

# Heart to Heart

A guide to fostering successful  
Heartbeat Victoria Inc. peer support groups



## Acknowledgements

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We would also like to acknowledge the shared and valuable insights of the Heartbeat Victoria Inc. support group members across Victoria who provided the quotes you will see printed throughout the manual. We thank them for their tireless efforts supporting people in the community recovering from a heart event and living with heart disease.

Finally we would like to thank Robyn and Arthur Fennell, Heartbeat Victoria Inc. for their ongoing consultation and valuable knowledge in developing the manual. We know what a heavy workload you carry and are so grateful for your time and commitment to supporting hearts.

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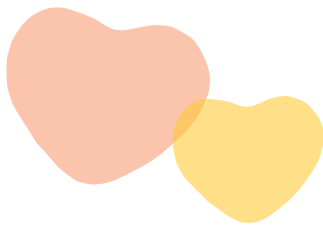
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# Contents

Introduction	2	Succession Planning	23
About Heartbeat Victoria Inc.	3	Tips to consider before closing down your group	24
What do Heartbeat Victoria Inc. peer support groups do?	4	Case study: Building partnerships between support groups and health services	25
Heart Foundation Supporting Hearts Project	6	Activities – keeping your group interested and engaged	26
What is peer support?	7	Staying connected to group members	29
Benefits of belonging to a peer support group	7	Dealing with challenging behaviours and situations	30
What makes a successful peer support group?	8	Someone who dominates the group	30
Effectively running your group	8	Someone who is angry or disruptive	31
Running an effective meeting	12	Someone who annoys you	31
Appropriate leadership and facilitation	13	Someone who cries	32
Managing boundaries	13	Someone who doesn't talk	32
Being accountable and making decisions	13	Members with English as a second language	33
Respecting people's stories and providing a safe space	14	Group members with physical needs	34
Group Agreements	14	Controversial topics	34
Communication tips for Presidents and office bearers	16	Being aware of anxiety, depression and suicide	35
Welcoming new members	18	When a member dies	37
Managing new member dynamics	19	Looking after yourself	38
Assessing your progress as a group - conducting surveys and receiving feedback	22	Self care	38
		Debriefing	39
		Taking time to reflect	39
		Recommended websites and resources	41

# Introduction



Running a support group or being involved in the committee as an office bearer can be a very rewarding and at times, challenging job. Support groups have their own story that unfolds as the history of the group develops, friendships form and the group evolves. No two groups are ever the same. However, some of the challenges faced (outlined in this manual) are common to many peer support groups.

This manual has been developed to complement existing publications and help office bearers and members navigate this very valuable but sometimes complex terrain.

This manual has been produced to help you in your role as office bearer and provide you with the support needed at different times and in various circumstances. The Heart Foundation has also produced Supporting Hearts – A toolkit for heart support groups, which we encourage you to use in conjunction with this manual. Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Policy and Procedures Manual for support groups will also assist you with the day to day running of groups by providing standard form templates, position descriptions and other resources. Please also see Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Rules of Association for more detailed information.

The idea for this manual came from Robyn Fennell, Secretary, Heartbeat Victoria Inc. who expressed the need for a resource that would provide more hands-on, operational tips, ideas and advice for the day-to-day running of heart peer support groups. The Heart Foundation was then successful in receiving support from the Ian Potter Foundation and the Joe White Bequest to produce the manual in partnership with Heartbeat Victoria Inc.

Enjoy what you do. Work as a team.  
Support one another. Ask for help if need be.

*Treasurer, 3rd term*

# About Heartbeat Victoria Inc.

Heartbeat Victoria Incorporated is an Australian voluntary organisation of ex-cardiac patients, family and carers. In appreciation of patients being given a second chance, they all share a common desire to contribute positively toward the support and assistance of other heart patients.

## Current structure

Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. is an association incorporated under the Association Incorporation Act 1981 (Vic). It is a charitable institution and is endorsed as deductible gift recipient. Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. is an umbrella organisation for the Heartbeat Affiliate and Branch organisations in Victoria.

Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. has Affiliates and Branches throughout Victoria. Affiliates are independent incorporated associations, but Branches are not separately incorporated. While Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. has full responsibility for and formally controls the business affairs of the Branches, they operate largely in an autonomous fashion.

Affiliates share the same mutual relationship with Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. as the Branches, with some exceptions due to their status as incorporated associations, they are responsible for their own assets and liabilities and compliance with government statutory requirements.

The Affiliates and Branches co-operate in various fundraising events and share information relating to their common activities. Affiliates contribute to membership and insurance levies in the same way as Branches, and can become members of the Board of Management of Heartbeat Vic Council.

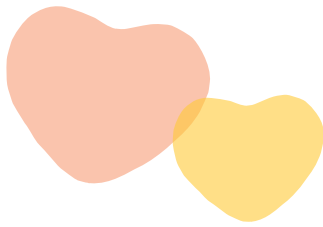
Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. is a membership based organisation and governed by a Board of Management. The Board of Management has the responsibility of overseeing the operations of the organisation including its property, finances, employment of staff or consultants, engagement of volunteers and in making sure it is working towards achieving its charitable purpose. The Board of Management is elected annually at the Annual General Meeting.

All Affiliates and Branches of the organisation are required to comply with the current Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Rules of Association.



“I could see that my district was in need of a support group, so I started one with a small group of people. We have slowly grown over the period to 20 members.”

*Office bearer of 3 years*



## What do Heartbeat Victoria Inc. peer support groups do?

Support groups are an important first step for people who are recovering from a heart event or adjusting to living with heart disease or a heart condition. They provide a place for people to come together, learn about their condition and speak to others in a similar situation to themselves. Most of all they provide friendship and support for ongoing health and wellbeing.

When a new group forms it is important for the group to discuss and agree upon their purpose and activities. It's also important to re-visit this purpose from time to time as the group changes, or new people come into the group. Some groups will have a very simple purpose of supporting others with heart disease or a heart condition, where others may want to make a difference in the community, and create change by having a large fundraising component for local support services or the cardiac unit at their hospital.

What each individual group decides as their main purpose is up to them, however it is important to be clear to new people coming along to the group, what your group does so they know what to expect when they turn up to a meeting. It is important also, that whatever the structure of the group, all Heartbeat Victoria Inc. Affiliates and Branches follow the Association Rules and Guidelines.

## The Vision, Purposes and Objectives of Heartbeat Victoria Inc.

### 2. Vision, Purposes (Mission) and Objectives

#### 2.1 Vision

To be an excellent and well recognised peer support organisation which assists in improving the emotional, social, and physical wellbeing of people living with heart disease or a heart condition.

#### 2.2 Purpose (Mission)

To advise and promote associated support groups in conducting peer support activities for people living with heart disease or condition, to ensure they have a better understanding of the impact of their heart disease or heart condition, how they might seek ongoing services and support in their local area and how to raise funds to improve cardiac services.

#### 2.3 Objectives

The objectives of Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. are:

- 2.3.1 To act as a co-ordinating body for and serve impartially Victorian Branches and Affiliates having purposes and objects the same or similar to those set out in these Rules and known by the name "Heartbeat Victoria", this includes:
  - a) Developing, overseeing, and supporting Branches;
  - b) Developing and maintaining positive relationships with Affiliates; and
  - c) Assisting in the formation of new Branches and Affiliates connected to health services in the State of Victoria.



- 2.3.2 To provide a network that supports cardiac rehabilitation and promotes maintenance of wellbeing for people who have a heart condition or have had cardiac intervention, and their families and carers, which:
- a) encourages help seeking behaviours, build capability and empower individuals through raising awareness, providing information and support; and
  - b) provide opportunities for friendship and peer support enabling people to:
    - I. be reassured;
    - II. share their story and experiences; and
    - III. participate in social, education, exercise, meetings and activities.
- 2.3.3 To promote, assist and support community education and health promotion programs that enhance awareness of heart disease and the facilities and services available in the Victorian community.
- 2.3.4 To assist or co-operate with heart researchers in appropriate research programs which foster the advancement of knowledge on the prevention, treatment and rehabilitation heart disease with Member's informed consent.
- 2.3.5 To promote and assist cardiac units, emergency care, cardiac rehabilitation and cardiac related health services in Victoria in a voluntary capacity by accepting, attracting, investing and using any bequest, legacy or gift, funds provided by other foundations, trusts or funding bodies, or fundraising income after the deduction of appropriate administration costs, to:
- a) provide medical equipment; and
  - b) enhance the delivery of care.
- 2.3.6 To do all the things which the Executive Committee or the Board of Management of Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. may think necessary or desirable to promote the purposes of Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. for the benefits of its members.
- 2.3.7 To undertake any other activity that remains consistent with the above.

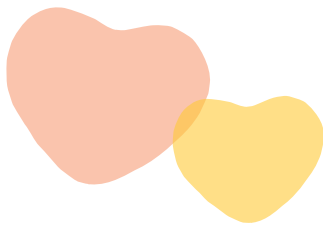
*(Reference: Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Rules of Association 2015)*



“Heartbeat is not only about raising money, we are also there to support members with help and advice. Visiting the Heart Wards to provide comfort, sharing experiences and letting them know support is available. Social functions provide opportunities to form friendships and happy times.”

*Treasurer of 10 years*

# Heart Foundation *Supporting Hearts* project



Since 1959, the Heart Foundation has been leading the way in improving heart health and preventing premature death from cardiovascular disease. As a charity, the Heart Foundation works with the trust and generous support of the community to help all Australians live healthier lives.

Surviving a heart event or being diagnosed with a heart condition can be very traumatic for many people and their families. Approximately, 70% of people who experience a heart event don't attend cardiac rehabilitation and are never linked to support.

People who have little or no support after a heart attack have a higher risk of being readmitted to hospital and are less likely to make the lifestyle changes needed to keep their hearts healthy.

After a heart attack many people need help in adjusting to a new way of life that includes watching what they eat, taking daily medications and scheduling regular exercise. The social and emotional support offered by family and friends, many say, is crucial to this adjustment.

Just as vital for recovery is connecting with someone who has been through a similar experience, who can offer hope, coping strategies and reassurance about the future.

Heartbeat Victoria Inc. support groups and other heart support groups offer an invaluable level of peer support that can only be offered by people who have experienced a heart event and know what it takes to get through it.

Through the *Supporting Hearts* project – funded by a Department of Health, Health Condition Support Grant 2013 – 2015 - the Heart Foundation worked with heart related peer support groups to bring them together and build strong new relationships.

Through these stronger connections, the Heart Foundation was able to mentor and resource groups to help them remain sustainable, increase their memberships, link to health and community services and learn new ways of promoting themselves by working with the media.

Key activities of the *Supporting Hearts* project included:

- ♥ a quarterly newsletter
- ♥ a state-wide needs analysis asking support groups what they needed and what the Heart Foundation specifically could do for them
- ♥ development of a *Supporting Hearts* toolkit especially for heart support groups with information, tips, case studies, brochures, posters and templates for sustainability
- ♥ regional heart health peer support forums in Shepparton, Traralgon and Stawell



- ♥ skills-based practical workshops focussing on increasing skills and confidence working with the media and developing new linkages in local communities
- ♥ teleconferences with support group office bearers and cardiac rehabilitation providers to forge new relationships and share ideas.

The *Supporting Hearts* project brought together heart support groups from across Victoria that had never been connected to the Heart Foundation or to each other before, communicating informally and formally, sharing stories, resources, and strategies and embracing a model of community engagement that had previously not existed.

The key resource produced by the *Supporting Hearts* project: *Supporting Hearts – A toolkit for heart support groups* - can be obtained for free from Heart Foundation Victoria.

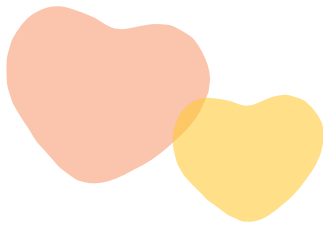
## What is peer support?

Peer support occurs when people who are living with a long-term illness get together and share stories and experiences, and give each other empathetic, emotional and practical help.

The word 'peer' — which means 'one of equals' — is important. It differentiates this type of support from other rehabilitation services provided by professional health-based organisations. Peers are not health professionals or medical experts. They are volunteers who have been diagnosed with the same or a similar illness, and who are willing to share their time and experiences to offer hope, encouragement and a positive role model to others, especially the newly diagnosed. Peer support programs usually cater for people with the illness, but not always. Some programs include family and friends, while others are designed specifically for family and close friends, as in the case of carer support groups and programs.

*(Reference: Chronic Illness Alliance, Victoria)*

Peer support can be delivered in many ways: from structured support groups, telephone calls, via the internet, home or hospital visits, going for walks together, having regular coffees or dinners to informal catch ups.



## Benefits of belonging to a peer support group

For a person living with heart disease or recovering from a heart event, becoming a member of a support group can have many benefits. Being part of a support group can:

- ♥ **Help you feel less alone** – spending time with people who have experienced what you are experiencing can help you feel less fearful, more hopeful, supported and accepted.
- ♥ **Help you feel more motivated** – many people struggle to maintain the lifestyle changes needed to keep their heart healthy and avoid a second heart event. Being with people who have also had to make these changes and who have survived for years after a heart attack can be motivating, reassuring you that making the effort can be very beneficial. Being part of a support group may also motivate you to connect in other ways such as through a walking group, exercise group or club such as bowls or golf for example.
- ♥ **Help you feel more in control and informed** – the sharing of experiences and success stories can help you feel more informed about your condition and can provide you with valuable links to other health professionals and community programs you may need during your recovery. Many support groups also have regular guest speakers who provide up to date information on heart related treatments and research.
- ♥ **Help you feel a sense of belonging and community connection** – joining a new group of people opens up the potential to make new friends and forge new connections to your community in many ways. You may even decide to become an active volunteer for your group and join in fundraising, promotion or educational activities connecting you to people and opportunities that you may not have experienced before. Feeling that you ‘belong’ and are connected to others is very beneficial to your physical and emotional health.

*(Reference: Supporting Hearts: A Toolkit for heart support groups. Heart Foundation. For more information please also refer to Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Rules of Association).*

# What makes a successful peer support group?

There are many elements to running an effective peer support group. The definition of a successful group may largely depend on what the group has set out to achieve. For some groups, this may be very simple, and for others it may be more complex and far-reaching. Much of the work in running an effective group happens behind the scenes with the office bearers.

Being organised and having a team of people that can help you in your role, goes a long way. In general, successful heart peer support groups are:

- ♥ Effectively run and organised
- ♥ Have appropriate leadership and group facilitation (especially through office bearers and committee members)
- ♥ Are accountable to their members
- ♥ Make decisions as a group, for the group
- ♥ Are supportive of their members' stories and respect people's confidentiality and privacy
- ♥ Provide a safe space for people to share stories, laugh and form friendships.

## Effectively running your group

To help your group run effectively, it may be necessary for people to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Some groups have found it works well if a sub-committee is formed to plan a calendar of activities as far as a year in advance so everyone knows what is ahead and what can be planned for and who is responsible for what task. The Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Policy and Procedures Manual provides guidance and direction on the roles and responsibilities for office bearers and committee members.



“We are all survivors, with a range of knowledge of heart disease and the compassion to work with the ill and [have] a good ear”

*President of 3 years*

Most groups will have office bearers involved in the committee whose roles may involve the following:

Role	Responsibility
<b>Chairperson/President</b>	Organises and runs the committee meetings (also called organising party or office bearer meetings) and in most cases, the group meetings as well. In some groups these are two separate roles.
<b>Secretary</b>	Responsible for paperwork, takes minutes of meetings and maintains the membership database (Heartbeat Victoria Inc. Affiliates and Branches require this list to be submitted annually to ensure insurance coverage).
<b>Treasurer</b>	Responsible for incoming money, collecting membership fees, paying bills issuing receipts, presents, and keeping accurate books. They also report on financial statements at the meetings. This position may also have assistance, such as an assistant treasurer – this also helps to lighten the load and ensures good succession planning.
<b>Membership Officer</b>	Takes on the special role of welcoming new members to the group. They ensure new people are introduced to someone they can chat with so they don't feel too intimidated on their first meeting.
<b>Catering</b>	Organises food and drinks for meetings and events
<b>Resources Officer</b>	Collects and manages online and print resources for the support group. This also includes correspondence from the Heart Foundation.
<b>Publicity Officer</b>	Responsible for promoting the group through the media, the group's newsletter, flyers and emails.

*(This table has been adapted from Cancer Support Groups: A Guide to setting up and maintaining a group with permission from Cancer Council Australia).*

Groups also have a range of other Committee Members including: Social Convenors, Welfare Officers, Cardiac Rehabilitation Volunteer Program Coordinators, Volunteer Ward Visit Coordinators, Fundraising Convenors, Newsletter Editors and Guest Speaker Coordinators.

This may seem like a long list to achieve but what it highlights is the importance of sharing the load and the responsibility of running the group across several key people. The team approach works best and ensures the group stays viable when key members leave or move into other roles.



## TIP

Having specific time limits on roles (for example, 12 - 24 months) is important as it allows members to take on a role without feeling that they are volunteering for a job with no end date! Equally, a clear induction process for people coming into the role is important so that they don't feel overwhelmed with responsibility when they take it on. This may involve the previous person shadowing them for some time, or developing some key descriptions of what the roles involve so that everyone understands exactly what is required of the role.

