

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS PROGRAM

ELEVATOR PITCH

Peer Support Groups (PSGs) is a 12- to 16-week program that teaches participants emotional and relational skills as well as the supporting science and research. By subdividing the class into small groups comprising 4–5 members, participants have a place in which to practice these skills and develop deep relationships. The program combines elements of traditional support groups (e.g. 12-step), social and emotional learning (SEL), peer support training, and group facilitation. By the end, participants will have developed the skills and relationships that they will continue to benefit from beyond the classroom and throughout their lives.

OVERVIEW

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is fast becoming a core element of K–12 education curricula. And while the objectives of SEL are admirable, they often focus on individual skills and self-care, only briefly touching on the impact of relationships and interactions. And even when they do, it can be at an abstract level where the concepts are presented in theory but not used in practice. Or if they are practiced, it is in the confines of the classroom. It can be difficult to bring techniques into the real world where the other people don't have the same training.

Participants will be placed into same-gender peer support groups (PSGs) each comprising four participants (five if necessary). Each PSG will remain in place for the duration of the program. Participants will learn the principles of the program in weekly classroom sessions, then practice within their PSG in the interim. The participants will be strongly and explicitly encouraged to continue to meet in their PSG beyond the assignments and after the program finishes to provide mutual support.

The research that forms the foundation of this program includes:

- *The Harvard Study of Adult Development* (a.k.a. The Grant Study) which found that [the only thing that truly matters in life are your relationships](#).
- *The Blue Zones*, which are linked with some of the healthiest, happiest, and longest-lived people on the planet. Okinawa is one of the blue zones, and the peer support group is modeled on their community's social group, known as a [moai](#).
- Susan Pinker's book *The Village Effect*, which explores one particular "blue zone"—the Italian island of Sardinia.
- Dr. Robin Dunbar's research, who found that human relationships—like other primates—follow hierarchical levels of intimacy, with our innermost support group comprising 3–5 individuals.

From his book [Friends](#): “You will certainly do yourself a favor by eating better, taking more exercise, and popping the pills they give you, but you’ll do considerably better just by having some friends.”

- The [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) study](#) by the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) in partnership with Dr. Vincent Felitti from Kaiser Permanente.

A group size of four was chosen to give each participant three close confidants while still leaving room for other close relationships like best friends and romantic partners.

TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC

[Transitional age youth](#) (TAY, age 16–25) are likely to gain the most from this program. They are still early in their lives so they likely have more space to invest in developing deep relationships. They also have had less time to internalize counterproductive habits in relationships. And at this age, they are empowered with more agency and autonomy, so there is less chance of interference from caregivers (well-meaning, unintentional, or otherwise).

The ideal participants (at least for the pilot) are college/university students, preferably roommates and even better if they are Freshmen. In-person interactions outside the classroom are key to the success of this program. Choosing young adults who will be spending most of their time together will remove a barrier to success that would otherwise be there for participants who do not live together.

That said, this program would be beneficial for any age group, provided they live close enough together to allow for relatively easy in-person gatherings.

FORMAT

FORMAL PROGRAM

- 12 weeks (3 months)
- Weekly full-group classes: lectures, demonstrations, small-group exercises, discussion, Q&A
- Weekly moai (small-group) sessions, facilitated by a TA
- Weekly homework assignments to be done with the moai

CHOOSING MEMBERS

- Physical proximity and ability to meet in-person is essential.
- Same-gender or sexual preference to avoid sexual tension and conflict.
So a gay man can be in a group of straight women. For bisexual, non-binary, or other such cases, talk to the participants and get their input before group assignment.

- Diversity is important (except for sexual preference).
- Level playing field—all members must be equally close at the outset. No existing friend pairs grouped with strangers or acquaintances.

CONTENT

We will be completely transparent about what we're doing. The goal is to teach SEL, and the key is that participants will practice these skills with one another in their PSG during the program. But also this is a commitment to prioritize meeting up with their PSG for the whole year, practicing these skills, and providing emotional support for one another.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing the container— how this classroom is different from every other one you've ever been in:

- Full presence (no devices)
- Radical honesty
- Non-judgment, full acceptance
- We are all in this together as equals
- We want to hear all perspectives and opinions
- Being here is a choice

Set the example; model the behavior.

Being vulnerable is hard, especially if you're not used to doing it—even more so if you have had relationships modeled for you that did not make you feel safe and accepted for being honest and vulnerable. Everyone makes progress in their own time and gets to choose what to share, with whom, and when. There are no musts other than to respect the container. The program will leverage vulnerable self-disclosure to model the behavior, which will encourage some brave participants to follow suit so that eventually, all will feel comfortable enough to be vulnerable to some degree. Reciprocity is an important aspect of the program. In kind with your peers, then the quality and depth of the relationship will suffer.

Explicitly give people the chance to opt-out. Reinforce that there is no shame in choosing not to participate, especially if you feel you are not capable of fully committing. But know that if you choose to proceed, the whole staff and class will be here to support you through this.

