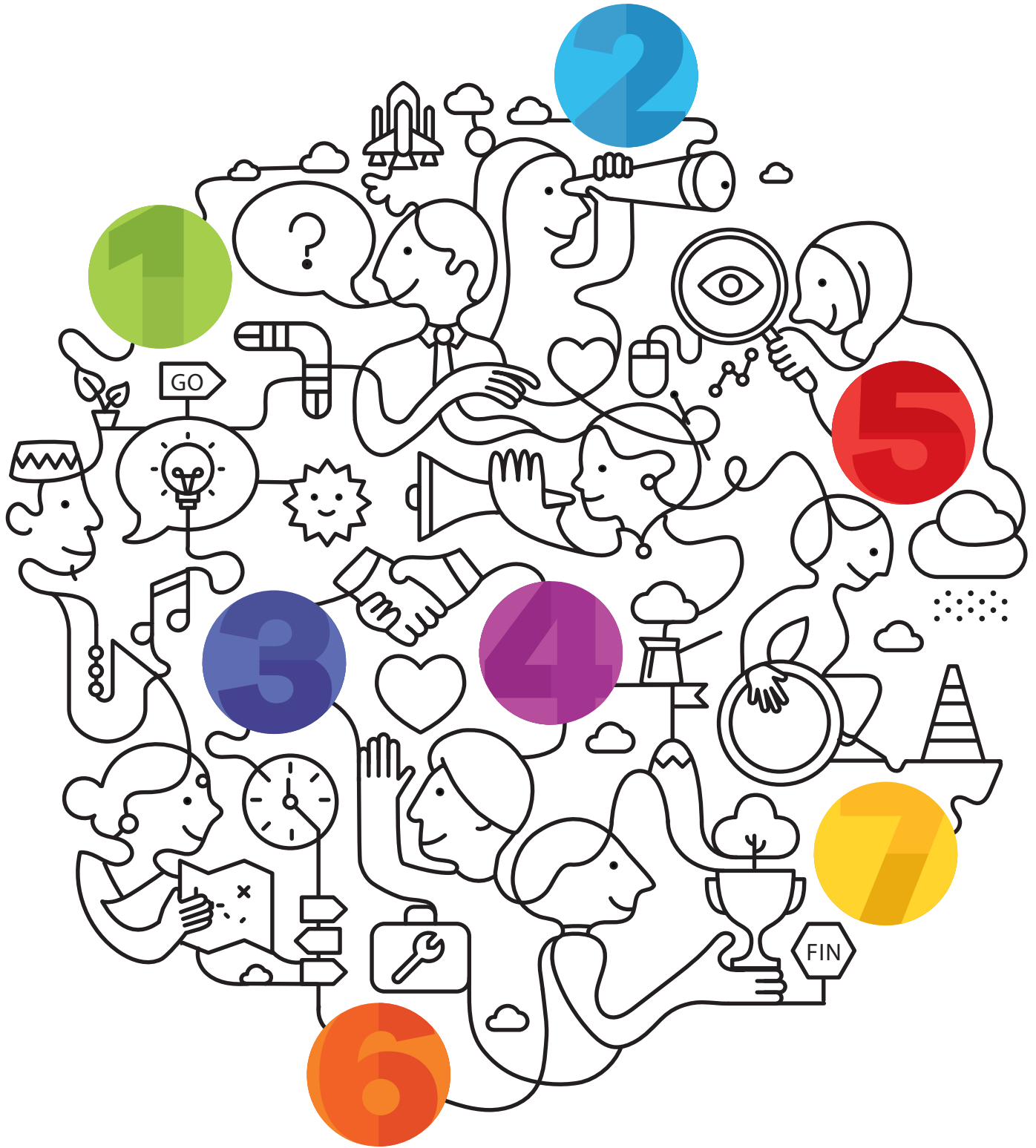


# STRONG PEER NETWORKS

Connecting the Beads Together



# **STRONG PEER NETWORKS**

*Connecting the Beads Together*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

**This workbook has been co-produced in collaboration with a group of people passionate about peer networks and the benefits they bring.**

In particular we acknowledge the contribution of the co-design group members:

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This work book complements and sits alongside existing online resources on the Peer Connect website [www.peerconnect.org.au](http://www.peerconnect.org.au).

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PeerConnect respectfully acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands and waters of Australia. We are committed to inclusive communities.

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# WELCOME



**Welcome to this workbook. It has been created by people running peer networks or organisations around Australia.**

This workbook has been designed for:

1. People who are interested in setting up a peer network
2. People already involved in peer networks, looking for ways to keep their peer network strong

By drawing on the experiences of peer networks and the people involved, this workbook will take you through a range of ideas about how to get your network started, how to refresh your network when it hits a low point, and how to finish peer networks well.

It is not a recipe book; it is a guide to help you get started, and to help you think through how your network is going and what you can do.

**To help you find your way around, the workbook is organised into seven parts:**

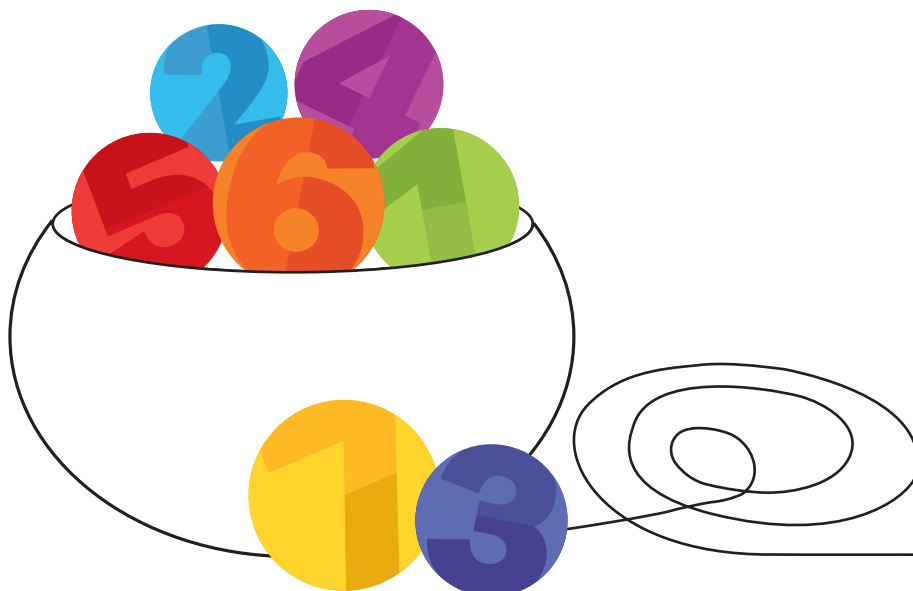
1. Starting a peer network
2. Checking your peer network's purpose
3. Bringing new energy to the network
4. Inviting new members to join
5. Responding to tricky situations
6. Surviving unexpected changes
7. Finishing the peer network well

# STRINGING THE BEADS TOGETHER

**The Peer Connect website currently has lots of QuickGuides on setting up and running peer networks. These are stored as a browsable library resource. The challenge is that these QuickGuides are like the beads sitting in a bowl – you have to rummage through the bowl to find the one you want!**

This workbook arranges these beads into a string, making it easier to move from one to the next. As you read through you might think: 'Ah yes, that's where we're at' and get some ideas to move through it, so that the peer network is strong.