Having a time limit on the role also means that different people get to try different roles within the group and the group can benefit from different leadership styles and skills sharing.

Speak to your group members about what roles they may like to take on. There may be people in your groups who have relevant skills for the jobs required (for example one member may be former teacher who could be great chairperson, former book keepers could be great treasurers and so on). Heartbeat Victoria Inc. can also give you advice on forming a committee.

“Some groups have Birthday Officers. It's their role to keep track of people's birthdays and make sure everyone signs a card for them to receive at that time of year.

Other groups have a welfare officer. The officer sends written material (cards) or arranges visits as need be.

We match up people in our group who have had similar heart experiences so that they can have that person as a contact and peer support.

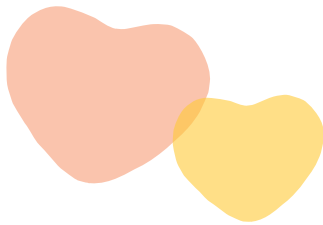
Some groups have a volunteer program where one member attends each Cardiac Rehab Program session and assists coordinators. They speak about the benefits of the peer support group to participants. This can assist recruitment of members. They also assist the coordinator with pre-set tasks which raises the profile of Heartbeat Support Groups with the health service.

*Secretary 6 years, Foundation Member*



“The greatest challenge for this role at present is the lack of structure in the group. I am trying to write Position Descriptions for office bearers and guidelines for various activities in the affiliated group, ie secretary, treasurer, publicity etc; how to organise events, who to contact and when.”

*President of 1 year*



## Running an effective meeting

Successful groups usually have as their foundation, the ability to run effective and informative meetings that keep people wanting to come back. To run an effective meeting it is important to keep to time and stick to a group format that works for your style and that of the group. It's also important to ensure members have equal say and all voices are heard. Here is an example of an effective group meeting format that you may wish to try:

**E.g.**

### Example meeting format

#### *Welcome*

*Ensure your room is set up appropriately. For example – seats in a circle so everyone can see each other and have discussion. Rows may be useful for a more formal presentation with a guest speaker who has a PowerPoint projector. You may also need a microphone if it is a large group or if members having hearing problems.*

*Ask people to say their name as a reminder to existing members. It's a good idea to have name tags at every meeting. If any new people are joining, you can ask them to introduce themselves (if they feel comfortable). Some groups also use attendance sheets or books for people to sign in as they arrive.*

*Have a simple agenda developed to keep the meeting on track.*

#### *Guidelines and Reporting*

*Briefly run through the group agreement guidelines – for example, confidentiality and finishing at a particular time. You can also go over any housekeeping issues and introduce what is on the agenda for the day. This is also the time to have reports and discussion from finance (Treasurer), any new correspondence to the group, reports from members on various activities, and general discussion that may be raised on group activities by the members. It is important to keep an eye on time frames during this part of the meeting (you may need to alert members when time is running out), especially if there is also a guest speaker planned.*

#### *Guest Speaker and discussion*

*If a guest speaker is presenting, it's the president/chairperson's job to introduce the speaker. It's best to keep this brief and to the point. Allow also for question time.*

*Otherwise, you might start the group discussion by asking people to say their name and anything important that has happened since the last meeting. They might introduce a planned theme to discuss (e.g. discussion about the lifestyle changes people have found helpful).*

#### *Energisers*

*If you feel people are getting tired and the meeting needs a lift;*

- *ask people to stand up, stretch and take a deep breath introduce a five-minute activity that is funny or silly and get everyone laughing*
- *have a break for refreshments – this is also a good opportunity for people to chat with each other and take a break from the group conversation.*



### *Closers*

*Although it may be tempting to wrap up quickly, it's important to close the group. You may briefly summarise the achievements from the meeting and actions for next time.*

*When you are wrapping up the meeting, remind people about the date and time of the next meeting and thank them for their participation.*

*(This example has been adapted from Cancer Support Groups: A Guide to setting up and maintaining a group with permission from Cancer Council Australia).*

## Appropriate leadership and facilitation\*

A group President/Chairperson should be open, objective and have a good sense of humour. Effective leaders are good communicators well organised and can gently encourage people to participate in a group without being intrusive. They need to be able to lead without being overbearing. It also involves keeping an eye on how the members are responding to the content and allowing members to share their stories equally.

## Managing boundaries

Presidents/Chairpeople must clearly manage the boundaries between their own story and those of support group members. If you become a president or chairperson, your focus will be on creating a safe space for group members to share, rather than using group time to discuss the impact of your own heart condition in your life.

Presidents/Chairpeople should also have a boundary between what they know about group members within group and outside of it. If you interact with members socially or in the community, you should not let group conversations flow into daily chat at the shops, at a dinner party, or on the sidelines of a football match.

Managing boundaries can be challenging. It involves exploring your own emotions and knowing how to let others express theirs without allowing yourself to become upset or emotional. In fact, your story might not come up at all.

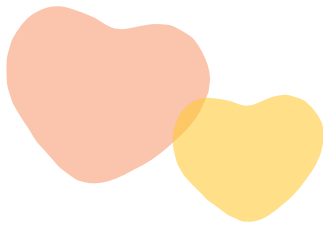
## Being accountable and making decisions

An effective President/Chairperson has a written agenda for each group meeting, and makes sure all the meetings keep in line with the Group Purpose and Group Agreement (see Group Agreements section to follow) and run to schedule.

One of the key ingredients for a group's success is ensuring its members are part of the decision making process. This helps to reduce any potential conflict and ensures members feel valued and heard.

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\*This section has been reproduced from "Cancer Support Groups" with permission from Cancer Council Australia



One tool to ensure you are inclusive is to use agendas, and take minutes of meetings. Having an agenda for meetings means that group members know what is going to be discussed and can add items to the agenda beforehand.

When it's time to make decisions it's also important that your group is clear in its agreement on how that happens. (For example, are decisions based on a vote that is unanimous or majority rules?). Taking minutes for meetings also means that the group is clear on what was discussed and what decisions were made. This also means that if group members miss a meeting, they can catch up by reading the minutes. The minutes from previous meetings will also have a list of actions and appropriate outcomes recorded.

More guidance can be found by referring to the Action Plan in Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Policy and Procedures Manual.

### Respecting people's stories and providing a safe space

Having a clearly defined Group Purpose and Group Agreement are great tools for Presidents and office bearers to help keep meetings on track and reinforce why the group was set up in the first place. They can also help when dealing with difficult or challenging situations within the group.

**E.g.**

### Example of a Group Purpose

*A monthly support and information evening for people who are living with heart disease or a heart condition, their family and carers to help people maintain healthy lifestyle choices and encourage social connection.*

*The group meetings have arranged guest speakers on heart related topics, ongoing health maintenance and discussion time to support members.*

### Group Agreements

Having a Group Agreement is the key ingredient to setting up a safe space for people to interact within your group. It also reinforces that member stories will be treated with respect. It is a set of rules that governs the behaviours and expectations of people who are part of the group. It also acts as a tool to refer back to when behaviours may not be ideal, and you may need to have a conversation with that member about it (for example when members speak over each other, or not respect other people's stories).

One of the key tasks of the first meeting is to establish rules for everyone to follow. (If you haven't already done this, don't dismay – it's never too late to introduce a Group Agreement as it can save potential future headaches and help with group cohesion\*)

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\* This section has been reproduced from "Cancer Support Groups" with permission from Cancer Council Australia

Group Agreements should:

- ♥ outline communication and behaviour standards
- ♥ allow people to share responsibility and ownership for the meetings and discussion
- ♥ help to maintain a focus on the group purpose
- ♥ keep the President/Chairperson and office bearers on track
- ♥ help the group work effectively and minimise conflict.

The Committee can already have drafted a Group Agreement for discussion at the first meeting. The agreement should be referred to at each meeting, and it can be reviewed and updated by the group from time to time.



