

2023

# Wings of Change – Peer Support Guide



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# Acknowledgements

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Sylvio (Syd) A. Gravel, Retired Staff Sergeant from the Ottawa Police Service and a Member of the Order of Merit for Police in Canada, Founding father of Robin's Blue Circle

Jim Harris, Director of the Barrie, Ontario Branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association

Bill Rusk, Director, Badge of Life Canada

Focus Group Members:

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Nicholas Harris (Police Officer)

Bonnie Bradley AEMCA, PCP (Paramedic)

# Message From Founder, Natalie Harris

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Dear Participants,

Welcome. You are among friends; peers who, just like you, have experienced some form of difficulty coping with the sights, sounds, smells and memories of traumatic interactions with members of their community while on duty. I have experienced these difficulties as well, and want to share a portion of my story to reveal how Wings of Change - Peer Support, was born.

On September 23, 2014, I testified at a double murder trial where after two years, I would see my patient again - the murderer. This was followed by a memorial service in the afternoon for a fellow paramedic and friend who had recently died. It was a day filled with pain, and that night while trying to numb this pain, I overdosed. I woke up in the mental health ICU, where hospital staff told me I would be for a while. But they said I shouldn't worry, because I had a lot of support; and that I did. Family, friends and co-workers texted, messaged and phoned me a lot over the next few weeks - for which I am grateful. But as the days went by, the conversations started to dwindle, and I began to feel very alone. I felt like I was the only person in the world going through the same type of pain, but I would soon find out how wrong this thinking was.



**"... I sadly  
discovered that  
mental illness  
was running  
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profession..."**

As I progressed through my recovery in a rehabilitation hospital and in out-patient therapies, I sadly discovered that mental illness was running rampant in my profession and that the fear of stigma was causing many of my peers to secretly suffer until their bodies and minds could no longer bare the toxic silence they believed was necessary to keep their careers; which most still dearly loved. I was among individuals who believed that asking for help equaled weakness, and I knew that when I was healthy enough, I would work hard to change this belief.

After completing my treatment and programs I realized how much I missed the peer support I received there from others who were recovering just like me. Their presence and strength played such a huge role in my successful recovery and I was sad to learn when I went home that there were no regular support groups like this that I could still participate in.

Fellow paramedics and Director of the Barrie, Canadian Mental Health Association, Jim Harris, both agreed with me that there was a lack of regular peer support available in our community for those with operational stress injury questions and concerns. This sparked my desire to research peer support groups in other fields.

I obtained expert advice from Syd Gravel, Member of the Order of Merit and Peer Support Specialist, and Bill Rusk, Director of Badge of Life Canada. I then formed a focus group with peers across the country who had just as much passion about seeing an improvement in this field as I did, and used their valued feedback to create Wings of Change - Peer Support.

It is my sincerest wish that this model will provide the framework needed to implement peer support groups everywhere and complement programs already in place. Through non-stigmatized fellowship and education, Wings of Change - Peer Support, encourages a new outlook where the need to be comfortable with discomfort no longer exists.

Wishing you health and happiness,

*Natalie Harris*  
*she/her*

[www.wingsofchange.ca](http://www.wingsofchange.ca)  
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# Facilitator Etiquette

Suggested checklist for online meetings:

- Wear neat clothing (can be casual attire)
- Try to choose a location where distractions in view of your camera are limited (ie: people walking around behind you). Consider blurring the background or using a virtual wallpaper
- Arrive 10-15 minutes early to check your connection/audio/video
- Give your full attention (sit upright, look at the camera and speak clearly)
- Monitor the time so that you end the meeting in an hour (staying online to have conversations after the meeting is welcome if the facilitator has time to do so)
- Display your pronouns

Suggested checklist for in-person meetings:

- Wear neat clothing (can be casual attire)
- Arrive in enough time to prepare coffee (if offered)
- Welcome each guest by introducing yourself and informing them that you are the facilitator(s)
- Keep cell phones on silent and refrain from using it during the meeting
- Ensure that the room(s) is/are left clean and tidy
- Have paper and pens available for people to take notes
- Make eye contact with person sharing and use positive body language to convey the attention you are giving to them

# Online Meeting Guide

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1. Welcome to today's Wings of Change - Peer Support meeting. I am \_\_\_ and I am pleased to be your facilitator. