins greeting her each morning with a warm hello and a smile. At first, Amara replies with a shy nod. Over time, she begins initiating the greeting herself. This simple routine helps her to feel seen and slowly builds a sense of comfort that allows future conversations to unfold naturally.

Starting natural conversations

First conversations do not need to be about mental health or the network. They can focus on everyday topics such as weather, food, language learning or the local area. These conversations can help to create comfort and familiarity. As an advisor, you can then gently examine how the person is settling in and whether they have found support within the community. Listening is central. When people speak about challenges or worries, you can respond with understanding without attempting to solve everything at once. This strengthens rapport.

Case vignette: Everyday topics create ease

Jonas recently moved to the city and attends an afternoon computer class. An advisor notices him struggling with a translation app. They strike up a conversation about language learning and share a light-hearted story about their own struggles with a new language. Jonas laughs and explains that he misses the food from his home country. The advisor listens with curiosity and Jonas begins to share more. This simple exchange opens the door to future conversations about settling in.

Explaining the peer network with simplicity and warmth

When the conversation feels natural, you can introduce the peer support network. A simple and reassuring explanation works best. You can explain that the network is a small, friendly group where people talk about settling into life in a new country, share ideas and support each other emotionally. It is also important here to explain that participants decide what they want to share, that people can attend when they feel ready and that nothing is compulsory. This can help to communicate safety and control for the migrant or refugee over their engagement and participation within the network.

Case vignette: A gentle invitation

After speaking with a participant a number of times, an advisor explains that there is a small group where people meet to talk about daily life and share experiences. The participant looks thoughtful and asks a few questions. The advisor reassures them that they are welcome to join whenever the moment feels right. The participant says they will

think about it and smiles as they walk away. A week later, they appear at the meeting room door.

Recognising signs of hesitation

Some people may appear unsure, may avoid eye contact or may redirect the conversation. As an advisor, you should treat this with respect. Acknowledging that participation is voluntary helps people to feel free to decide without pressure. As an advisor, you might say that you are available if the person ever wants to talk again or if they later become interested in the group. Knowing they can return at any time may be enough to build confidence.

Case vignette: Respecting personal boundaries

A man named Farid listens politely when the advisor explains the peer group but steps back and folds his arms. His answers become short and guarded. The advisor notices this shift and thanks him for taking the time to talk. They add that he is welcome to approach them again if he ever wants to know more. Two weeks later, Farid returns and asks if he can come to one session just to observe.

Maintaining consistency

Trust requires consistency. Advisors can strengthen trust when they return at the same times, follow up on earlier conversations or check in with someone they previously met. Even small acts such as remembering a person's name or asking about something they mentioned earlier can help create a sense of being cared for.

Case vignette: Familiarity builds trust

Every Wednesday, an advisor visits a local intercultural café. After speaking with a woman named Petra about her children, they remember to ask the following week how her daughter's school project went. Petra notices that the advisor remembers small details and begins to share more about her life.

Creating safe and comfortable invitations

Advisors can invite people to the peer network by describing the location, the type of people who attend and the general atmosphere. People feel safer when they know what to expect and what is expected of them. A warm and descriptive invitation can help people to imagine themselves in the space before attending.

Case vignette: Painting a picture of the space

When invited to the group, Arben hesitates. The advisor explains that the group meets in a cosy room at the community centre with chairs arranged in a circle and tea available for anyone who wants it. Hearing this helps Arben to feel reassured about what he will encounter. He decides to join the group the following week.

Working with varied language abilities

Language barriers can make first interactions challenging. Advisors can speak slowly, use gestures or rely on translated leaflets when needed. If an interpreter or bilingual volunteer is present, they may assist, provided the participant consents.

Case vignette: Bridging communication gently

An advisor meets a woman named Lina who speaks very little of the local language. They communicate using simple words, a translation app and friendly gestures. Lina smiles frequently but speaks only a little. Two sessions later, she arrives with her teenage niece who helps with translation. This shows that the advisor's patience created enough comfort for her to seek support in her own way.

Encouraging community ownership

Some participants may wish to bring friends or family members. This can be encouraged, as familiarity increases comfort and participation. A peer network grows most effectively and sustainably through personal recommendations.

Case vignette: The knock-on effect

After attending three sessions, Ali feels more settled and begins to trust the process. When he hears that a neighbour from his building feels isolated, he suggests that the neighbour attend the next meeting with him. Together they join the group and the neighbour finds value in hearing others speak about similar experiences.

Cultural and linguistic considerations

Cultural expressions of emotion differ widely. In some cultures, individuals may speak openly about personal matters. In others, such discussions may be private. As an advisor, it is important that you approach every interaction with flexibility and respect for these differences.

Body language also varies. Some people may avoid eye contact as a sign of respect. Others may prefer direct eye contact to express engagement. Advisors should observe these cues and adjust to the communication style that feels comfortable for the individual.

Language is more than grammar. It carries memories and identity. When advisors attempt even a few words in the participant's language, it can create connection. Advisors who acknowledge their own limitations in language learning also model patience and humility.

Ethical considerations

Advisors must ensure that all conversations during recruitment remain confidential. People need to know that their stories and concerns will not be repeated to others without their permission.

It is also important that advisors avoid making promises they cannot keep. Clear boundaries support trust and protect both the advisor and the participant. Advisors can reassure individuals that the peer network is a safe and supportive space but should avoid presenting it as a solution to all challenges.