Each bead represents an aspect of peer networks you might want to work on. You can either work on all of them, one at a time starting from the beginning, or you can go straight to the bead that makes most sense to your situation.





# STARTING A PEER NETWORK

## What is a peer network?

**Peer networks are where people with a common interest meet up to make something good happen. They are not segregated day programs or special groups. And they support, and do not replace, a person's roles and relationships in other parts of their life.**

Peer networks come in all shapes and sizes. A peer network might be a group that meets regularly at a community centre. It might be a facebook group – sharing information and providing online support. It might be three people catching up regularly over coffee and cake to talk about things.

It doesn't matter what your peer network looks like - what matters is that the peer network is clear about how it is helping its members. This might be by assisting people to get new connections, and to learn from each other so that each member is better able to deal with issues or goals they have.

Evidence shows that people who are members of peer support networks gain friendships, information, increased confidence, social connections and leadership skills. Peers say that one of the best things about peer support is that people with similar experiences help each other and provide each other with support.

Peer networks can also help people to have a shared voice about common concerns. Peer networks can influence disability services and systems (such as the NDIS). Peer networks can also influence mainstream services like health and education, and help local communities be more welcoming and accessible.

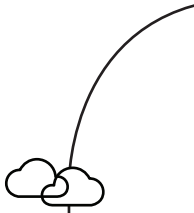
## What is the purpose of your new peer network?

**Peer networks work better when the network has a clear purpose. It also makes it easier to attract new members. People are more likely to come if they know the network is working on things they care about.**

This doesn't mean you have to write up a big document. Just think through what you want the peer network to do.

Here are some examples of reasons why different peer networks might start:

- To talk about how to make something better, like making schools more inclusive, or buses more accessible, etc.
- To learn about new things, like learning about rights, decision-making, self-advocacy, or the NDIS, etc.
- To make new connections, like meeting people with similar experiences and learning from each other.





## Where can you get help with resources and save money?

**Depending on the situation, peer networks might need some resources to help them.**

Most peer networks will need help with some things like a meeting venue, transport, refreshments, sending out reminders, and so on.

Some of these resources might come from your peer network's own members. You could even share the jobs so everyone is involved. This might include ride-sharing, a 'tea-and-biscuits' roster, and a host roster where members are using each other's houses to meet.

But sometimes the peer network may need other help. Most Australian communities have resources available to local people, like council-run community centres, meeting rooms at local clubs, or free wifi at local cafes.

Take a moment to think about what types of resources your new peer network might need, and how you can find those resources.

Have a look at the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: How to make sure the first meeting is a success:***

<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/how-make-sure-first-meeting-success/>

Also, here's a link to something called ***The Art of Asking***, which could help you think about how to approach people for help:

[www.family-advocacy.com/resources/the-art-of-asking/](http://www.family-advocacy.com/resources/the-art-of-asking/)



Go to the link wherever you see this symbol

## How do you invite people to your first peer network meeting?

**First, you need to think about the ways you can tell people about the meeting, like:**

- a notice on your local shopping mall notice board
- a social media post
- word-of-mouth: telling your friends to tell their friends, who tell their friends, and so on
- a community advert in the local free paper.

There will be other ways too. Think about the ways that best fit your network. For example, if your new network is about health and wellbeing, you might ask your local GP practices to put the invitation in their waiting room.

You could try making an invitation that just talks about what will happen at the first meeting. Remember that people may not know much about peer networks and may not know you. They might be unsure about committing to meeting regularly with someone they don't know.

Think about the difference between these two sample invitations:

#### INVITATION TO JOIN A PEER NETWORK

*We are setting up a peer network to talk about the problems for people living with disability finding proper work. We are going to meet on the first Monday night every month. The first meeting is 7pm next Monday at the community centre in the high street.*

*We hope you can be a regular; we can all help each other.*

#### TELL US WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT FINDING PROPER WORK WHEN YOU HAVE A DISABILITY

*We think people living with disability should have a fair go at getting proper paid work. If this is something you agree with, we'd love to talk with you. We are having a meeting at 7pm next Monday at the community centre in the high street.*

*Let's talk about what could be better; we'll all learn something and we might be able to make something happen.*

In the first invitation, people are asked to make a regular commitment. In the second type of invitation, people are invited to have their say about an issue. They are not being asked to commit beyond one meeting.

The first invitation may get fewer people, but those who are there will be your peer network because they are ready to meet regularly.

The second invitation might get more people to your first meeting, but many may not be ready to commit to a regular meeting.

You are in the best position to decide which type of invitation is best suited to your situation. Whichever way you go, don't be discouraged if you don't get many people coming to the peer network. Sometimes, this can take time, so stay with it. Also, even a small network of 2-3 people can do good things.

## How do you make the first meeting a success?

**However you invite people to your new peer network, it is important the first meeting is a success. You might think about success in these ways:**

- everyone in the room was welcomed
- everyone in the room had the chance to have their say and to be respected
- everyone in the room felt like they learnt something
- everyone in the room got the chance to meet someone new
- the conversation finished in a way that led to people want to come back for more
- Set up agreed meeting rules for the group.

See the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: How to make sure the first meeting is a success:***

<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/how-make-sure-first-meeting-success/>







A great meeting happens when people join a conversation about something really important to them. It may be to hear a guest speaker, to hear from others about their views and experiences or to voice their concerns about an issue that impacts on them.

The Peer Connect website has a section called 'Stuff Peer Networks talk about' and it might be one of these topics that forms the first topic for a meeting and ignites the passion for a peer network. The topics include things like rights, employment, education, transport, supported decision making, and self-advocacy. You can find them here:

[www.peerconnect.org.au/stuff-peer-networks-talk-about/life-issues/](http://www.peerconnect.org.au/stuff-peer-networks-talk-about/life-issues/)



Your peer network may have other topics and you can write a Quick Guide or make a video on that topic to go on the website. Just go to the Peer Connect contact page and tell us.

As the network gains momentum, the network can encourage members to take turns at doing the different jobs, such as sending out the reminders, lining up the guest speaker, making sure the venue is available, bringing the biscuits, and so on. This helps all members share ownership of the peer network. This strengthens the network stronger and helps it last longer.

## Case study – Julia Farr Youth peer network

A South Australian peer network called Julia Farr Youth (JFY) started like this. There was a word-of-mouth invitation that there was going to be a meeting about issues for young people living with disability. A small number of young people living with disability showed up at the meeting. There was a good conversation, and by the end of the meeting there were still some things people wanted to talk about. So they agreed to meet again to finish the conversation. At the second meeting, the young people there started to talk about how it would be good to hear from other young people living with disability, so they put the word out for people to come to a third meeting. And so on.

The JFY network has now been running for more than ten years, and has created a lot of benefits for its members and for young people living with disability generally. And it started with an invitation to one meeting.