“We are a small group but we stick together, support each other and work as a TEAM”

*Treasurer, 3rd term*



## Example of a Group Agreement

*Everything discussed in group is confidential. “What is said in the room, stays in the room.”*

*Group members are respectful of other members’ opinions and we all have the right to our own opinion. We do ask however, that members refrain from using derogatory, racist, sexist or other inappropriate comments during discussions. Bullying in any circumstances will not be tolerated in group setting or on social media. Be aware of your actions and language you use with others.*

*We ask you to also manage your participation. If you have had the floor for a while, allow others to also share their story too. Please do not interrupt others or be discourteous when they are speaking.*

*We make decisions using a “majority rules” system of voting and using a show of hands.*

*Please be respectful towards our President/Chairperson, office bearers and speakers. Their job isn’t always an easy one, but they are always open to feedback.*

*Please put your mobile phone on silent, or be considerate of how you use your mobile phone.*

*Please try to be punctual with meeting and activity times.*

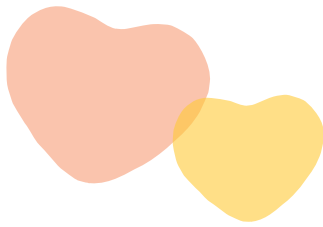
*We celebrate our successes.*

*To the best of abilities – we share packing up after the meeting.*

*We provide and promote healthy living by offering appropriate venue choices and food options at meetings. Please keep this in mind.*

*If you become distressed by any of the content discussed during the meeting please speak to one of the office bearers during/after the meeting to be put in contact with further support.*

*Any member that is unable to follow the group agreement may be asked to leave the group.*



## Communication tips for Presidents and office bearers

A large part of the President/Chairperson role falls into the category of being a good communicator. Whilst good communication and facilitating group discussion is a large part of the role, so too is interpersonal communication skills. Below are some tips for improving your communication:

- ♥ **Learn to listen.** Listening is not the same as hearing. Listening is a learnt skill and it also takes into account the non-verbal cues that are being communicated by the other person also known as body language. Make and maintain eye contact and use first names where appropriate. Always clarify what is being said and reflect back to the person what you believe they are communicating to you.
- ♥ **Be aware of other people's emotions.** It's important to try to respect other people's stories and try to spend some time imagining yourself walking in their shoes. Consider the impact of what you are saying, and how that will be interpreted. It may be helpful to take a minute to think about what you are going to say, and its meaning, before you say it, rather than responding straight away.
- ♥ **Empathise.** Empathy is trying to see things from the other person's point-of-view. When communicating with others, try not to be judgemental or biased by preconceived ideas. Remember that everyone is the expert in their own life story. Stay in tune with your own emotions to help enable you to understand the emotions of others.
- ♥ **Encourage.** Offer words and actions of encouragement, as well as praise, to others. Make other people feel welcome, wanted, valued and appreciated in your communications.
- ♥ **Be aware of non-verbal cues.** Ensure you are making eye contact and avoid defensive body language (such as folded arms, slumping backward in a chair). Instead, have open body language, sit a little forward when listening, avoid fidgeting when someone else is talking so that your whole attention is focused on what they are saying. Avoid jargon and over-complicated language and explain things as simply as possible. Always avoid racist and sexist terms/ jokes or any language that may cause offence.
- ♥ **Use humour.** Laughing releases endorphins that can help relieve stress and anxiety; most people like to laugh and will feel drawn to somebody who can make them laugh. Don't be afraid to be funny or clever, but do ensure your humour is appropriate to the situation.

- ♥ **Treat people equally.** Always aim to communicate on an equal basis and avoid patronising people. Never say anything about a group member that you wouldn't be comfortable saying if they were standing there. By treating people as your equal and also equal to each other you will build trust and respect.
- ♥ **Attempt to resolve conflict.** Learn to troubleshoot and resolve problems and conflicts as they arise. Try to listen, hear and understand both sides of any argument – this may involve encouraging and facilitating people to talk to each other. Try not to be biased or judgemental but instead ease the way for conflict resolution.
- ♥ **Minimise stress.** Try to remain calm and focused when communicating in a group or individual situation. It may be helpful to take a few deep breaths before the group starts to focus your energy on being present in that moment. This helps to calm yourself and get ready for hearing people's stories/issues.

(Reference: <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/improving-communication.html>)



## What would you do?

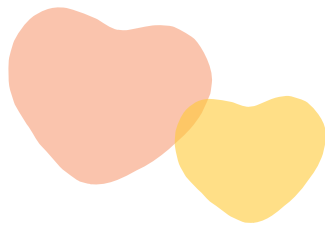
*Jenny has been President of the support group for over a decade now. You have received feedback from members that her leadership style doesn't allow any interaction from the audience, and instead she spends the large majority of the meeting discussing her own story. There has been a drop off too in the number of new people staying in the group. You have several people in the group who you feel may be happy to volunteer for the role of President but they don't want to step on Jenny's toes. You and members of the committee feel that it is time for a change however don't know what to do or how to go about it without Jenny feeling ambushed.*

### Reflection – how would you respond to this scenario?

#### Suggestions

- *Obtain the feedback in written form so that it is objective. Putting a survey to the whole group about the structure of meetings and sharing roles is a good way to get further advice on what changes need to be made to re-invigorate the group.*
- *Get advice from Heartbeat Victoria Inc. executive and other group office bearers on how to go about giving this feedback to Jenny in an empathetic way.*
- *Introduce time limits and key role descriptions so that office bearers benefit from change after 1-2 years.*
- *Try to remain objective when giving this feedback to Jenny – try not to use “I” or “you” statements, and instead stick to the facts.*
- *Try to focus also on the things that are going well, and that change is not necessarily a negative thing.*

# Welcoming new members



Most Heartbeat Victoria Inc. members originally heard about the group through their local cardiac rehabilitation program, followed by word of mouth (family and friends) or through promotion of the group in the local media or health services.

Managing that first interaction with a potential member, knowing what to say and how to welcome them into your group is a really important skill.

Having a discussion with someone before they attend the group has many potential benefits. Sometimes this isn't always possible as potential members may find out about the group and simply turn up. Having the conversation with the person beforehand can help a new member feel valued and welcomed into the group – and they are more likely to keep coming back!

We know that many Heartbeat Victoria Inc. groups have found promoting themselves at their local cardiac rehabilitation program to be a really effective way of meeting and recruiting potential members. It is a great opportunity to talk to people about what the group does, how you operate, your mission and purpose and what people can expect out of attending the group. Try to be clear and concise and use examples in your presentation. This environment also allows you to chat with participants over coffee after the formal part of the program. This then lets you to go into further depth with the potential member and cover off some of the suggested questions below, in a friendly way.

If the potential member has found out about the group from a current member, they may have already gone through some of the orientation beforehand on your behalf. Make sure all group members are briefed on what to say to potential members, or that there is written material such as group brochures that cover potential new member questions. It's also a good idea to check in with the new member when they attend to make sure they have all the information about the group they need and know who the office bearers are if they have any concerns or need more information. Make it a special point to introduce yourself to them at the first meeting.

Other times you may receive a phone call from the person before the next meeting who has seen the details on your brochure. In this case, you have the opportunity to chat with them over the phone to ensure your group meets their expectations. Sometimes that person may just turn up at the meeting. In these cases, it's good to have a Membership Officer in place who takes on the task to welcome the new person, and go through some of the suggested talking points below.



Speaking to potential members beforehand – whether it at the cardiac rehabilitation program or over the phone gives you the opportunity to:

- ♥ get a sense of whether or not their needs match up with what the group provides
- ♥ make sure they are aware of the Group Agreement and standards of behaviour before attending
- ♥ make them feel comfortable attending as they already know one person – you!

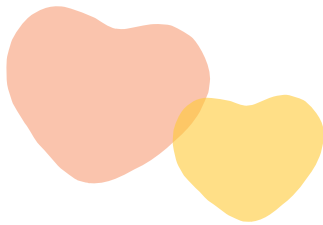
Below is an example of the types of questions that you may want to ask. Please note that this shouldn't feel like an interrogation or be too lengthy, but rather a friendly conversation to ensure everyone's expectations match up before a new person comes to their first meeting.

Questions to consider asking a new member before attending:

- ♥ What is your name, contact information?
- ♥ Tell me a bit about yourself – what has motivated you to come to the group?
- ♥ Are you planning to bring someone else with you to the group?
- ♥ Have you been to a support group before? If so, what was your experience like?
- ♥ What are you hoping to get out of the group?
- ♥ Let me tell you a bit about what our group is like...
- ♥ Our group does/does not have membership fees that is \$...
- ♥ Are there any medical issues that we should be concerned about – do you have a next of kin we can contact in case of an emergency?
- ♥ Please be aware that we are not a therapy group, and offer friendship and support. If you need support with mental health issues I can confidentially refer you on to someone that can help.
- ♥ We have a group agreement that governs how we interact together. Let me go over it with you before the meeting.

## Managing new member dynamics

Sometimes you may find that someone may not be fitting in well or quite so easily with the other members of the group. If you find this happening, it's really important to address this issue early on, rather than letting it go and hoping for the best! There are guidelines available and support on how to deal with this through the Board of Management of Heartbeat Victoria Inc. Seek support early and use your Group Agreement as a tool to manage behaviour that is not acceptable in your group. Inappropriate group members affect



everyone's enjoyment of the group, and it's your responsibility as Chairperson/President to address potential problems and make the group an enjoyable place for everyone (see also section on Dealing with challenging behaviours and situations).

For more guidance on Disciplinary Action and Grievance Procedures please refer to Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Rules of Association.