CLASSROOM SESSION TOPICS

A more detailed list appears in the appendix. These are just some high-level possibilities.

- The importance of relationships to health, happiness and longevity

- Crisis resources and what to do if you or a classmate is in crisis
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their long-term negative impacts
- Self-care: putting on your own oxygen mask first before helping others
- Meditation, mindfulness, “present sense”
- The human superpower: deception; our brains are deception engines
- Radical honesty and the importance of telling your truth to a compassionate person
- Can you be completely honest with yourself? Can you admit that you might be wrong?
- Empathy and Compassion; Multiperspectivity
- Active listening skills
- Non-judgment (the golden rule, the platinum rule, the antimatter rule), the Chicxulub impact
- The Acceptance Gap, Radical Acceptance, acceptance without judgment
- Empathy Traps
- Gottman’s findings on relationships and the four horsemen
- Dispelling common societal metanarratives
- The challenges of managing relationships in modern society
- Mental Illness (mental injury)
- Conflict and resolution (e.g. Nonviolent communication)
- Interacting with other people who don’t have these skills, especially family & loved ones

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

The core of the program are the weekly peer support groups attended by all the members of the group, plus a facilitator.

INTAKE

All participants will go through an intake screening including a version of the ACEs evaluation (see the Measuring Impact section for more details). This intake will expose unresolved trauma in some participants. The program will work hand-in-hand with licensed therapists to help these participants work through their trauma in parallel with the program. The scope of this problem may be bigger than anticipated. If so, the program may utilize its TAs to work with participants from a different PSG, or we may refer to other organizations such as support groups, NAMI, campus services, or nonprofit orgs (e.g. allcove).

HOMEWORK

Expected commitment of 1–2 hours each day outside the classroom.

- social dinners without devices
- shared exercise activities: walks, hikes, running, cycling, tennis, volleyball...

- Sharing stories of growing up—what happened to you?
- Resolving conflict
- 1:1 interactions

MEASURING IMPACT

Administer [standardized mental health questionnaires](#) before the program begins. We will balance being comprehensive with the desire to keep it reasonable so that participants can remain engaged and give honest answers. Design the survey so that the most important metrics are at the beginning.

Some possibilities:

- [ACEs](#)
- Big 5 personality
- Enneagram
- PHQ-9 (Depression)
- GAD-7 (Anxiety)
- Loneliness
- Suicide and Self-harm
- Imposter Phenomenon (Clance IP)
- Frustration-Discomfort Scale (FDS)
- SCOFF (eating disorder)

Or these:

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your life these days?
1 = completely dissatisfied ... 4 = neutral ... 7 = completely satisfied
- Overall, how happy are you?
1 = completely miserable ... 4 = neutral ... 7 overwhelming joy
- How happy did you feel yesterday?
1 = completely miserable ... 4 = neutral ... 7 overwhelming joy

Administer the same set of questionnaires at the end of the formal program, then again at intervals during some—if not all—follow-ups.

FOLLOW UP

- 3 monthly check-ins with the moai and TA (months 4, 5, and 6)
- 2 quarterly check-ins with the moai and TA (month 9 and 12)
- Optional: lead and assistant instructors brief check-in cameos at months 6, 9 and 12

COST ESTIMATE

STAFFING REQUIREMENTS

For a class of 20 people (5 cohorts or 4 people each)

- 1 lead instructor · \$1/hr for Dave Cortright or \$100/hour for market rate
- 1 assistant instructor · LCSW/LPC/LMFT, OR PsyD) · \$75/hr
- 5 teaching assistants (TAs) · SW/PC/MFT students, coaches or peer support specialists · \$30/hr
- Therapists (as needed) · \$100/hour

I estimate 20% of participants would need to talk to a therapist each week. Buffer funding allows for more if needed.

$\$1 + \$75 + \$150 = \$226/\text{hr}$ staff time

TRAINING

6–10 hours for all staff up front: **\$1356–\$2260**

Staff meetings—1 hour each week for check-in, sync, planning and ongoing training: $\$226 \times 12 =$ **\$2712**

CLASSES

12 1-hour classes: **\$2700**

SMALL GROUPS (PSGs)

12 1-hour sessions for all groups (5): $\$150 \times 12 =$ **\$1800**

INDIVIDUAL 1:1 SESSIONS

Participants who need additional support 1:1 can meet weekly with one of the TAs (*it could be their moai lead, or maybe it'd be better to meet with someone else to keep group cohesion*).