Summary

This chapter has helped to highlight that recruitment is not a single moment but a continuous relationship built on presence, empathy and consistency. When advisors listen with care and communicate with clarity, newly arrived migrants and refugees can feel more prepared to join a network that supports them through the challenges of settling into a new life. Trust grows when people feel safe, respected and seen. A thoughtful and patient approach will help to make sure that the peer support network becomes a place of connection, comfort and shared strength.

Templates for Chapter 2

Below are some scripts and reflection questions which you can use in your role as an advisor during outreach and relationship building activities. These are designed to help give you the language for these early interactions.

Template 1: Introductory script for first conversations

Purpose: To support advisors during early outreach when engaging with someone new.

Script:

Hello, my name is [Name]. I spend time here each week to meet people who are settling into the community. I enjoy learning about the experiences of people who have arrived recently. How are things going for you today?

If you ever feel interested in meeting others who are also settling in, there is a small group where people talk and share ideas about life in a new country. You are welcome to join whenever you feel ready. You can also talk to me again anytime you like.

Template 2: Simple explanation of the peer network

Purpose: To help advisors to provide a clear and reassuring description of the peer support network.

Script:

The peer network is a small group where people meet in a safe and friendly space. People talk about things that matter to them, like daily challenges, questions about services or feelings that come with living in a new place. Everyone chooses what they want to share. Some people talk, some people prefer to listen. Participation is completely voluntary. The group meets at [Location] at [Time]. If you would like to come, you are welcome.

Template 3: Follow up message after initial contact

Purpose: To strengthen trust through consistent communication.

Script:

It was nice to speak with you the other day. If you ever wish to join our small support group, we meet at [Location] at [Time]. You are welcome whenever the moment feels right for you. Feel free to ask me anything if you are curious.

Template 4: Reflection sheet for advisors

Purpose: To help advisors reflect on their own communication and presence during outreach.

Questions:

- How did the conversation begin and how did the other person respond?
- What emotions did I notice?
- Did I speak with clarity and kindness?
- Did I listen more than I spoke?
- How can I strengthen rapport the next time I meet this person?
- What cultural or linguistic factors did I observe that may influence future interactions?

Referral Processes and Collaborating with Mental Health Professionals

Introduction

One of the most valuable things a lay mental health advisor can offer a newly arrived migrant or refugee is a trusted connection to professional support. As an advisor, you are not a therapist or a counsellor, and you are not expected to diagnose, treat or manage mental health conditions. What you can do, however, is listen carefully, recognise when someone may benefit from professional support and help them to take the first steps towards accessing that support. This chapter focuses on how to make effective referrals, how to explain referral pathways to participants in a clear and reassuring way, and how to develop collaborative relationships with the mental health professionals in your local area.

Referral is a skill that requires both knowledge and sensitivity. It requires knowledge of the services available and how they can be accessed, and it requires sensitivity because the decision to seek professional mental health support is a deeply personal one that may carry different meanings for different people depending on their cultural background, previous experiences and current circumstances.

Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, lay mental health advisors will be able to identify the main mental health referral pathways available to migrants and refugees in their host country, explain referral processes to participants in a clear and non-stigmatising way, make appropriate referrals when a participant's needs exceed the scope of peer support, and build respectful working relationships with mental health professionals in their area.

Knowledge

- Understand the range of mental health services available to migrants and refugees in your host country, including community-based services, public health services and third-sector organisations.
- Recognise the circumstances under which a referral is appropriate.
- Understand the principles of informed consent in the context of referral.

Skills

- Explain referral pathways to participants in plain language and in a way that reduces stigma.

- Make a warm referral that supports the participant's transition from peer support to professional care.
- Communicate professionally and respectfully with mental health service providers.

Attitudes

- Approach referral as an act of care rather than as a transfer of responsibility.
- Respect the right of each participant to make their own decisions about professional support.
- Remain free of judgement regarding a participant's pace or readiness to engage with formal services.

Context and purpose

Accessing mental health services can be a significant challenge for newly arrived migrants and refugees. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with local systems, concerns about cost and fear of stigma are among the most commonly reported obstacles. For many people, particularly those from countries where mental health support is not widely available or where it carries strong social stigma, the idea of speaking with a psychiatrist or psychologist may feel unfamiliar or even frightening.

As a lay mental health advisor, you occupy a unique and important position. You have experienced migration yourself and understand the challenges of navigating a new country. You speak the language of your community and have earned the trust of the people you work with. This places you in an ideal position to serve as a bridge between the people who need support and the services that can provide it. A warm referral from a trusted peer can overcome barriers that formal outreach alone cannot.

Key concepts

Key concept	Definition and application
What a referral is	A referral is a supported introduction to a professional service. It is not simply telling someone that a service exists. A good referral involves helping the person to understand what the service offers, how to access it, what they can expect during their first appointment and, where appropriate, accompanying them to an initial session or following up afterwards.
Warm referral versus cold referral	A cold referral gives someone a phone number or leaflet. A warm referral involves a personal introduction, a conversation about what the service involves and an offer of ongoing support during the transition. Warm referrals are

	significantly more likely to result in people accessing the care they need.
Informed consent in referral	Before making a referral, you must have the participant's permission. This means explaining clearly what you are suggesting, who you plan to contact and what information, if any, you may need to share. People have the right to decline a referral, and that right must always be respected.
Your scope of practice	As a lay mental health advisor, you are trained to provide peer support, share information about services and offer a compassionate and non-judgemental ear. You are not trained to provide therapy or to manage mental health conditions. Recognising the boundary between these two roles is essential for your safety and the safety of the people you support.