## For more information

The **Department of Human Services – Victoria, Australia Peer Support Guide** explains what peer support is and provides ideas about how to do it.

<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/documents-and-resources/policies,-guidelines-and-legislation/peer-support-guide>



**The Centre of Excellence Peer Support – Mental Health** has great Peer Support resources. See the document about setting up a peer support group here:

<http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-42-49/2014-12-16-02-22-27/Resources/>



## Checklist for starting a peer network

- Think about why you are starting a peer network  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Think what people might get from the network  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Think about how you can get low or no cost resources  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Think about how the group is welcoming and accessible for all  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Think about a venue  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Think about the invitation to the first meeting  
\_\_\_\_\_



**Hopefully, this section has given you some useful ideas about setting up a peer network. We have used the green bead to represent this first stage of a peer network. It is seen as the first connecting thread: the bringing of people together.**

In the next sections we look at some of the highs and lows that a network can go through and how the network might respond to these.



## Reflection

Take a moment to think about setting up a peer network. Why are you starting it up? What do you think your local peer community would want from it? What resources will you need? How will you invite people to come along to the first meeting?

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# YOU HAVE A PEER NETWORK, AND WOULD LIKE TO MAKE IT STRONGER

**Starting a peer network can often result in fantastic energy in the network: people are showing up regularly, they are sharing tasks, they are making good connections with each other, they are learning things.**

Even with these benefits, there can come a time when the peer network loses its momentum. Just like the weather or your favourite sports team, a peer network can go through highs and lows. We hope there are as many highs as possible, but there can also be times when a peer network feels low. It might lose energy, members might drop off and it simply feels like too much hard work, not like fun at all.

When this happens, there are things the peer network can do, to either help the network refresh itself, or to bring the network to a good finish.

This brings us to the next bead in our thread; going back and thinking about why the peer network is there.

*While the experiences might be different there was always a connecting thread. It's always coming back to finding what we have in common.*

**Cath Mahony CDAH**

[www.teamup.org.au/resources/](http://www.teamup.org.au/resources/)





# CHECKING YOUR PEER NETWORK'S PURPOSE

**Losing momentum is a good time to check in on the Why? of the peer network. Your network might have had the “why?” conversation when the network first started, but maybe your network has not asked the question for a while, or maybe there are new people who have not been part of that conversation. Having the “why?” conversation again can help you get clear on your statement of purpose.**

## How to develop a statement of purpose

**A statement of purpose is one or two lines that describe your group. It says what good things people can expect if they come along to the peer network. This is important if the group wants to attract new members. So the statement should really highlight something that peers can relate to, enjoy and benefit from.**

### Start with your own thinking

Why was the network established in the first place?

What value does it currently bring to the peers?

Could the network offer something else, something new or different to peers who are already coming or to new peers?

### Talk with the peers in the network and peers in your community

Start by asking some of these questions:

- “Why do we have this peer network?” “What are WE all about?”
- “Why are we here?” (What’s our purpose?)
- “What do we value as a group?” (What’s important to us?)
- “What do we offer each other?” (How can we best help each other?)

For peers who are not part of the network ask them why, and what would make them want to come? Ask them for their ideas for a peer network. You could open a Facebook chat page for people not comfortable talking in groups or run a poll on Instagram to ask people what they think about a network.

### Talk with people around your community

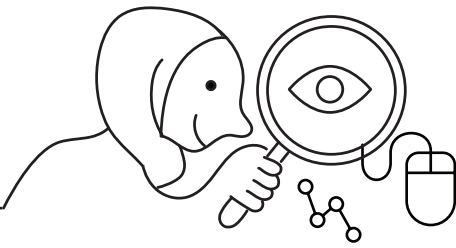
Community organisations, community development officers, community groups, and any others you can think of.

### Think about gaps

What is missing for your peers in your community?

What can the peer network do about that gap?

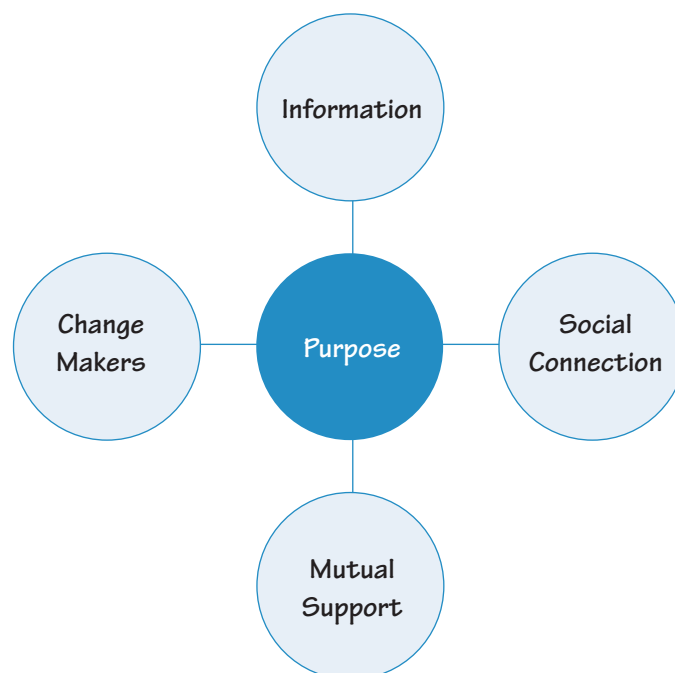




### Be open to ideas and really listen to what people want

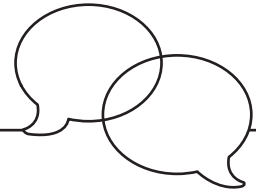
When you have gathered all your information, sit down with the peers in the group and look it over and see if there are things that keep coming up – what is MOST wanted from a peer network in your community?

You could use a drawing, or sticky notes, or coasters, to brainstorm these ideas. It might be a concept map such as this:



<https://getting-it-together.moadoph.gov.au/images/graphic-organisers/pdf/concept-map.pdf>

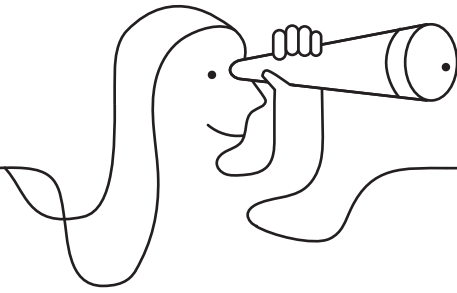
Maybe there are several answers to this and perhaps your network is offering lots of good things, not just one.