## What would you do?

*Bobby and Julie saw an ad in their local paper advertising your Heartbeat Victoria group. They attended the group without calling first. From their first attendance you got the sense that they weren't going to be a good match for the group. They were extremely disruptive and constantly talked over other participants. They also made negative comments about other people's choices to deal with their heart conditions. Initially, you were so confronted by their behaviour that you weren't sure what to do. You had mentioned the Group Agreement at the start of the meeting but they weren't respecting it. You hoped that they wouldn't come to any further meetings, but you have had no such luck. Due to their attendance, your regular group members have stopped attending. What would you do?*

### Suggestions

- *Sometimes despite your best efforts, people aren't a good match for the group and impact negatively on others. It's important to keep the rights of the other group members top of mind, as they have the right to engage in a safe space, as much as Bobby and Julie have a right to attend.*
- *This is a perfect time to enact your Group Agreement. Bring it out and discuss the main points with Bobby and Julie. As they have been made aware of the agreement in the past and have not behaved in a way to uphold the agreement, it is grounds for them to leave the group.*
- *Obtain advice from the Heartbeat Victoria Inc. Board of Management regarding their grievance procedure to ensure that all protocol is correctly followed.*
- *Ensure you debrief with your office bearers or Heartbeat Victoria Inc. after this event and have support during it. Dealing with negative behaviours and tricky people is never easy. It's important you feel you have approached the situation in a positive way.*
- *You may wish to have a support person with you when you meet with Bobby and Julie. This way you are adequately supported as well.*
- *Let Bobby and Julie know beforehand what the meeting will be about so they aren't surprised by the content being communicated to them.*



## TIP

When producing advertising material, brochures, posters and flyers, you may want to add in a sentence to “please call our contact person before attending”. This allows you to be aware of new members coming and gives you the ability to have a conversation with them first.

Some groups use a group pre-paid mobile phone to manage new member queries. This allows the load to be shared, where office bearers take it in turns answering queries. It also means people are not being called on a home phone line (so has added privacy protection) and stops any inappropriate use of home phone numbers. The pre-paid mobile phone can be purchased through the Department of Human Services disability self-help grants and topped up when needed with pre-paid cards ([www.dhs.vic.gov.au](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au)). This also ensures people who no longer wish to undertake that duty in the group aren’t contacted from old brochures.

# Assessing your progress as a group – conducting surveys and receiving feedback



“I enjoy what I do..., but I will have to find someone to take my place soon, as we are planning to move in the next 2 -3 years.”

*Office bearer of 3 years*

An important part of running a successful group involves taking time to reflect and receive feedback about how the group is travelling. A good way to do this is through conducting annual surveys. The survey can ask people anonymously for feedback about the format, content and overall feel of the group. It is a great way to get direct feedback on specific issues that you might be concerned about. The ideas generated can also help inspire you when developing your calendar of events for the following year.

Another way to get feedback is by asking participants directly. This can be done informally, over coffee at the end of the meetings, speaking with individual members. Another approach is to ask for feedback directly during meetings and allow members to share their opinions about different topics to do with the running of the group. This also allows members to feel valued and have their voices heard. It's important too, that members know what you are going to do with the feedback so that they know it will be acted on.

It's also good practice to take all feedback back to the Committee meetings so that feedback both positive and negative, can be discussed openly and improvements made.



## Annual Survey example

*This survey is used to help us plan and improve our group. Please provide any feedback you have and please be as honest as possible.*

*How did you find the range of speakers this year?* \_\_\_\_\_

*What did you enjoy most?* \_\_\_\_\_

*What did you enjoy least?* \_\_\_\_\_

*Do you find the length of meetings:* ☐ *Just right* ☐ *Too short* ☐ *Too long*

*How do you find the format of meetings?*

☐ *Need more education* ☐ *Need more chat time* ☐ *Just right* ☐ *Other*

*Name something you think the group has achieved this year that you are proud of*

*Are there other people in the community who may benefit from being part of our group?*

*What would you like to see next year?*

*What other suggestions do you have for the group?*

*Thank you for your time*

# Succession Planning

A key concern expressed by support groups in a recent survey conducted by the Heart Foundation was that the group did not have a clear succession plan in place. A major factor leading to a group's closure is often the lack of members with the skill set or willingness to take over when a key office bearer moves on.

In order for succession planning to work, it needs to be proactive rather than reactive. This means that there needs to be a plan in place for what happens when key members leave, from day one.

This can be achieved by:

- ♥ Having clear definitions of the key roles in the group and what their duties are
- ♥ Having contingency plans in place for when an office bearer is sick or away (who is trained to take over in your group, what does this involve?)
- ♥ Actively seeking out members within the group to train for specific roles, rather than relying on people to volunteer. This may mean looking wider than the group for some roles – Volunteering Victoria, Heartbeat Victoria Inc. and the Heart Foundation may be able to assist with the recruitment of specific volunteers.
- ♥ Partnering with local health providers is also a good way to ensure the group's survival and bring extra expertise into the group (see Supporting Hearts - A toolkit for heart support groups. Heart Foundation).

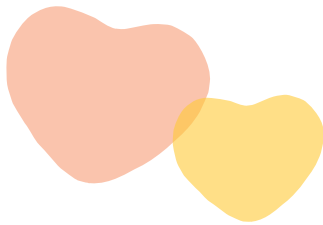
Over the years there have been many examples of support groups that needed to look at different ways of staying sustainable in order to avoid having to close down. For some groups this meant changing their original focus from fundraising to being more a group that offers peer support, friendship, information and social activities. This change of focus may free some committee members from time-consuming administration tasks, enabling them to stay engaged with the group thereby increasing the group's chance of keeping going.

The Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Rules of Association allows a group to continue down to a minimum of five members. Even if your group gets this small, it is worth having a look at the suggestions below to encourage the group to keep going as peer support is very valuable regardless of the size of the group. Never underestimate how valuable your group is to your members, your community and local health services.



"I heard on the radio that this group would need to close if it didn't get new/younger members and as my husband had had a heart attack a few years before, thought I could help. I didn't know the group existed until the radio interview!"

*Treasurer, 3rd term*



## TIP

### What to consider before closing down your group

- Take a look at another group that is successful and share ideas – you may consider either attending a meeting or one of their activities to see how they do it.
- Revisit the purpose of Heartbeat Victoria Inc. and your own group's peer support direction.
- Ask for assistance and guidance from the Board of Management from Heartbeat Victoria Inc.
- Make contact with past members or those who haven't attended recently – perhaps have a special lunch or dinner inviting old faces back. For some, they may be ready to re-join the group or have friends or family members who may find the group valuable.
- Seek assistance from local health services or a cardiac rehabilitation coordinator or cardiac nurse.
- Have another look at Heart Foundation's Supporting Hearts Toolkit.
- Look at ideas from other chronic illness groups that run successful peer support group programs such as Arthritis, Cancer, Diabetes, Parkinson's Disease and Multiple Sclerosis.
- Have a look the Chronic Illness Alliance website which has a number of peer support resources [www.chronicillness.org.au](http://www.chronicillness.org.au)
- Do an informal skills audit within the group – many people have experience and skills from past jobs they may have forgotten about or taken for granted that may be useful in reinvigorating the group.

Sometimes, despite everyone's best efforts, groups need to close due to lack of numbers or the inability to find appropriate people to take over. It's important not to focus on this time as a failure but rather focus on all the great work that happened while the group was operating. Heartbeat Victoria Inc. can also help support you during this time – it is advisable to ask for advice before it is too late and closing the group is the only option. Remember - the group process has a life cycle as well, with a beginning, middle and end!

If your group does close there are legal processes that need to be complied with so it is vital that you contact Heartbeat Victoria Inc. for further information.



## CASE STUDY

### Building partnerships between support groups and health services

I run a nine week one hour exercise, one hour education Cardiac Rehabilitation Program in Mildura. We have always had a good relationship with Heartbeat Victoria Sunraysia and they come in and talk during the nine week program. Our local group in Mildura which started in 1982 is very active with fundraising as well as supporting members and people in the community who have a heart condition.

I went along to one of the meetings to ask for funds to purchase equipment for our cardiac rehabilitation program. At the time, they were recruiting for roles. Membership to the group was low at the time as well, so I decided to go along to the AGM and offer my support, volunteering in the role of Secretary. I am now in my third term! I do this role in my spare time and my 13 year old also gets involved and helps with group fundraisers and activities.

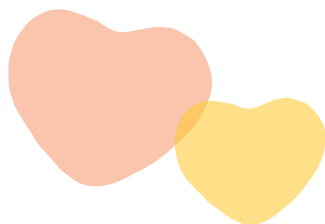
We have been working particularly on our brochures and materials and these go into every pack for patients of the cardiac rehabilitation program. It's handy having a nurse at the group in case there are any medical questions that the group has. It has been very beneficial for the hospital with the group supporting the purchasing of essential medical equipment, also equipment to go out into the community. The partnership between the group and hospital has been a fantastic outcome.