Practical steps and approaches

Knowing the services in your area

Before you can make effective referrals, you need to develop a working knowledge of the mental health services available to migrants and refugees in your local area. This includes understanding which services are free of charge or low cost, which are accessible to people with limited language proficiency, and whether services operate a waiting list. Your project coordinator or adult educator can help you to compile a local resource list at the start of your work as an advisor. This list should be kept up to date and reviewed regularly.

Case vignette: Building a resource list

Ifeoma spends an afternoon with her Pharos project coordinator reviewing the mental health services available in her area. She notes the name, contact details and referral process for three organisations: a public health centre, a community mental health service and a charitable organisation that provides counselling to migrants in their first language. She stores this information in a simple document that she can refer to during her work as an advisor.

Recognising when a referral may be needed

Not every person who attends the peer network will need a professional referral. Many people will benefit from the social connection, the normalisation of mental health conversations and the practical information shared within the network. However, there are circumstances in which peer support alone is not enough. These include situations where someone describes persistent feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, expresses thoughts of self-harm or suicide, shows signs of severe distress that are not improving over time, or describes symptoms that

significantly affect their daily functioning. In these circumstances, a referral should be considered carefully and made with the participant's full knowledge and consent.

Making a warm referral

A warm referral begins with a compassionate conversation in which you acknowledge what the participant has shared, explain gently that you think a professional could offer additional support and describe what that support might involve. Allow the person time to respond, ask questions and make their own decision. If they agree to a referral, offer to help them with the practical steps: finding the contact details, making a phone call together or accompanying them to a first appointment if this is possible and appropriate.

Case vignette: A warm referral in practice

During a peer support session, Mirela shares that she has been unable to sleep for several weeks and feels that she cannot stop thinking about what happened to her family before she left her country. The advisor listens carefully and thanks Mirela for her trust. After the session, they speak privately. The advisor explains that what Mirela described sounds very heavy to carry, and that there are professionals in the area who are trained to help with exactly this kind of experience. The advisor mentions a local service and offers to help Mirela make the call together the following week. Mirela agrees.

Respecting the participant's decision

Some people will decline a referral, and this must always be respected. Continuing to pressure someone after they have expressed reluctance is not only unhelpful but can damage the trust you have built. Instead, acknowledge their decision without judgement, let them know that the offer remains open and continue to provide peer support within your role. Sometimes, a person who declines a referral today will return to the idea weeks or months later, once they feel more ready.

Collaborating with mental health professionals

Your work as a lay mental health advisor is strengthened when it exists within a network of professional support. Where possible, seek to build respectful and open working relationships with the mental health professionals in your area. This does not mean sharing personal information about participants, which would violate confidentiality. It means being aware of who is available, how they work and how you can best support participants in making the transition from peer support to professional care.

Ethical considerations

Referral involves navigating a careful balance between advocating for a participant's wellbeing and respecting their right to make their own decisions. Never share a participant's personal information with a professional service without their explicit consent. Be honest about the limits of what you can offer as a peer advisor. Avoid giving

the impression that you are recommending a specific service because you have received payment or incentives to do so. Your role is to inform and support, not to direct or decide.

Summary

Effective referral is one of the most important contributions a lay mental health advisor can make to the wellbeing of newly arrived migrants and refugees. A warm referral, made at the right moment with the participant's full knowledge and consent, can be the bridge that connects someone to the support they need. By developing knowledge of local services, recognising when professional support is appropriate and communicating with compassion and clarity, advisors can ensure that peer support and professional care work together in the interest of each participant.

Templates for Chapter 3

Template 1: Local mental health resource list

Purpose: To support advisors in keeping an up-to-date record of local mental health services available to migrants and refugees.

Service name	Contact details	How to refer	Languages available / notes

Template 2: Script for making a warm referral

Warm referral conversation script

Purpose: To support advisors in introducing the idea of professional support to a participant.

What you have shared with me today is important, and I want you to know that it takes real courage to speak about these things.

From what you have described, I think it might be helpful to speak with someone who is trained to support people through exactly this kind of experience. There are professionals in the area who work with people from our community and who understand the kinds of challenges that come with starting a new life here.

I am not saying that there is anything wrong with you. I am saying that you deserve more support than I am trained to offer, and that support is available.

Would you be open to finding out a little more about what that might look like? I can share some information with you, and if you would like, I can help you to take the first step.

Template 3: Advisor reflection questions

Purpose: To support advisors in reflecting on referral decisions and professional collaboration.

- Have I updated my local mental health resource list recently?
- Did I encounter any situation this week where a referral might have been appropriate?
- How did I communicate the idea of professional support to the participant, and how did they respond?
- Did I maintain confidentiality in all referral conversations?
- Is there a mental health professional or organisation in my area that I have not yet made contact with?

Peer Networking Essential Skills and Code of Conduct

Introduction

The quality of the peer support network depends not only on the knowledge you have gained through training, but on the relational skills you bring to every interaction. Peer support is, above all else, a human endeavour. It rests on the capacity to listen with genuine attention, to speak with care and clarity, to hold space for emotions that are sometimes overwhelming and to uphold the dignity of every person you work with. This chapter outlines the essential skills that underpin effective peer support and sets out the code of conduct by which all lay mental health advisors are expected to work.

A code of conduct is not a set of rules designed to restrict or control. It is a shared commitment to working in a way that is safe, ethical and respectful for every participant and every advisor involved in the peer network. Familiarising yourself with this code and returning to it regularly will help to ensure that the peer support network remains a space that participants can trust.

Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, lay mental health advisors will be able to apply active listening and empathic communication skills in peer support interactions, maintain clear and appropriate boundaries in their role as advisors, uphold the code of conduct in all their work within the peer network, and manage their own emotional wellbeing while supporting others.