Some ideas for the why and what networks can do together are outlined below:

WHY	A PEER NETWORK MIGHT OFFER
<p><b>Share information with my peers</b></p>	<p>Time to talk with each other                      A facebook page                      Regular peer guest speakers on topics of information                      Go together to events and ask questions</p>
<p><b>Learn together from my peers</b></p>	<p>Network sessions on topics of interests                      Going to a workshop together                      Running a workshop                      Researching information and sharing it online</p>
<p><b>Provide mutual support</b></p>	<p>Have regular meetings                      Share contact details for support in-between meetings                      Have a buddy system                      Develop Peer mentoring opportunities</p>
<p><b>Develop personal connections</b></p>	<p>Have social events and do things together in the community</p>
<p><b>Work together for change</b></p>	<p>Identify a shared passion and organise a campaign around it (eg. making your community more welcoming and accessible)</p>
<p><b>Deal with challenges and plan for improvement</b></p>	<p>A conversation with peers can uncover a whole array of different ways to solve a problem</p>

We have left some space above because your reasons why might be different. And, perhaps people are asking for all of these things – your statement of purpose could be a combination of some or all of these things.



## Some examples of a statement of purpose

**Imagine More** in the ACT promotes its two peer group as:

- Self managing NDIS supports Peer Support Group: Share ideas and learn how to effectively and responsibly manage your NDIS supports without being overcome by exhaustion.
- Circle of Support Peer Support Group is a circle of support is a group of family and friends that gather around a person with a disability to help them achieve their good life goals.



<https://imaginemore.org.au/monthly-peer-support-groups/>

**Disability Elders of All Ages** is a peer group for people living with disability in South Australia. Its purpose is 'to share experiences, tips and ways of managing our lives', and includes a focus on building knowledge and skills in self-managed support.

## Getting your message out

Once everyone is happy with your statement of purpose, you have to get your message out.

A few sentences that clearly and simply state the why and what of the network are really useful. You can pin them up at every network meeting, you can have them upfront on your facebook page, you can have them printed on your fliers. Everyone can practice saying them and then everyone talks the same ways about the network, whether you are inviting new members or you try to get some resources from your local council.

You can read more about this in the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: Developing a value proposition:***



<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/establishment/why-would-you-set-one/>



## Checklist for our statement of purpose

- It's easy to understand  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Every person knows about it  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Every person knows how they will benefit  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Unique to our network  
\_\_\_\_\_



**Hopefully this exercise means that you have checked in on the purpose of the peer network and why it is so important and thought about ways you can tell people about it. The blue bead can be threaded onto the string.**

It could be though that you still find the group is low on energy or that people are not as enthusiastic as they once were. Your peer group may need MORE ENERGY.

## Reflection

Take a moment to think about the peer network you belong to. What purpose does it serve? What keeps members coming back? How do you capture and communicate this to other potential members and the broader community?

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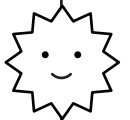


# BRINGING MORE ENERGY TO THE NETWORK

**There can be times when a peer network loses its momentum and energy.**

We have already mentioned the idea of checking your statement of purpose in the blue bead section. Make sure people know about it. This may attract new members, and may also shift existing members' level of commitment. It is important all members are involved in this process. It could be though that you still find the network is low on energy or that people are not as enthusiastic as they once were. Your peer group may need more energy.

As we said before, peer networks have their ups and downs and together we need to make sure that the group has enough energy to make it through the downs. A peer group needs to be nurtured and helped along. Maybe think about the peer network as a flower or plant needing some water and fertiliser.



## Seven ideas to try to get that energy flowing into the network

### 1. Mix up the roles

Talk with existing members in the network about taking on a different role. Or you could establish new roles you never had before in the group. You could have different people do the "Acknowledgement to Country", you could have an official welcomer, someone who greets new people (and 'old' ones). You could have other people facilitate all or some of the meeting.

Mix it up and build and value the different skills and contributions everyone can bring to a peer network.

### 2. Brainstorm and reflect

Invite the peers to reflect on the past and brainstorm new ideas. When was the network full of energy? What has changed? How can we repeat some of the good energy? What does the group want now? What's missing? How can we mix things up? This will inject fresh energy into the group. Offer an opportunity for people to provide independent and private feedback for example through email.

### 3. Change your environment

Think about a new venue, meeting time, or meeting structure. A change like that often brings a change in energy levels. Being out and about brings new ideas, doing things differently lets us see things in a new light.

### 4. Add some new activities

Adding new and interesting activities such as going out for a meal together, having a session where you make posters for the local demo or a banner for your network, learning some songs together, going to a local concert. These ideas may bring a different energy into the group and add novelty and excitement to coming to meetings.



### 5. Invite new guests

Perhaps you can find peers to be speakers and guests from different parts of your community. They can offer new perspectives and ideas e.g. invite an Indigenous speaker to tell some stories of their culture that offer new perspectives, or ask a leader in the community to talk about their leadership story.

### 6. Celebrate

Set aside time in a meeting/s to reflect on the achievements and stories of success in the network, and how these can be captured and celebrated. Plan a celebration that all will enjoy. Ask the local paper to write a story about the network's successes. Make a short video of someone's story and post it on Facebook. Celebrating successes can offer the network a sense of pride and may re-energise your commitment to the network. Or maybe just have a party.

### 7. Seek advice

If you feel a bit like the people in the group can't be motivated you might turn to the network of peer facilitators. Other facilitators can help you and most likely they have similar experiences. Check out the Peer connect website and connect another peer facilitator. Or maybe there are some local facilitators of other groups you know.

## For more information

See the **Peer Connect Quick Guide: Sharing the work around: how to get more members involved:**



<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/maintaining-network/sharing-work-around-how-get-more-network-members-involved/>

The **Community Tool Box**, From Kansas in the US, has significant information on increasing participation and you can read it at this link and in related sections:



<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/increasing-participation-and-membership>

**The Centre of Excellence Peer Support – Mental Health** has great resources about Peer Support. There is information about engaging with volunteers and other stakeholders in the guide available here:



<http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-42-49/2014-12-16-02-22-27/Resources/CEPS-Setting-up-a-Peer-Support-Group/>

## Checklist for re-energising a peer network

- Review the purpose  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Establish new roles  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Seek advice  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Brainstorm  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Change your environment  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Add some new activities  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Invite new guests  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Reflect  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Celebrate  
\_\_\_\_\_



**The indigo bead has now been threaded onto the string along with the green and blue beads.**

It may be that during that time of low energy some members of the peer network decided to leave the group or haven't shown up for a while. This means the peer network could recruit new members to help it become strong again. In the next section we look at what is important when inviting new members to join the network.

## Reflection

*Take a moment to think about how you could re-energise the peer network. Is it simply time to invite a new guest along, show an interesting video, or hold a celebration in a new venue? Why not invite the members of your network in thinking about new ideas to re-energise the network?*

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# INVITING NEW MEMBERS

**Sometimes, peer networks need new members to keep them fresh. This section will help you think about how to invite new members.**

## Before you start inviting new members, think about:

- Why you or others feel that the energy in the network is 'stale'? For example, are people no longer learning and growing, are there conflicts, are people not showing up, are people leaving, is it hard to find times that people will commit to? It may be useful to pay some attention to these issues with the existing network, having an honest conversation about them, to identify and address them - bringing in new members may only be one part of strengthening the network. This is potentially a great learning opportunity for the existing network, and a great way to get everyone in the network happy to invite new members.
- What else needs to happen in the network before bringing in new members? How do the people in the network feel about the energy levels? How will they feel about new people coming in? It is important to make sure everyone has a say before a plan is put in place. Make sure everyone is comfortable with new people coming into the network; and if some people are not, make sure everyone understands the reasons.
- What work has the network done on getting clear on its purpose? What plans for the future does the network have? Does inviting new members change your statement of purpose? Could this be an opportunity for the network to review the purpose?
- How has the network changed since it started? Are the needs, for the individual and for all, different than they were before? How will this change who and how to invite new peers?
- What kinds of experiences are missing from your peer network? Are there peers from your local community who are not connected to your peer network? This might include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or local people from other cultures, or people who are in group services like group homes or day programs. How could your peer network reach these people?