Over the last two years our membership has doubled. The last five couples that have joined our group have been as a direct result of attending our cardiac rehabilitation program.

Cardiac Rehabilitation Nurse, Mildura

See page 28 and 29 of Supporting Hearts - A toolkit for heart support groups, Heart Foundation for extra ideas on how to keep your group on track.

# Activities – keeping your group interested and engaged



When your group has been operating for some time it can be hard to think of new ideas to keep people interested. A good way to get ideas is from group members themselves through your annual survey. You may also want to try the following suggestions for group meetings, potential speakers and other activities.

## Potential speakers

- ♥ Local cardiac rehabilitation coordinator (this is a good opportunity for them too to see how your group works and refer clients)
- ♥ Pharmacist
- ♥ Local General Practice Nurse
- ♥ Exercise Physiologist
- ♥ Meditation / Relaxation instructor
- ♥ Nutritionist / Dietician
- ♥ Community Health Centre representative
- ♥ Psychologist/counsellor to discuss emotional changes, dealing with stress and anxiety
- ♥ Local government representatives
- ♥ Heart Foundation representative
- ♥ Carers Victoria
- ♥ beyondblue
- ♥ Service clubs such as Lions, Probus, Rotary
- ♥ Centrelink representatives
- ♥ Police re community and home safety
- ♥ Ambulance officers
- ♥ Quit program nurse educator if you have members trying to quit smoking
- ♥ Representatives from peer support groups representing other chronic illnesses such as Arthritis, Cancer or Diabetes that may exist in your area
- ♥ Other health services available in your community such as representatives from ethnic groups or culturally diverse groups
- ♥ Having a current member present on their hobbies or interest.

## Activities

- ♥ Walking Group
- ♥ Social Activity – bus trips, dinners or birthday celebrations
- ♥ Taking the day out to have a shared lunch
- ♥ Picnic meeting for a holiday season celebration
- ♥ Watching a heart-related documentary followed by a group discussion. The Heart Foundation has its own You Tube channel with many videos around heart health that you can access for free go to <https://www.youtube.com/user/HeartFoundationAust>
- ♥ Newsletters from peak bodies and Heartbeat Victoria Inc. to share and discuss
- ♥ Articles about new heart research to share and discuss.



### TIP

It's important when planning speakers and activities that you have a plan and have help. Planning a calendar of events and activities a year in advance - if possible – can be beneficial as it keeps the group organised and on-track. This also helps promote attendance as special events can be promoted in the community and media in advance.

Sharing the responsibility for organising these speakers and activities is a good way to make sure that one person does not become overburdened. There may also be people in your group who have networks with the types of guest speakers/activities that you would like to have at your meeting. Planning this as a group at the start of the year is a good way to stay on track and share the load. Make sure you write all the actions down in your minutes so everyone is clear about what they have agreed to organise.

## Calendar of Events Example - Cherryvale Heart Support Group

Date	ACTIVITY	Details
<b>February 2</b>	Dinner Meeting Cherryvale RSL 6.00pm	Speaker: 7.00pm Member Jenny Smith
<b>March 2</b>	Dinner Meeting Cherryvale RSL 6.00pm	Speaker: 7.00pm Audiologist Cherryvale Health
<b>April 13 (changed date due to Easter)</b>	Dinner Meeting Cherryvale RSL 6.00pm	Speaker: 7.00pm Leslie Chung Chief Radiographer Tour of Cherryvale Radiology Dept 6.45pm
<b>May 4</b>	Dinner Meeting Cherryvale RSL 6.00pm	Speaker: 7.00pm Susie Higgins Meditation and Stress Management
<b>June 1</b>	Dinner Meeting Cherryvale RSL 6.00pm	Speaker: 7.00pm Telemedicine demonstration and presenter Cherryvale Health

Date	KEEP IT BEATING- WALK
<b>February</b>	No Walk
<b>March 11</b>	Walk 5.30pm Lions Park Cherryvale BYO Meat Salad to share. Sweets provided.
<b>April 21</b>	Walk 5.45pm Lake Alexander Dinner Cherryvale RSL 6.30pm
<b>May 11</b>	Walk 5.30pm Lions Park, Cherryvale Dinner Cherryvale RSL 6.30pm
<b>June 8</b>	Walk 5.45pm Lake Alexander Dinner Cherryvale RSL 6.30pm

# Staying connected to group members

Some group members may not attend every meeting or activity due to illness or life circumstances. It can be helpful for these members to receive correspondence from the group so that they still feel that they belong and are connected. It's also a good reminder of the next meeting coming up, especially for members who may not be attending so often, whatever their circumstances, and may be ready to re-join the group.

## Newsletters

Producing a simple newsletter is a good way for members to keep up with important news and group activities. It doesn't have to be an arduous task. Most newsletters contain simple information about what is coming up in group events, what has happened in the previous month, decisions made and might include interesting health information from Heart Foundation or the newspaper. Minutes from the previous meeting are normally also included.

Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. groups' newsletters are often shared. If you would like to see a sample newsletter – please contact the Board of Management of Heartbeat Victoria Inc.

It is important to maintain people's confidentiality especially in the written form. If you are giving an update on a member's health status, it's critical to gain that person's consent beforehand. Otherwise, speak about the group as a whole and do not use any identifying data such as names or descriptions. Newsletters can have a wide distribution and end up in GP surgeries or hospitals so it's important to be respectful of people's privacy when giving group updates.

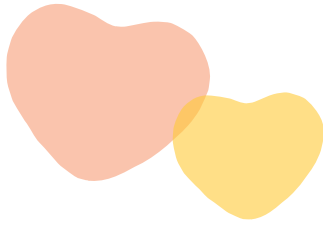
Equally, if you are using photos with group members in them, please gain the person's written consent beforehand. Heartbeat Victoria Inc. Policy and Procedures Manual will have a sample form.



### TIP

if using an email distribution list – ensure you put people's email addresses in the BCC (blind carbon copy) option of the email. This ensures all recipients on the list don't see the personal addresses of other people on the list and that their confidentiality is protected. If members would like to share email addresses, always ensure all members have agreed to this beforehand and that the Group Agreement protocols are also respected when using electronic distribution of information.

# Dealing with challenging behaviours and situations



With all groups there will be challenging aspects that arise when people get together on a regular basis. Whilst most of these scenarios may not happen in every group, they act as a guide to help prepare you in a tricky situation. Heartbeat Victoria Inc. is also available to support you via telephone and sometimes by attending a group alongside you, if a situation is particularly challenging, and if you feel you may benefit from assistance.

The following are some common situations that arise in a group setting.

## Someone who dominates the group

There may be a person in the group who takes over. They might seek attention and overshadow everyone else by:

- ♥ always having the 'worst' problems or being in crisis
- ♥ constantly talking, filling silences
- ♥ being a know-it-all and 'knowing' the problems of another group member (e.g. "I'm like that too")
- ♥ giving advice and using "you should" statements
- ♥ behaving aggressively.

People don't always mean to act this way, and they might be unaware of how their behaviour affects the group. However, their behaviour may cause the other members to hold back their ideas.

### Actions to consider

- ♥ At the start of the group, remind everyone about the Group Agreement. For example, there may be a rule about not talking over one another.
- ♥ Avoid discouraging the excessive talker; encourage others to talk more and manage personal participation.
- ♥ Go around the group, giving each person a chance to talk (perhaps for an agreed amount of time).
- ♥ During the discussion part of the meeting format, you may wish to divide the group into smaller group (2-4 people) to share ideas, then ask each group to summarise their comments and report back.
- ♥ Acknowledge a comment, even if it's not appropriate or helpful, then quickly involve others: "Jim, that was an interesting comment. Barbara, what are your views?"
- ♥ If the person is dominating too much, limit eye contact and don't respond to unhelpful comments. Move on to the next person.
- ♥ In a difficult case, change the Group Agreement (for example, set a time limit on speaking).



## Someone who is angry or disruptive

Anger is a natural emotion when people are undergoing life changes, and it shouldn't always be thought of as a problem. People may be angry at the changes in their health, their doctors, their treatment, their side effects, or at the pain and suffering of their loved ones. The support group could be the person's only chance to express their anger in a non-judgmental place.

Anger can be frightening if it's directed at the group or at you personally, as the Chairperson/President. However, it's usually not necessary to intervene unless the person doesn't cool off, if they become hostile or verbally abusive, or if they direct their anger at another group member.