Knowledge

- Understand the key skills that underpin effective peer support.
- Recognise what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in a peer support context.
- Know the principles that guide ethical peer support practice.

Skills

- Apply active listening techniques in peer conversations and group sessions.
- Communicate with empathy and without judgement.
- Maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries.

Attitudes

- Demonstrate humility by recognising the limits of your role.
- Treat every participant with dignity, regardless of their background or beliefs.

- Commit to ongoing reflection and growth as an advisor.

Context and purpose

Peer support occupies a distinct and important space between informal friendship and professional care. It is not therapy, but it requires skill. It is not social work, but it carries responsibility. Understanding the nature of this space, and developing the skills to work within it well, is one of the most important tasks of a lay mental health advisor.

The people who attend the peer network come with real and sometimes complex needs. Many will have experienced trauma, loss and disruption. Some will be navigating systems and services they do not yet understand. All of them deserve to be met with patience, honesty and genuine regard. The essential skills outlined in this chapter are the practical expression of that regard.

Key concepts

Key concept	Definition and application
Active listening	Active listening is more than hearing words. It involves giving full attention to the person speaking, noticing what is said and what is left unsaid, and responding in a way that shows genuine understanding. It includes maintaining appropriate eye contact, avoiding interruptions, reflecting back what you have heard and asking open questions that invite the person to share more.
Empathy	Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. In peer support, empathy means acknowledging the emotions a person expresses without minimising them, comparing them to your own experience or rushing to offer solutions. It is often expressed through simple statements such as 'that sounds very hard' or 'I can understand why you feel that way'.
Boundaries	Boundaries are the limits that define what is appropriate within your role as a peer advisor. They protect both you and the participants you support. They include not sharing personal information about participants, not continuing conversations outside the peer network setting without explicit agreement and not taking on responsibilities that belong to professional services.
Non-judgement	Non-judgement means setting aside assumptions, personal opinions and moral evaluations when supporting others. It does not mean agreeing with everything a participant says, but it does mean responding in a way that is free from criticism, comparison or advice that was not requested.
Self-awareness	Self-awareness involves recognising your own emotional responses, assumptions and limits. Peer support can be emotionally demanding. Being aware of your own state allows you to manage it appropriately and to seek support for yourself when needed.

Practical steps and approaches

Practicing active listening

Active listening can be practised deliberately. In each peer conversation, commit to giving the person your full attention. Put aside distractions, resist the urge to formulate your response while they are still speaking and use short verbal affirmations such as 'I see' or 'go on' to signal that you are engaged. At natural pauses, reflect back what you have heard using your own words. This shows the person that you have understood and gives them an opportunity to clarify or expand.

Case vignette: Active listening in practice

During a one-to-one conversation, Yusuf shares that he has been feeling very alone since arriving in the city. The advisor listens without interrupting and, when Yusuf pauses, says quietly: 'It sounds like the loneliness has been really difficult to manage, especially when everything here is still so new.' Yusuf nods and continues talking. He later tells a colleague that the advisor was the first person who had made him feel truly heard since his arrival.

Maintaining boundaries

Maintaining clear boundaries is a form of care, both for the participants you support and for yourself. Boundaries become easier to uphold when they are established clearly from the beginning of the peer relationship. In your first conversation with a participant, you can explain gently that the peer network is a space for support during meeting times, that you are not a therapist and that there are some things you will need to refer to a professional. This clarity protects everyone involved.

The code of conduct

All lay mental health advisors working within the Pharos peer network are expected to uphold the following code of conduct:

- Treat every participant with dignity, respect and genuine regard, regardless of their nationality, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation or any other characteristic.
- Maintain confidentiality at all times. Do not share personal information about participants with other network members, with family or friends, or with anyone outside the professional network without the participant's explicit consent.
- Be honest about the limits of your role. Do not present yourself as a therapist, counsellor or medical professional. When a participant's needs exceed the scope of peer support, refer them to appropriate professional services.
- Avoid dual relationships. Do not combine your role as an advisor with another role in the participant's life, such as employer, landlord or close friend, in a way that could compromise the peer support relationship.
- Seek supervision and support. If a situation arises that leaves you feeling uncertain, distressed or unsure of how to proceed, speak with your Pharos project coordinator or the adult educator supporting your network.

- Take care of your own wellbeing. You cannot support others effectively if you are not supported yourself. Make use of the self-care strategies learned during training and seek help when you need it.
- Report serious concerns. If you become aware of a situation that involves immediate risk to the safety of a participant or another person, you have a responsibility to inform the appropriate services. Confidentiality does not override the duty to protect someone from serious harm.

Managing your own emotional responses

Peer support work can be emotionally demanding. Hearing about experiences of trauma, loss and displacement can affect you, even as a trained advisor with your own experience of migration. It is important to recognise when you are feeling overwhelmed or emotionally depleted and to take steps to care for yourself. This might mean taking time after a session to decompress, speaking with a trusted person about your feelings in a way that does not compromise participant confidentiality, or using the self-care practices you learned during training.

Case vignette: Recognising emotional impact

After a session in which a participant shared a very difficult account of her journey, an advisor notices that she cannot stop thinking about it during the evening. She recognises that the conversation has affected her emotionally. Rather than suppressing this, she takes a walk, writes in her personal journal and sends a message to her project coordinator letting them know she would appreciate a brief check-in the following week. This self-awareness helps her to return to her advisory role with renewed energy.