## Going out and inviting new peers

**So, your peer network is clear about its purpose, and wants to bring in new members. It's time to invite more people to join your peer network.**

Have a look at the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: Recruitment: spreading the word about your new network:***



<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/establishment/recruitment-spreading-word/>

This is a good starting point and now you have more some advantages you can build on:

### **Experience**

You will know what worked well last time when you first invited peers along- do more of that! If most people found the network through their service providers, concentrate there. If most people read a story in the paper, get the paper to write another story. Now you can talk about the success of the group. And make sure you get the people in the network to do lots of talking about the group, make sure everyone one knows the 'statement of purpose'. Word of mouth is very powerful and absolutely free. Also don't forget to do the things that maybe weren't the most successful last time, but may attract new people with different experiences bringing new and different perspectives. That's always healthy for a network.

### **Achievement**

Your network will have had some wins, and overcome some challenges. Update and send out any promotional leaflets and cards you use to tell people about your peer network, and do the same if you have a Facebook page or similar. The stories from people who have found the network valuable, are powerful in showing the benefits of the peer network. Don't forget to tell others about them.

### **Connections**

You will have a broader network of connections in your community now - make sure to ask for their support in inviting new members. And it is important they know about your peer network's purpose and successes.





## Welcoming new peers

### **Make sure you pay good attention to welcoming new peers. Some tips include:**

Give them a good induction into the network: Give people all the details they will need - share with them the purpose, guidelines and plans of the group, meeting details, give them access to previous meeting notes. Encourage and answer lots of questions - be open.

Ensure a warm welcome from everyone at the first meeting they attend - perhaps you could consider a 'buddy' system for supporting new members if they want that. Maybe a special 'welcome' meal or morning tea will also help them feel welcome.

Importantly, if you have new members who are Aboriginal, or who come from other cultures and traditions, or who are in group services where they are unused to having these types of conversations, think about what your peer network can do to make these new members feel very welcome and included. This Peer Connect Quick Guide: how to make a peer group welcoming for ATSI members gives some ideas here

<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/establishment/how-make-peer-group-welcoming-atsi-members/>



Follow up - check in with new members in between meetings - be available for them if they have concerns or questions. And also be sure to check in with any existing members who may be struggling with new members coming in.








*“Peer support is this amazing space where you come and get boosted by being with people who understand you and who share a lot of your lived experience but from that space we are then trying to connect with our broader community.”*

**Cath Mahony CDAH**

<https://teamup.org.au/resources>



## Checklist for inviting new members

-  Think about why members are leaving or not showing up  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Re-visit the purpose of the peer network  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Use your previous experiences in to reach out to new members  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Try different ways of inviting new peers  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Promote the group's achievements  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Use your community connections  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Ensure a warm welcome for new members  
\_\_\_\_\_



**Hopefully you will have a heap of new members ready to make the peer network vibrant and energised again. You can add the violet bead to the string of beads. You now have a clearly defined purpose, new energy and new members.**

A strong peer support network will be a network that works well together. Individuals will get along well together and explore different ideas and views in a constructive way. This will make the network most effective for everyone.

People will have different views and ideas. Sometimes people will disagree with each other. Having disagreements is normal. Some group members may act in ways that disrupt group effectiveness, and this can create challenging situations. These members may need more support.

This is where the facilitator role comes into play. The main aim is to foster communication among the group and to model effective interaction that members can emulate. We look at this in the next section: what to do if someone is not quite playing ball!

## Reflection

*Take a moment to think about how you will go about finding new members for your peer network. What has worked in the past? What new things could you try? How will your peer network welcome new members?*

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# RESPONDING TO TRICKY SITUATIONS

## **A great peer support network is one that works well together.**

Members get along well together and explore different ideas and views in a constructive way. People will have different views and ideas and sometimes people will disagree with each other. Having disagreements is normal. Healthy disagreements and different points of view will make the network most effective for everyone.

But sometimes the disagreements are not healthy and sometimes people act in ways that disrupt the network and what it aims to achieve. This can create tricky situations.

## **What kind of tricky situations are we talking about?**

**The Community Toolbox identifies a number of behaviours that can be disruptive to the network. These include:**

- Often being late to meetings
- Talking too much, taking up more than a fair share of the time
- Dismissing every idea that other network members bring
- Often bringing problems to the network that are bigger than the network can handle.
- Often Interrupting others, changing to inappropriate or irrelevant subjects
- Bringing in topics or problems that have nothing to do with the purpose of the network.
- Using language that is outdated or offensive.

When this happens, it is important the other members have their views heard, and in a way that re-establishes the focus of the meeting and the purpose of the group.

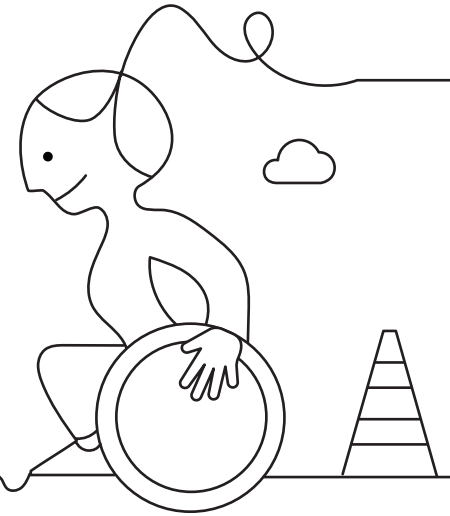
Often, this means that the person who is running the meeting needs to help this to happen.

By 'running' the meeting, we don't mean that the person is the boss. They might be the meeting's chairperson or facilitator (where their role is to help make sure the meeting stays on track and is a success). Depending on what a peer network prefers, the facilitator role might be shared amongst all members, or it might be done by just a few members within the network, or the same person each time.

It is in difficult situations that the facilitator role becomes really important.

The main role of any facilitator is to make sure there is good communication between the members, in support of the meeting's goals.

Before a difficult situation emerges, a facilitator should know that they can help improve communication in the peer network by simply being a clear and respectful communicator and listener themselves, so that all members can see those behaviours and copy them.



You can also refer to the peer network's rules that may have been set up at the beginning of the network, or take the time now to establish some.