### Actions to consider

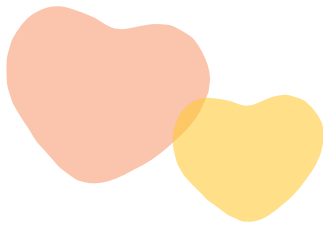
- ♥ Clarify the issue. What exactly is the person angry about?
- ♥ Ensure the person feels supported. Talking to the person one-on-one during a break may help.
- ♥ Keep discussion focused and allow people to finish statements. Encourage "I" statements and active listening. Refer to the group agreement, if necessary.
- ♥ Ask the rest of the group if they also get angry and how they deal with it. Hearing how someone else faced a similar situation might be helpful.
- ♥ Take a short break to allow the angry person time to cool off.
- ♥ End the meeting with an open discussion. Wrapping up this way gives members a chance to have a 'last word' about the meeting.

## Someone who annoys you

At times, certain people's behaviour or comments will be annoying. It can be frustrating to have someone in the group who pushes your buttons. It might help to do some self-reflection about the personality traits and behaviours that irk you. Sometimes taking a step back and thinking about it can help calm you down when you encounter this type of person.

### Actions to consider

- ♥ Monitor your reactions to people who annoy you. Chairpeople/ Presidents have to be understanding and polite to everyone, not just those they like.
- ♥ Ask your office bearers (or health professional if you have one involved in the group) to deal with the person. Talk about it during your debrief and work on strategies together.



- ♥ Pay attention to how others in the group respond. If someone is trying to dominate the group, other members will expect you to deal with it or they will remind them about the group agreement to keep the group on track.
- ♥ Acknowledge that nobody is perfect. You may sometimes need to apologise for what you've said or how you've said it. Say you're sorry, then move on.

### Someone who cries

Talking about our experiences can be emotional and there will be tears at times. For some people, the group may be the first time they have felt comfortable enough to cry or have given themselves permission to do so. Tears are a healthy expression of emotion so they should be allowed to flow.

#### Actions to consider

- ♥ Make it clear to group members that it's okay to cry during a support group meeting.
- ♥ Always have a box of tissues visible.
- ♥ Acknowledge the emotion being expressed without singling out the person. Group members may rush over with a box of tissues or a comforting arm around the member's shoulders. Although their intentions are good, this may be an unintentional signal for the person to stop crying. A better response is to give them time to cry and ask if they want a tissue.
- ♥ Talk with the person quietly, either in group or during a break, and ask what they would like to happen.
- ♥ If the person cries a lot or becomes disruptive, explore if they may need other support outside the group.

### Someone who doesn't talk

Not all group members will talk as much as each other. Some people will be shy about sharing their feelings or opening up. This may be a problem if other people in the group start to feel resentful about sharing, or if there are several silent members in the group and not much conversation. It can be easy to ignore silent members. People might not contribute because they don't like to interrupt, or they might feel shy or worry that they don't have anything worthwhile to say. Be aware of non-verbal cues that show the person is interested – for instance, a person may nod in agreement.

#### Actions to consider

- ♥ Use an alternative format, such as breaking into smaller groups to share ideas. In this setting, a quiet person might be more comfortable to talk freely. A spokesperson from each group can report back.

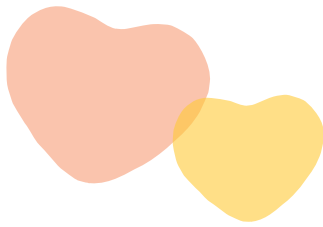
- ♥ Draw the silent member into the discussion by asking questions related to their areas of expertise and interest. Be careful not to spotlight people and be mindful of their right not to speak.
- ♥ Reassure the person that they aren't the only one who feels vulnerable.
- ♥ Encourage a more active person to gently draw the quiet person out of their shell during group.
- ♥ Before a meeting or during a break, check in with the silent group member. Find out if they would like to talk more and how they can be supported. Ask if there is anything in particular they were hoping to discuss. The person may be happy with their level of participation.
- ♥ If someone is usually chatty and then becomes silent, it could be a concern. You may want to talk to the person one on one to see what has changed for them.

## Members with English as a second language

Some members may not speak English or may have English as a second language. Some may understand English but feel uncomfortable when speaking it, and may be limited to listening to the conversations without being able to actively participate. It is important that these members are made to feel comfortable and welcome.

### **Actions to consider**

- ♥ Call the Heart Foundation Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87 to see if there are any specific resources available in their language. There may also be support or education programs running from time to time, specifically for people from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. The person may want to attend that group instead.
- ♥ Let the person know that they are welcome to bring a family member or friend along to help with communication.
- ♥ Be patient with people who have heavy accents or have difficulty expressing themselves. Don't rush them or attempt to put words in their mouths. Speak slowly and be patient, and don't talk to them loudly.



## Group members with physical needs

Some group members may have physical needs that require extra assistance – for example, they may have problems with mobility, vision or hearing. It's important to be able to cater for this.

### Actions to consider

- ♥ Ask the group members to tell you about any special needs so you can accommodate them. For example, if someone is vision impaired, you may want to print materials in a larger font size or you may want to use a microphone for those with hearing impairment.
- ♥ Rearrange furniture to make room for wheelchairs or walking frames.

## Controversial topics

It is common for support groups to talk about controversial topics from time to time. Some topics can cause lively discussion or debate. This may include complementary or alternative therapies, new treatments, positive imagery or positive thinking, faith and religion. Everyone has a right to their own opinion – it's the President/Chairperson's job to keep their opinions private and keep discussions on track.

### Actions to consider

- ♥ If the discussion becomes too intense, or if it gets the group off track, refer back to the Group Agreement.
- ♥ Ask if anyone has personal experience with the topic – sometimes it's helpful to have input from someone who has been through it.
- ♥ Acknowledge how challenging it is to think about these issues and talk about them. Some people may never be on the same page, and it's okay to have different opinions about issues.
- ♥ If someone is misinformed, refer the person to the group's Resources Library, if there is one. You may also be able to invite a health professional to come in to discuss the topic or tell someone to call the Heart Foundation Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87
- ♥ Keep up with your own self care through debriefing – it can be very draining to lead controversial discussions (see section on Looking after yourself).

## Being aware of anxiety, depression and suicide

Anxiety, depression and heart disease are common conditions and often occur together. Fortunately, once diagnosed, anxiety and depression can be treated safely and effectively.

### Anxiety

Surviving a serious heart event or being diagnosed with a heart condition is stressful and traumatic for many people and their families. For many, these events mean that major lifestyle adjustments need to be made that result in huge changes in people's physical, emotional, social and financial positions. This life situation is one that can trigger feelings of anxiety.

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. It is normal to feel anxious at different times during your life and these feelings usually pass once the stressful situation has been resolved.

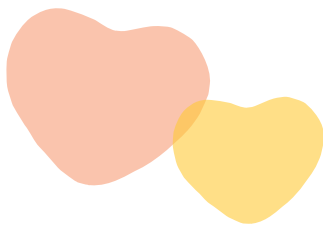
For some though, anxious feelings happen for no apparent reason or continue after a stressful event is over. Anxiety can be felt in many different ways. Common symptoms include:

- ♥ Hot and cold flushes
- ♥ Racing heart
- ♥ Tightening of the chest
- ♥ Snowballing worries
- ♥ Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- ♥ Obsessive thinking or compulsive behaviour

There are very effective treatments for anxiety. If you or a member of your group is experiencing anxiety, the best first step is to go and have a chat with your GP to discuss treatment options that are suitable for you. Unfortunately, if left untreated, anxiety can lead to depression.

You can also find more information about anxiety at [www.beyondblue.or.au](http://www.beyondblue.or.au)

*(Reference: beyondblue)*



## Depression

It's normal for everyone to have days when they feel down. It's when those down days stick around for a longer period of time, accompanied by profound feelings of sadness and loss of interest in things that you previously enjoyed, that we become concerned about depression.

We know that one in five people will go on to develop depression after a heart event. This may not be something that people will always talk about at a group, however it's important to understand that this may be an issue for some people.

The Heart Research Centre has produced a series of cardiac blues resources which would be very valuable to have on display at meetings to support and inform members. They point to symptoms, and where to get help. You can order these resources from the beyondblue Support Service on 1300 22 4636, a confidential service available 24 hours, 7 days per week. A trained mental health professional can give you advice that you, or a group member may need.

## Suicidal thoughts

Depression left untreated however, can sometimes lead to people having suicidal thoughts. Although suicide is rarely an issue in heart related peer support groups, it's important to know what you can do if you think a group member may be at risk of suicide.

If during the meeting, someone says something or does something that leads you to believe their life is at risk, the most important thing is to take this situation seriously and act straightaway. Taking action may be frightening, but it can save someone's life.

Talking about suicide doesn't increase a person's risk of suicide or put ideas into their head. In fact, it's important to let the person know that it is okay to talk about suicide and to get help.

**a heart event is an emotional experience, not just a physical one**

When you leave hospital after a cardiac event you may find yourself on an emotional rollercoaster.