Ethical considerations

The code of conduct described in this chapter is not an optional addition to your work as an advisor. It is the ethical foundation on which everything else rests. Without it, the trust that participants place in the peer network is at risk. If you are ever unsure whether a specific action or communication is appropriate, ask yourself whether it serves the participant's wellbeing and whether it upholds the values of dignity, honesty and care. If the answer to either question is uncertain, pause and seek guidance before proceeding.

Summary

The essential skills of peer support, including active listening, empathy, clear boundaries and non-judgemental communication, are the practical expression of your commitment to the people you serve. Combined with a shared code of conduct, these skills create the conditions for a peer network that participants can trust and return to. Peer support done well is one of the most powerful contributions a community can make to the mental wellbeing of its members. This chapter has outlined what that looks like in practice and how you can continue to develop these skills throughout your work as an advisor.

Templates for Chapter 4

Template 1: Code of conduct pledge

Purpose: For advisors to sign as a commitment to the standards of practice outlined in this chapter.

I, [Name], as a lay mental health advisor trained through the Pharos project, commit to upholding the code of conduct described in Chapter 4 of this Guidebook. I understand that this code exists to protect the wellbeing of the participants I support and to ensure that the peer network remains a safe, ethical and dignified space for everyone involved.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Template 2: Reflection sheet for advisors

Purpose: To support advisors in reflecting on their practice in relation to the code of conduct and essential skills.

- How well did I practise active listening this week?
- Did I find myself responding with judgement or advice before the participant had finished sharing? How can I address this?
- Were there any moments where I felt my boundaries were tested? How did I respond?
- Am I managing my own emotional responses to this work effectively?
- Is there anything I encountered this week that I need to discuss with my project coordinator or adult educator?

Conducting Peer-to-Peer Support Sessions and Facilitating Group Sessions

Introduction

The peer support network becomes real in the sessions themselves. Everything that precedes a session, the promotion, the recruitment, the trust-building, the preparation, comes together in the moment when participants sit together and begin to speak. The quality of that experience depends to a significant degree on how the session is facilitated. This chapter provides guidance on how to prepare for and conduct both one-to-one peer conversations and group support sessions. It addresses the practical dimensions of session management alongside the relational dimensions that make sessions feel safe, inclusive and worthwhile for participants.

Facilitating a peer support session is different from leading a class or running a meeting. The role of the facilitator in a peer support context is not to teach or to direct but to hold the space, to guide the group gently towards connection and to ensure that every participant feels heard and respected. This requires both preparation and presence.

Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, lay mental health advisors will be able to prepare and structure a peer support session with clear purpose and appropriate format, facilitate group discussions in a way that is inclusive, safe and responsive to the needs of participants, manage common challenges that arise during sessions, and adapt their facilitation approach to the needs of different participants and groups.

Knowledge

- Understand the difference between one-to-one and group peer support formats.
- Recognise the key elements of an effective peer support session.
- Know how to respond to common challenges that arise during sessions.

Skills

- Prepare and open a session in a way that establishes safety and clear expectations.
- Facilitate discussion without dominating or directing.
- Manage difficult moments, including strong emotion or conflict, with calm and care.

Attitudes

- Approach every session with genuine curiosity about the experiences of participants.
- Remain flexible and responsive rather than rigidly attached to a planned agenda.
- Model the values of honesty, respect and care in every interaction.

Context and purpose

Peer support sessions create a structured opportunity for newly arrived migrants and refugees to share their experiences, learn from one another and access information about local services. For many participants, these sessions will be among the first spaces in their new community where they feel genuinely welcome and understood. The significance of that experience should not be underestimated. A well-facilitated session can strengthen a participant's sense of belonging, reduce their isolation and provide the confidence they need to take further steps in their integration journey.

Key concepts

Key concept	Definition and application
One-to-one peer support	A private conversation between a lay mental health advisor and a single participant. This format is appropriate when a participant has specific personal concerns they are not comfortable sharing in a group, when confidentiality is particularly important, or when a participant is new to the network and not yet ready to engage in a group setting.
Group peer support	A session involving multiple participants, usually between four and twelve people. Group sessions create opportunities for shared learning, mutual recognition and the normalisation of common experiences. They require more active facilitation than one-to-one sessions.
The opening ritual	Beginning each session in a consistent way helps participants to feel oriented and safe. This might involve a brief welcome, a summary of the session ground rules and a simple check-in question. Consistency over time creates a sense of familiarity and trust.
Holding the space	Holding the space means creating and maintaining the conditions in which participants can speak freely, feel safe and be genuinely heard. It involves managing silence comfortably, redirecting conversations that become unhelpful and ensuring that no single voice dominates the group.
Closing the session	Ending a session well is as important as beginning it well. A clear and gentle closure allows participants to transition out of the emotional space of the session. This might involve a brief summary of what was shared, a reminder of the next meeting and an invitation to speak with the advisor after the session if needed.

Practical steps and approaches

Preparing for a session

Good preparation reduces anxiety and increases confidence. Before each session, consider what the aim of the session will be and how long it will run. Decide whether a particular topic or theme will be introduced or whether the session will be led by whatever participants choose to bring. Prepare the physical space by arranging chairs in a circle, ensuring the room is private and comfortable and having any materials or handouts ready in advance. Think through any potential challenges and how you might respond to them.

Case vignette: Preparing a group session

Before her first group session, Hana writes a brief outline of the session on a notepad. She plans a five-minute welcome and ground rules section, a ten-minute check-in using a simple question, thirty minutes of open sharing with gentle facilitation and a five-minute closing. She arrives early to arrange the chairs in a circle and places a small plant and a jug of water in the centre of the room. When participants arrive, the room already feels calm and welcoming.