Have a look at the **Peer Connect Quick Guide: Agreeing a set of rules for how people behave at a meeting:**

<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/first-meeting/agreeing-set-rules-how-people-behave-peer-meeting/>



## Assertive Caring

**One strategy all good facilitators should practise is something called 'assertive caring'.**

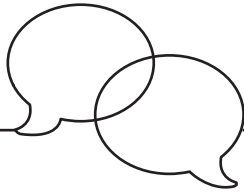
Being assertive doesn't mean being aggressive or impolite, but it means that when you recognise something isn't right you speak up and do something about it. Assertive individuals are able to get their point across without upsetting others, or becoming upset themselves.

Chris Hampton on the Community Tool box website states that:

*In dealing with difficult group members, support group facilitators must learn a delicate combination of control mixed with kindness. This sort of assertive caring directly addresses problems with the group without insulting or offending members. You may use assertive caring during a meeting to get the discussion back on track, or you may wish to speak to the member in private after the meeting.*

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main>





## Things to say

**Here are some examples of what assertive language looks like.**

The *Psychology Today* blog gives some examples of assertive phrases. These are words that you can memorize and resort to when the occasion arises. You can pick the ones that feel most natural to you. Examples include ‘thanks but’ phrases:

*“Thank you for sharing, but I’d like to hear from other people in the group.”*

Another idea is to use brief “I” statements—a sharing of your thoughts, feelings, wants, or opinions:

*“I appreciated you arriving on time today.”*

*“I would like you to respect my point of view.”*

*“I feel offended by your remark.”*

Offering to help come up with a solution also lets the other person know that you care:

*“Unfortunately we don’t have time to discuss that today.*

*Can I help link you to someone who might be able to help you with that issue?”*



<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/changepower/201210/speak-18-all-purpose-assertive-phrases>

## Things to do

**With a mindset of caring assertively for any member of a network that might have caused some tricky situations, the Community Toolbox website and other resources suggest these ways to approach the situation:**

### **Speak to the individual in private**

If you consider that one member's way of doing things is impacting on the effectiveness of the peer network, it is a good idea to say something early on. Do this in private and suggest ways and possibilities to make positive changes. You could send out a reminder of the conversation to the member by email.

### **Respect the member's position or dilemma**

State that you understand the reason(s) behind the member's negative behaviour. Use "I" or "we" statements, which show how his behaviour affects you and the whole network

### **Set limits**

Gently but firmly correct the behaviour. Explain your reasons; letting the member know why the situation needs to change and what can be done to change the situation. It may be helpful to refer to the group rules (See Quick Guide: How rules can help your peer network).

### **Suggest an alternative**

Explain what you'd like to see the member do instead of the negative behaviour

### **Get the member's agreement on the alternative**

Make sure the member understands what is being asked of him/her and agrees to do it.

### **Give the member the opportunity to be heard**

If a member is constantly interrupting, let the member know that they will have an opportunity to be heard and refer to the agreed meeting rules. Make sure you then return to the member later in the discussion and honour your agreement.

*"Peer groups provide an independent space for people to voice their concerns and share ideas with others in similar situations, which can support safety and confidence in speaking up."*

**Rhianwen Beresford, CoMHWA**

<http://www.comhwa.org.au/>



## For more information

See the **Peer Connect Quick Guide: Managing Conflict in the Group:**

- <https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/maintaining-network/managing-conflict-group/>

This guide by **Cancer Australia** for Cancer Support groups provides a summary of competencies for effective facilitators (page 3):

- <http://www.healthissuescentre.org.au/images/uploads/resources/A-guide-for-peer-facilitators.pdf>

The **Community Tool Box** website has great tips on running a peer network conversation and addressing conflict:

- <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main>

**About Leaders** is a general website about good leadership that has an article on conflict resolution:







- <https://aboutleaders.com/5-keys-to-conflict-resolution/#gs.69VXa0Y>

The **Better Believe It** blog gives some assertive communication examples:

- <https://betterbelieveit.net/9-helpful-assertive-communication-examples/>



## Checklist for approaching a disruptive peer group member

-  Speak to the individual in private  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Respect the member's position or dilemma  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Set limits  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Suggest an alternative  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Get the member's agreement on the alternative  
\_\_\_\_\_
-  Give the member the opportunity to be heard  
\_\_\_\_\_



**Hopefully following these ideas means the peer network is flourishing and is feeling supported and able to function in a really good way. Your red bead has been threaded onto the string. What else could possibly go wrong?! Well, there is always the possibility the main facilitator or organiser of the peer network could no longer be there.**

This might feel like the 'last straw', but we asked people running peer networks and they had a few great ideas on how to respond when a key organising member is no longer involved with the network.

We look at these ideas in the next section.

## Reflection

Take a moment to think about a difficult situation you faced in the peer network. What does assertive caring look like to you? Which of the ideas in this section could you try, to support the peer group member?

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# SURVIVING UNEXPECTED CHANGE

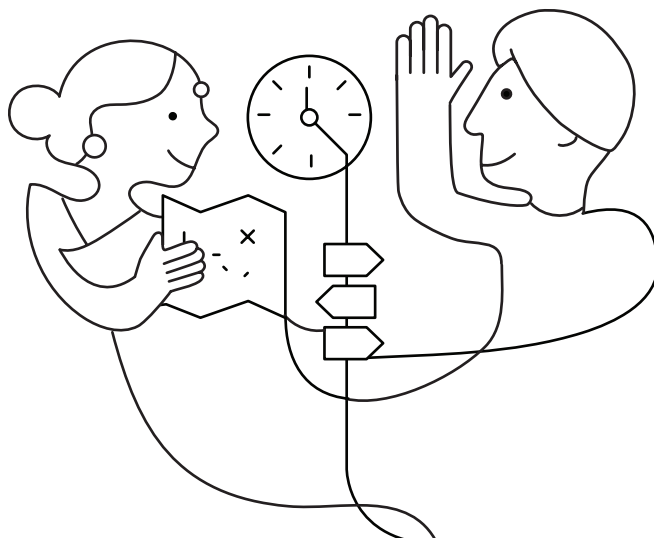
**Often, a peer network might rely on a few key people who ‘hold the centre’ for the network, and get things done so that the network is active and strong.**

This section will help you think about what to do when a key organising member is no longer part of the network. The loss of someone’s involvement can be difficult for a peer network. This is understandable if that person has brought many good things to the network. It can feel like a heavy loss, and the network members may find it hard to imagine the network being successful without the person. But success is always possible, and this can be a time for the network to discover new possibilities.

## Honour the person’s contribution

### Things to think about:

- Honouring the contribution of the person who has left. Make sure you include them if possible in some kind of ‘thank you’ or celebration of their contribution. This will demonstrate to both the person and all the peers that contributions are valuable.
- Capturing the knowledge the person holds, and the methods they used in holding a key position in the network. You could ask them to tell the story of the network from their perspective. Ask them to talk about how they went about making their contribution, important lessons they have learned and so on. You could also ask them to mentor someone else.
- Asking them to share any material, documents, contacts, photos etc they may have that the group could use, or are part of the network’s archive.