5–10 sessions/week @ \$30/session: **\$1800–\$3600**

DOCUMENTING THE IMPACT

Creating the participant surveys:

5 hours of the lead and assistant instructors: **\$380**

Compiling results of the survey and generating a report

10 hours of the lead and assistant instructors: **\$760**

N° participants	20	Staff	Hourly rate	Note
N° participants/moai	4	Lead instructor	\$1	I would take a nominal rate. \$100/hr market rate
N° moais	5	Assistant instructor	\$75	(LCSW, LPC, LMFT, or PsyD)
		Teaching Assistant	\$30	One per moai
		Therapist	\$100	As needed to help participants 1:1 work through trauma
				.
Item	Hours	Who		Note
Pre-course training	6–10	Lead, Assistant, TAs	\$2,260	\$226/hour
Staff meetings	12	Lead, Assistant, TAs	\$2,712	1 hour weekly for check-in, sync, planning
Class sessions	12	Lead, Assistant, TAs	\$2,712	1 hour each week, \$226/hour
Peer Support Groups	12×5	TAs	\$1,800	TAs maintain container and lightly facilitate
1:1 sessions	5–10×12	TAs	\$3,600	TAs meet with 1:1 participants not in their moai;
1:1 therapy	2×12	Therapist	\$2,400	10% of participants each week. \$100/hour
Gathering Data	5	Lead & Assistant	\$380	\$76/hour
Writing report	10	Lead & Assistant	\$760	\$76/hour
Buffer			\$3,325	20% additional money for unseen expenses
Total			\$19,949	\$24,602 (+\$4653) for a lead instructor at the market rate

APPENDIX A: POSSIBLE CONTENT

- The importance of relationships to health, happiness and longevity
 - The Harvard Grant Study
 - The Blue Zones, especially Okinawan moais
 - Robin Dunbar’s work, especially his books *Friends* and *Religion*
 - Susan Pinker’s *The Village Effect*
 - The Roseto Effect
 - The Amish *Rumspringa*
 - Johann Hari’s books *Lost Connections* and *Chasing the Scream*
 - Sebastian Junger’s book *Tribe*
- Relationships are like the air we breathe
 - Invisible
 - we don’t think about it
 - but it’s always there
 - it’s essential for life
 - when it’s not there, it’s very noticeable
- Radical honesty and the importance of [telling your truth to a compassionate person](#)
 - Catholic confession
 - Hindu Prāyaścitta
 - Islam Istighfar

- 12-Step program: Step 5
- Empathy Traps
 - even worse (there's a bigger problem than yours...)
 - look on the bright side [toxic positivity] (look on the bright side, at least ...)
 - giving advice (here's what you should do...)
 - problem solving (let me take care of that for you...)
 - refocusing on me (let me tell you about my similar situation...)
 - judging (you shouldn't feel that way)
 - rationalizing (let me show you why that isn't a problem...)
 - minimizing (oh don't be silly, that's not a big problem)
 - denying (that's not true)
 - rejecting (I don't want to hear about that)
 - anger (I said I don't want to hear about that!)
 - criticism/contempt (why do you always come to me with these petty problems!?)
 - stonewalling (I can't even respond to that)
- Gottman's findings on relationships and the four horsemen:
 - criticism
 - contempt
 - defensiveness
 - stonewalling
- Dispelling common societal metanarratives
 - The Inner Critic ([The Dalai Lama meets Western psychologists story](#))
 - The Achievement Fallacy
(aka performativity; love and belonging are contingent upon achievement)
 - Fulfilling the Quest (happily ever after)
- The challenges of managing relationships in modern society
 - Individualism and achievement
 - Money (only fulfills the bottom 2 levels of Maslow's Hierarchy)
 - Diffusion of relationship energy
 - High mobility
 - Finite games vs infinite games (ghosting)
 - The power of social pressure; Asch compliance experiment
 - Types of interactions: positive, neutral, negative, none
 - Managing difficult emotions
 - Parasocial relationships
 - Generational trauma and relationship skills passed down
 - Comparing your insides with others' outsides
 - FOMO
- Mental Illness (mental injury)

- common diagnoses
 - Depressive disorder
 - Anxiety disorders
 - Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
 - Psychosis and/or Schizophrenia
 - Bipolar disorder
 - Obsessive-compulsive disorder
 - Borderline personality disorder
 - Dissociative disorders
 - Dual diagnosis (co-occurring mental health conditions and substance use/abuse disorder)
- Treatments
- How to be compassionate ([Geel, Belgium example](#))
- Models for structuring the group
 - Circling
 - Mastermind
 - Authentic Relating
 - Support Group rules (e.g. no crosstalk)
 - Microsolidarity groups

APPENDIX B: SUPPORTING INFORMATION

[Op-Ed on Student on Mental Health](#) by Dave Cortright (May 2023)

[Grant's Razor](#)

[The Bowlby Conjecture](#)

[4AM Friends](#)

[ACEs study founder Vincent Felitti](#)

[USA Surgeon General April 2023 report on loneliness and social connection](#)

APPENDIX C: EXTRA CREDIT

Read [Laziness Does Not Exist \(But unseen barriers do\)](#) by Devon Price

Read [The Unlikely Friendship that Helped Legalize Same-Sex Marriage in Ireland](#)

Learn the [fallacies of Logic](#)

Take the [Professional Coaching Course](#) by New Ventures West

Peer Support Groups Program © 2022 by [Dave Cortright](#) is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#)