Opening the session

Begin each session by welcoming participants warmly and reminding them of the ground rules. Ground rules should be agreed with participants in the first session and revisited briefly in each subsequent session. They typically include commitments to confidentiality, respect for different perspectives and the right of each participant to decide what they share. A brief check-in question, such as 'how are you feeling today on a scale of one to ten?' or 'what is one word that describes how you arrived today?', helps participants to arrive emotionally in the space and gives the facilitator a sense of the group's mood.

Facilitating group discussion

The facilitator's role during group discussion is to guide without directing. Open questions invite participation without prescribing a particular answer. Questions such as 'does anyone else recognise that experience?' or 'what has helped you in moments like that?' encourage reflection and connection. When a participant shares something difficult, acknowledge it before moving on. Silence after an emotional contribution is not awkward. It is often respectful.

Case vignette: Managing a quiet group

At one of his first group sessions, the advisor notices that the group is unusually quiet. Rather than filling the silence with speech, he waits for a moment and then asks gently: 'Is there anything that feels heavy for anyone today? Sometimes it is easier to listen than to speak.' After a short pause, one participant shares that she has been worried about a medical appointment. This opens a conversation that others join. The session ends with a sense of warmth and shared understanding.

Managing strong emotion

It is not uncommon for participants to become emotional during peer support sessions. This is a sign that the space feels safe enough for genuine expression, not a problem to be managed. When someone becomes tearful or visibly distressed, resist the urge to redirect the conversation immediately. Acknowledge the emotion: 'I can see that this brings up a lot.' Offer the person a moment and let them know that they do not have to continue speaking if they do not wish to. If the emotion is very intense, offer a short break or the opportunity to speak privately after the session.

Closing the session

Close every session with care. Summarise briefly what was shared without attributing individual contributions by name. Acknowledge the courage it takes to participate and express genuine appreciation for each person's presence. Remind participants of the next session date and time and let them know that you are available to speak individually if they would like to. A brief closing ritual, such as each participant sharing one word about how they are leaving, can provide a gentle sense of closure.

One-to-one peer conversations

One-to-one conversations follow a similar structure to group sessions but allow for greater depth and personal focus. Before meeting with a participant individually, confirm that they understand the purpose of the conversation and that it remains confidential. Allow the conversation to be led by the participant and resist the urge to offer advice unless it is requested. At the end of the conversation, summarise what was discussed, offer any relevant information about local services and confirm whether the participant wishes to meet again.

Ethical considerations

Participants in peer support sessions share personal and sometimes very sensitive information. Confidentiality must be upheld within the group, which means that what is shared in the room stays in the room. Advisors should remind participants of this commitment at the beginning of each session. In group settings, this commitment extends to all participants, not only the advisor. While you cannot guarantee that every participant will honour this commitment, you can make it a clear and explicit group norm.

Summary

Well-facilitated peer support sessions are the heart of the peer network. They create a space where newly arrived migrants and refugees can share their experiences, feel genuinely heard and build connections with others who understand the challenges of settling into a new country. By preparing thoughtfully, opening and closing sessions with care and facilitating discussion in a way that is inclusive and responsive, lay mental health advisors can ensure that every session offers something of genuine value to everyone who attends.

Templates for Chapter 5

Template 1: Session plan template

Purpose: To help advisors prepare for each peer support session.

Session element	Notes
Date, time and location	
Number of participants expected	
Session aim	
Opening check-in question	
Main discussion theme or topic (if any)	
Materials or handouts needed	
Closing activity or question	
Any follow-up actions from previous session	

Template 2: Ground rules for peer support sessions

Purpose: To be shared with and agreed by participants at the first session.

- Everything shared in this group stays in this group.
- We listen to each other with respect and without judgement.
- Each person decides what they want to share. There is no pressure to speak.
- We speak from our own experience and avoid giving unsolicited advice.
- We respect each other's time by allowing everyone an opportunity to contribute.
- If something shared in the group causes concern for someone's safety, the advisor has a responsibility to seek appropriate help.

Template 3: Advisor reflection questions

Purpose: To support advisors in reflecting on their facilitation practice.

- Did I feel prepared for today's session? What would I do differently next time?
- How was the energy in the group? Did I adapt my approach accordingly?
- Was there a moment when I could have listened more and spoken less?
- How did I manage any difficult moments that arose?
- Is there anything from today's session that I need to discuss with my coordinator?

Crisis Intervention and Emergency Protocols

Introduction

Peer support networks create spaces of openness and trust. In these spaces, people sometimes share experiences or feelings that are very serious and that require a response beyond what peer support can offer. As a lay mental health advisor, you may encounter situations in which a participant expresses thoughts of suicide or self-harm, describes a risk to themselves or to another person, or presents in a state of acute distress that suggests an immediate mental health crisis. These situations can feel frightening, but they are also moments in which your presence, your calm and your knowledge of when and how to act can make a profound difference.

This chapter does not ask you to become a crisis specialist. It asks you to understand what a crisis looks like, to know when to act and what steps to take, to know the emergency services and crisis lines available in your country and to be clear about the limits of your role. Acting quickly and appropriately in a crisis is an expression of care. Knowing when to step back and involve professional support is equally so.

Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, lay mental health advisors will be able to recognise the signs of a mental health crisis, respond in a way that is calm, safe and appropriate to the situation, apply the Pharos emergency protocol when a participant presents in crisis, and communicate effectively with emergency services and professional supports when needed.

Knowledge

- Recognise the signs and indicators of a mental health crisis, including suicidal ideation, acute distress and risk of harm.
- Understand the difference between a crisis that requires immediate emergency response and one that requires urgent referral.
- Know the emergency services and crisis helplines available to migrants and refugees in your host country.

