

Peer support groups for NZSTI interpreters

NZSTI is setting up peer support groups for full member and affiliate interpreters in response to the needs expressed by members who frequently deal with distressing situations in their interactions with clients. This initiative is supported by Dr Di Nash, the president of the Balint Society of Australia and New Zealand who is an experienced facilitator and peer support group trainer for medical professionals.

The following information is based on the presentation given by Dr Nash at the 2021 NZSTI Conference. It aims to provide NZSTI members with an introduction of the concept of peer support groups, its guiding principles and ground rules, as well as some practical considerations around forming and running such groups.

What is a peer support group?

A peer support group is a group of people who gather to share and reflect upon common problems and experiences associated with a particular problem or personal circumstance.

The NZSTI peer support group initiative is based on the Balint group method. This method evolved after the Second World War as a form of peer support for doctors, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and other health professionals who were reporting an urgent need for help and support in dealing with extreme situations in their professional life.

Peer support groups primarily provide a safe space for colleagues to discuss difficult cases and workplace problems. Problems with colleagues and with the organisations and systems which interpreters encounter can also be discussed in a peer support group.

In a peer support group, people are able to talk with colleagues who have shared experiences and who truly understand what they're going through. Because of this, they can share the type of practical insights that can only come from first-hand experience.

Peer support groups which meet regularly offer proven value to professionals in terms of support and collegiality. **Research over the years shows that peer support groups can help in preventing burnout and compassion fatigue across a range of professions.**

How can peer support groups work for NZSTI?

The peer support group format is eminently suited to interpreters, who are intermediaries in conversations in two or more languages during medical consultations, legal consultations, court appearances, Ministry of Social Development interviews, and employment disputes, for example. The client's interactions with these services can be fraught, and the problems are compounded by the difficulties of people for whom English is not their first language, by intercultural factors, and by the lack of knowledge of many service providers of any language except English.

Some of the characteristics of NZSTI interpreter peer support groups include:

- They are available for full members and affiliates of NZSTI, and will function as part of professional development.
- They are made up of **peers** – interpreters who are directly involved in the same work.
- They have a volunteer coordinator or facilitator, who administers the group and who may also have or may undertake training in group facilitation.
- They are fairly small in size, to better allow everyone a chance to talk.
- Attendance is voluntary, although regular attendance is vital for these groups to function successfully.

Setting up groups under the auspices of NZSTI

There are a number of benefits to setting up peer support groups under the auspices of a larger organization such as the NZSTI.

- A larger organization can offer resources and assistance in setting up peer support groups and the name recognition that comes with affiliating with a well-respected professional organisation gives a group more credibility.
- Working with a larger organisation means you don't have to "reinvent the wheel" in deciding how the group will operate – there will be the advantage of a tried and true model, and an established way of running the group could be available and helpful.
- Training may be developed by NZSTI for facilitators or group leaders.
- There can be a more academic component, if groups want that, where recommended reading and updating of knowledge can be an agreed feature of the group.

Recruitment of members and the formation of the group

Having presented the concept in some detail at the 2021 NZSTI conference, we are now ready to launch the initiative to the membership. Help us get the word out by talking to your colleagues. This informal method of recruiting is often the most effective.

NZSTI is currently developing procedures for forming the groups. Some groups could be face-to-face, some may be online, and some may use a hybrid model.

Groups can also form spontaneously, with membership drawn from colleagues who know each other. Some people may be already working together and are welcome to form a group under the auspices of NZSTI.

What about the size of groups?

Generally, a group should be large enough to function well even when some of the members are absent, but small enough for all the members to feel comfortable.

- Face-to-face groups: as a rule, 5 to 15 people is a good number; anything larger too easily becomes unmanageable and impersonal.
- Online groups: experience suggests 6 to 8 members is more manageable.

Group meetings

At the first meeting, the group members decide the day and time of their meetings, and discuss the rules for the group. Group members become colleagues with whom you can vent and empathise, as well as a source of encouragement and motivation.

Parameters for each group to decide

- Consider whether the group will meet for a specific period of time or indefinitely.
- Set a time and place for the group to meet. Usually, early evenings on weekdays are the best times for the most people.

When meeting in person

Picking a good location is important.

If a member works with an organisation that has meeting space of its own, the group might want to have its peer support group meet there, but don't automatically assume that this is the best space for it. First and foremost, the location should be easily accessible for the people who will be coming to the support group.

Questions to consider include:

- Is the building in an easy place to find?
- Is it accessible to any members who are disabled?
- Is the location easily accessible by public transport and is there adequate parking nearby?

The location should also be somewhere where people can feel comfortable enough to talk about their problems and able to offer each other support.

Meeting in a member's home can add an element of comfort, but groups are much more accessible to newcomers if held in neutral places; therefore, meeting in somebody's home should probably only be done if it's a closed and established group. Some closed groups rotate their meetings through members' homes on a formal or informal roster.