Having a range of strong feelings is common and normal. These feelings generally pass with time, as you recover physically.

However, one in five people go on to develop depression after a heart event.

**Am I at risk of developing depression?**

One in five people go on to develop depression after a heart event.

You are at increased risk of depression if:

- ☐ you have had anxiety or depression in the past
- ☐ you have no-one to talk to
- ☐ you have been stressed at work or home
- ☐ you have lost your job
- ☐ you have financial worries
- ☐ a loved one has died recently
- ☐ you have recently divorced or separated
- ☐ you regularly use cigarettes, drugs or alcohol
- ☐ you have diabetes
- ☐ you have other health problems
- ☐ your mood is not getting better

**If you think you are at risk, make an appointment to talk with your doctor about depression.**

There are many services and supports available to help you with your emotions after a cardiac event.

For more information:  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)  
[www.heartresearchcentre.org](http://www.heartresearchcentre.org)

cardiacblues

beyondblue

heart

### Actions to consider

- ♥ Let one of your office bearers take over the group if you need to take someone who is distressed somewhere quiet and out of earshot.
- ♥ The best approach is to ask the person directly: "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" or "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"
- ♥ Encourage the person to talk, and listen to them without judgment or advice. Take the person seriously – don't deny their feelings. People often feel relieved when they are able to talk about suicidal thoughts.



- ♥ Do not attempt to counsel the person – refer the matter to appropriately qualified personnel as soon as possible.
- ♥ You or the person who is distressed can call Lifeline (13 11 14) for support. Lifeline is a 24-hour suicide and crisis prevention service.
- ♥ When the crisis has passed, it's important to look after your own wellbeing through debriefing and/or supervision.

## When a member dies

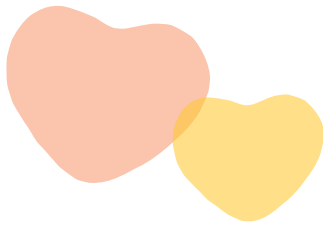
Most groups have to deal with the death of a group member at some stage. It is complex, difficult and distressing when a member dies. People in support groups often form a very special bond, and the loss of a member is deeply felt.

The death of a member is one of the hardest issues for Chairpeople/ Presidents, who have to acknowledge the loss while minimising the impact on the rest of the group – all the while dealing with their own grief. It may be a good idea to have a bereavement counsellor a guest speaker during the year (not when someone has died), to reinforce that death is an important issue. The session will also allow the group to talk openly about dealing with the death of a member.

### Actions to consider

- ♥ Deal openly with a group member's death. What the group does after a person dies is highly symbolic.
- ♥ At the first meeting after someone has died, announce the death and spend a moment or two remembering what made that person special. People may find it easier to talk more openly if everyone acknowledges how difficult it is.
- ♥ Group members can share what the person who died meant to them and what they felt they gave to the person. If people don't want to share this, don't push them to talk. It may be a good prompt for personal reflection.
- ♥ Some groups prefer to contact members when the person dies, via a phone call, so no one is surprised at the next meeting. This also allows people to plan to attend the funeral or memorial service, if appropriate.
- ♥ After paying tribute to the person, take a break and come back together to continue the group.

# Looking after yourself



Being involved in a support group can be a big responsibility and it may take a lot of time and energy. This can be draining at times, even for the most committed person with a lot of time on their hands. Even if other people are available to help, Chairpeople/Presidents are at risk of burnout. Burnout is a word that's sometimes used to describe exhaustion and reduced interest in a task.

Several signs may indicate burnout:

- ♥ feeling emotionally, physically and mentally tired
- ♥ inability to listen to group members' stories
- ♥ no satisfaction in completing tasks
- ♥ reluctance about going to group meetings
- ♥ not 'switching off' after group meetings
- ♥ negative attitudes to tasks
- ♥ questioning whether work is valued
- ♥ sense of failure, low self-esteem
- ♥ frustration and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Anyone involved in running a support group is susceptible to burnout, but it's most common for office bearers because of the amount of work they do. It's important to look after yourself and have your own personal support systems.

## Self-care

Self-care involves taking time to look after your own wellbeing. This involves debriefing, and it may also involve supervision (where you pay for a formal debriefing usually by a psychologist or social worker, which is common practice in helping professions).

Self-care can take some discipline – running a support group is time consuming, and it's easy to overlook your own needs. Some people think it's selfish to take time to look after themselves, but if you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, you probably won't be able to be as effective. It can also be hard to support others while dealing with issues in your own life.

## Debriefing

Debriefing is thinking about what happened during the support group meeting. It's an opportunity to process any concerns or questions that might have come up. Here is an example you may like to use when journaling or reflecting:

### **Traffic Debrief \***

*A traffic light is used to help direct motorists while driving to keep them from crashing. The lights signify things a driver should do to keep things flowing smoothly. The three colours on the stoplight can be used as metaphors for behaviours: What are you doing well? (green light) What do you need to be careful of? (yellow light) What do you need to stop doing? (red light)*

*RED: What are things happening in the group that need to STOP in order for it to be more successful?*

*YELLOW: What are things that I need to be CAREFUL of as the group continues?*

*Suggestions have included keeping everyone safe, listening to all ideas, being aware of personal choices and boundaries, etc.*

*GREEN: What are things are going well or we want to GO for? This could be group goals, as well as behaviour suggestions. Ideas have included being respectful, encouraging more, setting time limits, etc.*

*\*(Reference: Michelle Cummings, M.S. [www.training-wheels.com](http://www.training-wheels.com))*

If you have other office bearers (ie. Secretary or Chairperson), schedule about 30 minutes after the meeting to debrief with each other. This can be done face-to-face, by phone or by email.

## Taking time to reflect

Make time for debriefing either straight after group members leave or within the next couple of days. Chairpeople/Presidents who don't have an office bearer helping them run the meeting should debrief in the same way as a self-reflection exercise.

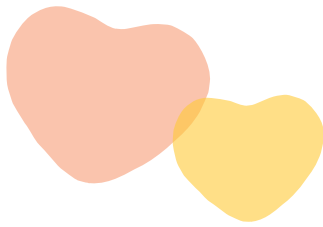
If the group has regular guest speakers, part of the debriefing should also involve discussing how the speaker went. You may also use this time to discuss other speakers that might be relevant for future meetings and what is involved to get them along.

It's not always possible to debrief straightaway, but try to block out some time during the week after the meeting for reflection. Once you get used to taking the time to talk to someone else or self-reflect, it often becomes a habit. Debriefing will help you monitor your personal wellbeing and the group in general.



“Just enjoy the experience, because it is very rewarding. In the knowledge that there are heart patients benefitting from our hard work.”

*Office bearer of 3 years*



Heartbeat Victoria Inc. can help you with difficult issues, both before you tackle them and as a sounding board to debrief. It may be possible to link you with another support group President/Chairperson so you can debrief with each other. Contact the Board of Management if you would like further information.

If you can't debrief with someone else, it's still important to take time for self-reflection after each group. Ask yourself the debriefing questions above and make some notes about what happened. You can also find a peer who is able to listen to your concerns confidentially, if you need to talk about what's going on.

From time to time telephone group debriefing with other branch committee members is arranged by the Heart Foundation.

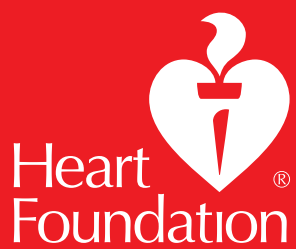
Coming along to delegate meetings is also a good way to speak with other Presidents/Chairpeople and share ideas/experiences.

If you would like to organise professional debriefing, this can normally be done by speaking with a qualified social worker/psychologist and asking them to recommend a colleague.

There are also a number of agencies that can help you in your peer support role. Please see Supporting Hearts Toolkit page 36 for helpful agencies.

# Recommended websites and resources

- Supporting Hearts: A toolkit for heart support groups (available through the Heart Foundation)
- Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Policy and Procedures Manual
- Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc. Rules of Association
- Cancer Support Groups: a guide to setting up and maintaining a group (available online or through Cancer Council Victoria <http://www.cancerdirectory.com.au>)
- Peer Leaders Online Training – chronic illness alliance (available to all leaders online at <http://www.peerleadersonlinetraining.net/>)
- Peer Support Guide – Department of Human Services (<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au>)
- Cancer Support Groups: a guide to setting up peer facilitated supports (<http://canceraustralia.gov.au/publications-and-resources>)
- Guide to successful peer support groups – Diabetes Australia Vic [www.diabetesvic.org.au](http://www.diabetesvic.org.au)
- Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria Peer Support Groups – A guide to setting up and maintaining a Peer Support Group <http://www.arthritisvic.org.au>



For heart health information  
1300 36 27 87  
[www.heartfoundation.org.au](http://www.heartfoundation.org.au)