Skills

- Respond to a participant in crisis with calm, presence and practical support.
- Apply the emergency protocol confidently and without hesitation.
- Communicate with emergency services and professional supports in a clear and accurate way.

Attitudes

- Approach crisis situations with care and composure, rather than panic.
- Prioritise the safety of the participant above all other considerations.
- Accept support for yourself after managing a crisis situation, recognising the emotional impact of such experiences.

Context and purpose

Mental health crises can occur in any setting and among any group of people. For newly arrived migrants and refugees, the risk of experiencing acute mental health distress is heightened by the cumulative stresses of displacement, trauma, uncertainty and isolation. This does not mean that every participant in the peer network is at risk of crisis. It means that you, as an advisor, should be prepared for the possibility and should know how to respond if it arises.

Your role in a crisis is not to resolve it. It is to be present, to keep the person safe, to communicate clearly and to connect them with the appropriate professional support as quickly as possible. This chapter outlines how to do that.

Key concepts

Key concept	Definition and application
Mental health crisis	A mental health crisis is a situation in which a person's emotional or psychological state is so severe that they are at risk of harm to themselves or others, or in which they are unable to function or care for themselves. It requires immediate attention and, in many cases, professional intervention.
Suicidal ideation	Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts about ending one's own life. These thoughts can range from passing and non-specific to active and detailed. Any expression of suicidal thoughts should be taken seriously and responded to with care and appropriate action.
Immediate versus urgent risk	Immediate risk describes a situation in which someone is in danger right now and emergency services must be contacted without delay. Urgent risk describes a situation in which someone is at risk in the near term and requires a same-day referral to professional mental health services.
The advisor's role in a crisis	Your role in a crisis is to remain calm, stay with the person if it is safe to do so, listen without minimising what they are sharing and take the appropriate steps as outlined in the emergency protocol. You are not responsible for resolving the crisis, but you are responsible for responding to it.

Debriefing after a crisis

Managing a crisis situation can be emotionally demanding, even for an experienced advisor. After a crisis, it is important to speak with your project coordinator or adult educator about what happened. This is not a sign of weakness. It is a necessary part of taking care of yourself so that you can continue to support others.

Recognising the signs of a crisis

Recognising a crisis early allows you to respond before a situation becomes more serious. The following signs may indicate that a participant is experiencing or approaching a crisis:

- Direct or indirect statements about wanting to die or not wanting to be alive.
- Talk of feeling trapped, hopeless or like a burden to others.
- Expressions of unbearable pain or suffering, either emotional or physical.
- Sudden withdrawal from the group or from conversations after a period of relative openness.
- Unusual agitation, distress or disorientation.
- Reckless or self-destructive behaviour.
- Saying goodbye in a manner that feels final or unusual.

If you notice any of these signs, do not ignore them. You do not need to be certain that a crisis is occurring in order to respond. It is always appropriate to check in with a person directly if you are concerned.

The Pharos emergency protocol

The following steps should be followed when a participant presents in crisis or when you are concerned that a participant may be at risk of harm. These steps are presented in order of priority.

Step 1: Stay calm and stay present

Your presence and composure are the most important resources you have in a crisis. Breathe, lower your voice and give the person your full attention. Avoid showing panic, even if you feel it. Reassure the person that you are not leaving and that you are there to help.

Step 2: Listen and ask directly

If you are concerned that someone may be thinking about harming themselves, ask directly. Research consistently shows that asking about suicidal thoughts does not increase risk. It can actually reduce it by offering the person an opportunity to speak. You might say: 'I am worried about you. Are you having thoughts of hurting yourself?' Listen to the response without judgement or alarm.

Step 3: Assess the level of risk

Based on what the person tells you, assess whether the risk is immediate or urgent. If the person describes a specific plan to harm themselves and has the means to carry it out, this is immediate risk. Call the emergency services without delay. If the person expresses suicidal thoughts without an immediate plan, this is urgent risk. The person should not be left alone and a same-day referral to a crisis mental health service should be made.

Step 4: Contact emergency services or crisis support

In situations of immediate risk, call the emergency services in your country. Stay on the line and provide the operator with a clear description of the situation, including the person's location and the nature of the concern. Do not leave the person alone while waiting for help to arrive. In situations of urgent risk, contact the mental health crisis line or emergency service recommended by your Pharos project coordinator and seek guidance on next steps.

Step 5: Inform your project coordinator

As soon as it is safe and appropriate to do so, inform your Pharos project coordinator or adult educator about what has occurred. You should not manage a crisis response alone. Your coordinator will be able to provide guidance on follow-up steps, documentation requirements and support for both the participant and for you.

Step 6: Care for yourself

After managing a crisis situation, it is important to take care of your own wellbeing. Speak with your coordinator, a trusted colleague or a professional support person about what happened and how you are feeling. Do not continue facilitating sessions on the same day as a serious crisis response. Give yourself time to decompress and recover.

Case vignette: Responding to a crisis

During a one-to-one meeting, a participant named Selin becomes increasingly distressed and tells the advisor that she has been thinking that everyone would be better off without her. The advisor takes a breath, maintains calm eye contact and says quietly: 'Thank you for telling me that. That is a very important thing to share. I want to make sure you are safe. Are you thinking about hurting yourself?' Selin says yes. The advisor stays with Selin, calls their project coordinator and, together, they contact the emergency mental health crisis line. The coordinator arrives shortly afterwards and accompanies Selin to the appropriate service. The advisor speaks with the coordinator later that day and is advised to take the rest of the week off.