The functions of the group coordinator or facilitator

The group leader or facilitator opens and closes the meetings, sets the tone for the discussion, may help members learn how to listen and offer support to each other, and may deal with any problems that come up during the meeting. Group leaders may undertake training in facilitation and leading of groups. It is helpful for members of the group to be

reminded of the meeting a few days before it takes place. The coordinator or a group member can do this.

The group may select a leader at its first meeting. NZSTI envisages that all group leaders are fully trained interpreters, i.e. full members of NZSTI.

Group leadership may rotate through the membership, or may be for a fixed period of time, after which another member may be appointed by the group.

For the guidance of the group, the ideal leader/facilitator will possess the following qualities:

- **Flexible schedule:** They should have enough time to perform the required tasks and commit to be there for every meeting.
- **Lots of energy:** They should have a positive attitude, be in generally good health, and be able to work after hours if necessary.
- **Ability:** Ideally, they should have experience in facilitating such groups, or be willing to have some training in group facilitation. They should also be responsible, articulate, fair, organized, and able to work well with others.
- **Support:** A group facilitator needs to have access to needed resources to run the group (a phone, a car, etc.), and people they can rely on for assistance, if necessary.
- **The desire to do the job:** They should have a commitment to helping other colleagues.

Ground rules

The group members contract with the coordinator/facilitator and with each other to abide by the following rules or customs. The facilitator should make sure everyone understands them.

- **Confidentiality** is key and is the most important of the ground rules or group customs of any peer support group. Absolute confidentiality generates safety and trust. Everything discussed in the group must be kept confidential, and should not be referred to, or discussed anywhere else.
- **No interruptions.** Respect for the person speaking without any interrupting is important.
- **Avoid distractions.** Another type of interruption has been more common in the last year in online groups. Partners, children, dogs and cats have a way of intruding when participating in an online group from home. It is important to secure a secluded safe space for participation in your online support group (for example your bedroom).
- **Giving advice is not the answer.** Group members should take care with respect to problem solving or case management advice. Group members may just need to be heard and understood by colleagues.
- **Telling people what to do is not the purpose or responsibility of a peer support group.** It takes away a person's feeling that they can handle their own problems, and it can make people feel attacked and uncomfortable.

- **Members may talk about what's worked well for them in similar situations.** The person with a problem may also talk about what they think might work. The leader/facilitator may remind the group of this from time to time as it is very important.
- **No criticism.** There shall be no criticism of other group members or their work.
- **Taking turns and respect.** Group members are to take turns to speak and to be respectful of each other. No one should dominate the discussion.
- **Do not bring personal problems to the group.** A peer support group is not a therapy group.

Group discussions

The discussion can be free flowing, or the leader/facilitator may ask if anyone wants to discuss a case or talk about a work problem. It may be useful for the leader to get a sense of who wants to speak in a session, so that they can help to fit in everyone who needs to talk if possible. The leader may gently steer the discussion, especially if trained in facilitation.

The structure of the group sessions will evolve – the group will usually become bonded and trusting with time. Some professional peer support groups in New Zealand have been running for more than twenty years.

For the group to work and to last, members need to feel safe, and to feel that their difficulties will be treated with care and respect by the group. Support consists of making statements that show understanding, sympathy, empathy and concern.

While solving problems shouldn't be the only goal of a peer support group, it is something that many members hope for and expect. All members should take part in any problem-solving process that arises, so that no single person is seen as offering the solution to a member's difficulties.

Sometimes members may offer to assist each other in other ways. For example, if the problem being discussed is a member's problems with transportation to the meetings, other members might offer to give that person a ride.

Finally peer support groups can help members realize they are not alone, and that others empathize with what they're going through.

FAQs

How often should the group meet?

Peer support groups can meet weekly or fortnightly. However, a peer support group should meet at least once a month.

How long should meetings last?

Most peer support groups meet for between one and two hours.

Will NZSTI help subsidise group expenses if any are incurred in running the group?

Groups can apply to NZSTI for some help with expenses, for example, if the group meets in a rented venue. The cost of support for and training of facilitators will be carried by NZSTI.

Should refreshments be served?

Refreshments help make everyone feel at home and encourage socialising among members; it's a good idea to have refreshments if the group is meeting in person. People can take turns providing refreshments.

Interested in finding out more?

You can log into your NZSTI account and watch [Dr Nash's presentation](#) on peer support groups at the 2021 NZSTI Conference. To see if you may benefit from joining a peer support group, download and complete [the self-assessment form](#). If you wish to register your interest in joining a support group, please [complete this online form](#).

This summary is based on Dr Nash's own experience and on the Creative Commons Community Tool Box, a service of the [Center for Community Health and Development](#) at the [University of Kansas](#).

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