## Opportunity knocks

**Now that a key person is no longer involved, what are the new opportunities opening up? What might be possible? Think together about this. Some ideas:**

- The person may have always filled a role that another group member can now step into – great opportunity for someone new to build their knowledge, skills and confidence
- A new key person from outside the group may now be available to step in
- Changes to communication, facilitation style, or group guidelines and activities may now be possible - people might even enjoy these changes!
- Sharing the work. A more collaborative approach may now be possible. Often key people do a lot of work. This can now be shared amongst more people who can learn new skills and take on new roles
- Review the tasks and activities the person undertook - are they all needed? Perhaps some of this work isn't necessary. There may be an opportunity to do less with the same results
- Review the tasks and activities the person undertook and see if they can be completed in another way. Can technology help? The person may have always caught up with people in person - would an email work just as well? Take the opportunity to streamline some of the tasks and activities of the network

Be positive. This is a chance to see opportunity instead of disaster. Thinking positively about what is now possible can energise the group and increase commitment and sharing of the work of the group.

Have a look at the ***Peer Connect Quick Guide: Sharing the work around, how to get more network members involved:***



<https://www.peerconnect.org.au/setting-and-running-peer-networks/maintaining-network/sharing-work-around-how-get-more-network-members-involved/>

## Checklist for when a key member leaves the peer network

- Honour their contribution  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Capture their knowledge  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Ask them to share experience  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Is there an alternative for the role  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Review roles in the group  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Share the work  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Look for opportunity  
\_\_\_\_\_



### **The sixth orange bead has been threaded on the string.**

By following the great ideas above, hopefully your peer network has adjusted to losing a key member and is flourishing again. The orange bead is on the string and the peer network is stronger.

From time to time, you may need to re-visit the other beads on the string: is the purpose still clear and relevant? Do you need to look at recruiting new members? This will help keep your peer network strong, so that it is bringing good things to its members.

But what if you have tried lots of different things, including the ideas in this workbook, but your peer network still has a low energy or remains in struggle. If so, one possibility is that the peer network has come to the end of its journey, and that it's time to finish it.

In the next section we have some ideas on how your peer network can finish well.





# FINISHING THE PEER NETWORK WELL

**We know that networks have a life cycle, and it might come to a point when the peer network is no longer needed. What do you do when the network has outlived its usefulness?**

Hopefully when members leave the group their feedback is positive and they are leaving because they have got what they need from the group.

This is what success looks like: don't confuse it with failure. Celebrate!

**Before you do that, just make sure it is really time to let go**

**It is very important that the peers in the network discuss and confirm any sense that the network is no longer useful. To do this, think about where the low energy is coming from. Here are some possibilities:**

## **You think the peer network should finish**

If it is your energy that is low, you may be thinking about finishing the network because you are the chair or facilitator. If so, you could think about how you can leave the network in a way that keeps the network active and strong. This might include talking with network members about who can take over some of the things you have been doing for the network. This will also give you the option of staying in the network but without being the chair/facilitator.

## **Some of the peer network members think it should finish, but not all members**

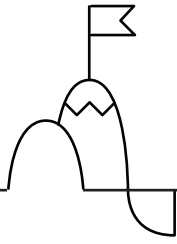
It would be wrong to discontinue the network if there were some members who wanted to keep going and felt that the peer network is still useful to them. If that is the case, think about how they can take over the network, and what help they might need to do this. Some of the other ideas in the workbook might be helpful. Also, there may be other peer networks, or community agencies with the right values, who could be called on to assist the remaining members to take the peer network forward.

If those remaining members are not able to do the future organising, or if there are only one or two members who want to keep going, then it is good to think about how these members could be supported to join other peer networks. Again, other peer networks or community agencies might be able to help with this.

## **All peer network members agree the network has come to an end**

if after trying different ways to keep going, all members agree the peer network has one all it can, then it is time to let go. If so, it is important the peer network has a good finish.





## Finishing up well

**Here are some ideas for how your peer network can have a good finish:**

### **Capture everyone's learning**

Why did the network achieve what it did? How did we do this? Perhaps a member could write this up, or record it graphically, or make a short video, and publish on social media, or share with all of the network's members and supporters, and with other networks. Celebrate the learning

### **Capture individual learning**

What has changed for individual peers because of the network? What can they do now that they couldn't before? Capture those success stories and tell them to anyone who is interested to help grow a peer movement everywhere.

### **Honour individual contributions**

Make sure there is plenty of time at the last meeting for gratitude and acknowledgment of everyone. Make sure that every member of the group leaves the network, having their unique contribution spoken about by others. This will leave everyone feeling great about what they achieved individually

### **Honouring the contribution of the network**

Make sure you have a final farewell celebration where people tell stories, show photos and share memories. This will leave everyone feeling good about finishing up.

### **Swap contact details**

Technology makes it a lot easier for members to stay in touch, email and social-media enable connections to be strengthened and friendships developed, even if the network doesn't continue.

### **Honouring the contribution of supporters and allies**

Use your contact lists, look back over people who contributed to the network. Make sure to thank them and share the achievements of the network with them, so they can see what they have contributed to. You could also invite your supporters to the farewell celebration to thank them for their support.

### **Complete outstanding tasks**

Do you have reports to funders? Close bank accounts, discontinue social media or a website, returning equipment etc. Write a list and make sure the network has met all its responsibilities



## Checklist for letting go and finishing up well

- Chat with the members of the network

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- Finish well by ensuring all obligations are met

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- Capture collective learning

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- Capture individual learning

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- Celebrate achievements

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- Maintain connections

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**The final seventh golden bead has now been added to the string of beads.**

## Reflection

*Take a moment to think about whether your peer network has fulfilled its purpose and can come to an end. How will you celebrate the success and achievements of the peer network? Is there still a gap that another different peer network could fill?*