What not to do in a crisis

The following should be avoided in a crisis situation:

- Do not leave the person alone if there is immediate or urgent risk.

- Do not promise confidentiality in a situation involving risk to life. Safety overrides confidentiality.
- Do not attempt to manage a serious crisis without involving professional or emergency support.
- Do not minimise or dismiss what the person is sharing, even if it feels alarming.
- Do not blame yourself for not having prevented the crisis. You are not responsible for the experiences that led to this moment.

Knowing your local emergency contacts

Before you begin facilitating peer support sessions, compile a list of the emergency services and crisis support lines available to migrants and refugees in your country. This list should be kept accessible at all times during sessions. Your Pharos project coordinator will help you to identify the most appropriate resources for your area. The list should include the national emergency number, a mental health crisis line, a service that provides support in the languages of your community and any local services that specialise in trauma support for migrants and refugees.

Ethical considerations

In a crisis, the safety of the participant takes precedence over all other considerations, including confidentiality. This is one of the clearest ethical principles in peer support practice. While confidentiality is a cornerstone of peer support, it is not absolute. When someone's life is at risk, you have both a moral and a practical responsibility to involve the services that can keep them safe. Being honest with participants about this from the beginning of the peer relationship, by including it in your ground rules, ensures that this boundary is understood before a crisis arises.

Summary

Crisis situations are among the most challenging experiences a lay mental health advisor will face. They require calmness, clarity and the willingness to act quickly and decisively. By recognising the signs of a crisis, following the Pharos emergency protocol and knowing when to contact professional and emergency services, advisors can ensure that even in the most difficult moments, participants are met with care and supported towards safety. This chapter has provided you with the knowledge, the steps and the language to navigate these situations. You are not expected to resolve crises alone. You are expected to respond with presence, to act without delay and to seek support for both the participant and for yourself.

Templates for Chapter 6

Template 1: Emergency contacts card

Purpose: To be completed by advisors before beginning peer support sessions and kept accessible during all sessions.

Service	Contact details
National emergency number	
Mental health crisis line	
Pharos project coordinator	
Adult educator / project support	
Local crisis service (if applicable)	
Interpreter / language support service	

Template 2: Post-crisis debrief guide

Purpose: To support advisors in reflecting after a crisis situation. To be completed with the project coordinator.

- What happened during the session? Describe the situation briefly without identifying the participant by name.
- What steps did I take and in what order?
- What went well in my response?
- Is there anything I would do differently in a similar situation?
- How am I feeling now? Do I need additional support?
- What follow-up actions need to be taken for the participant?

Template 3: What to say when asking about suicidal thoughts

Suggested language for checking in directly about safety

Purpose: To support advisors in asking about suicidal thoughts in a calm, clear and non-stigmatising way.

I have noticed that you seem to be carrying something very heavy today, and I want to make sure I understand what you are going through.

Sometimes when people are experiencing a lot of pain or hopelessness, they have thoughts about not wanting to be here anymore. I want to ask you directly: are you having thoughts like that?

[Listen to the response without interrupting.]

Thank you for telling me. That is a very important thing to share, and I am glad you told me. I am not going to leave you, and I am going to make sure you get the right support.

Conclusion

Peer support works because of something that cannot be trained into a person or written into a curriculum. It works because of the quality of attention one human being is willing to offer another. Everything in this Guidebook, the frameworks, the protocols, the scripts and the reflection questions, exists to support that quality of attention, not to replace it.

What makes peer support distinctive, and what makes the Pharos approach worth investing in, is the recognition that the people best placed to support newly arrived migrants and refugees are often those who have themselves made that journey. Shared experience creates a form of credibility that no professional qualification can replicate. It is not that qualifications do not matter; the training you have completed matters enormously. It is that the trust a newly arrived person places in someone who has lived something similar is a different kind of trust, and it opens different doors. The peer support network is built on that trust, and maintaining it is the most important responsibility you carry.

Mental health remains a topic that carries stigma in many communities, and among migrant and refugee populations that stigma can be compounded by cultural factors, by fear of how disclosing a mental health concern might be perceived, and by a justified wariness of systems and institutions that have not always treated them fairly. The peer network does not solve these barriers by addressing them head on. It dissolves them through repeated encounters in a space that feels safe, through conversations that are never clinical, through the gradual realisation that speaking about how you are feeling is not a sign of weakness but a sign of trust.

The Pharos project has brought together organisations and individuals across six (6) European countries who share a commitment to this approach. That transnational connection is itself a form of peer support, and you are encouraged to make full use of it. The challenges you encounter in your community are rarely unique to it. The questions you carry after a difficult session are likely questions that another advisor somewhere else is also sitting with. The peer support networks established through Pharos will outlast the formal duration of this project. The relationships built within them, the small moments of recognition between people who thought they were alone in their experience, the first time someone who has never spoken about their mental health finds words for it in a room full of people who understand, these are the outcomes that matter most.

Take care of yourself throughout this work. You cannot offer a steady presence to others if you are not supported yourself. Notice when the work is becoming heavy, and do not wait until you are depleted to seek support. The same care and honesty you bring to the people in your network, you also owe to yourself. Always remember:

The Pharos project was named for a lighthouse. But a lighthouse is only useful if someone is out on the water and needs it. The people who come to your peer network are out on that water. You are not there to rescue them. You are there to make sure they can see the shore.

*This Guidebook was developed as part of the Pharos project
Mental Health Support for Migrants and Refugees: A Lay Mental Health Advisor
Approach*

Erasmus+ KA220-ADU | 2024–2026



PHAROS

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