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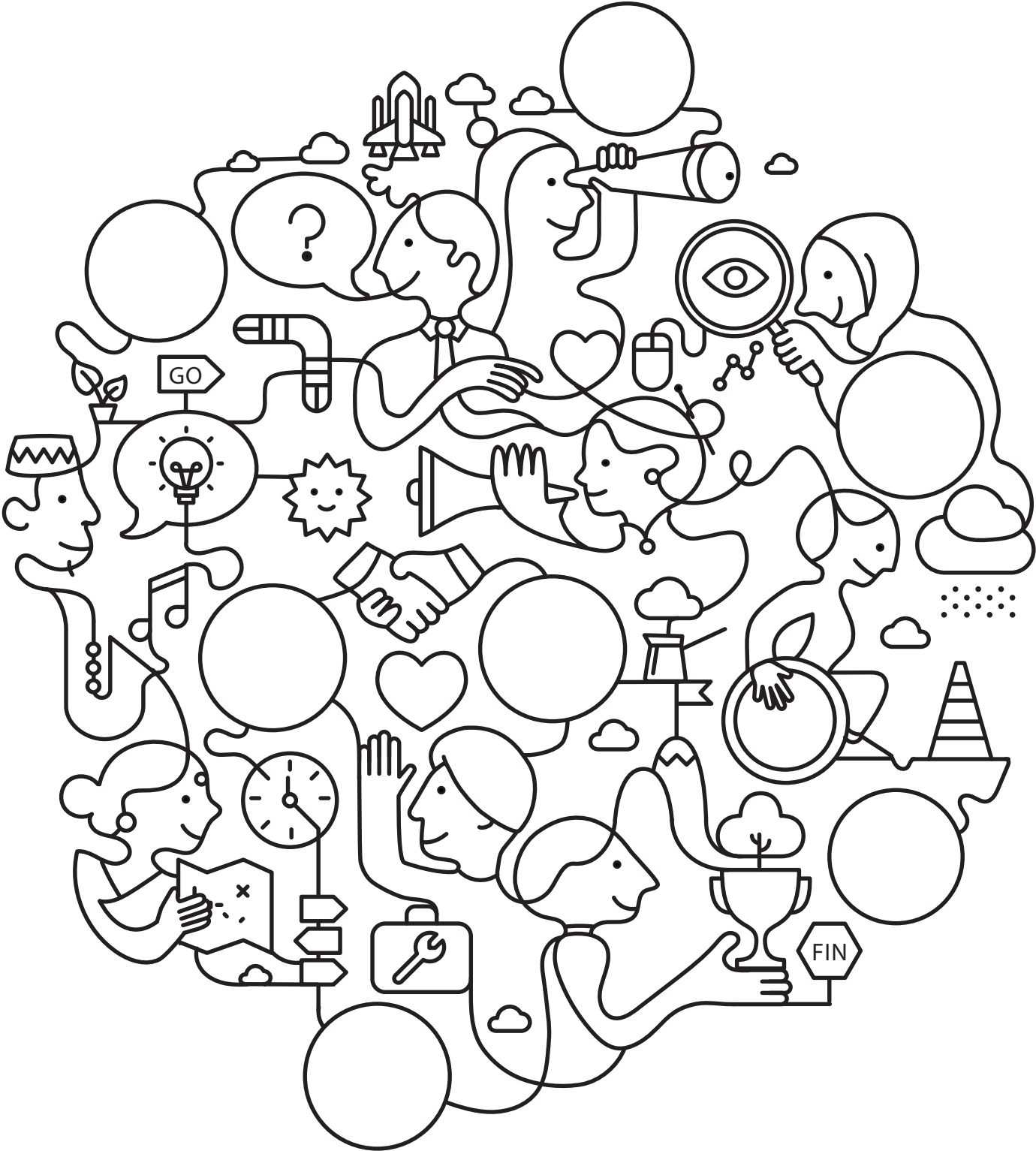
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Find your flow and colour me in.



# GOOD LUCK

**We hope this workbook has helped you to think about the connecting threads of a peer network and how to tackle some of the challenges that can come with running a peer network.**

We have made a string of beads to show the seven main stages that a peer network might experience.

If we put them all together they look like this:



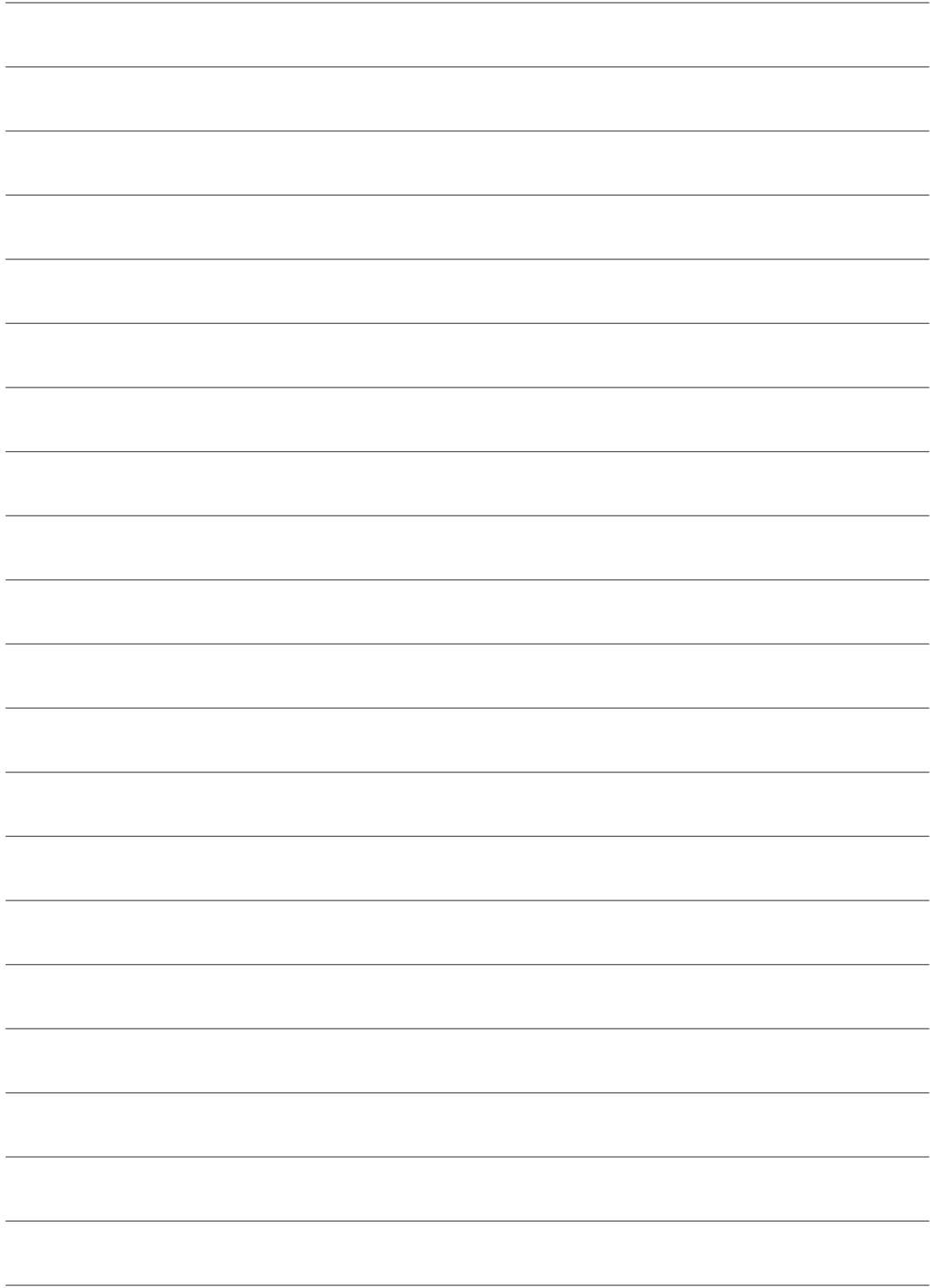
We have also made a short animation film about the life of a peer network which can also help explain some of the ideas in this workbook. You can watch it here on the Peer Connect website.



<http://www.peerconnect.org.au/>

**The Peer Connect website** has lots of other Quick Guides about how to run a peer network and some of the stuff a peer network might talk about. We see this as a browsable library that you can dip into to get more information about what you need.





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[peerconnect.org.au](http://peerconnect.org.au)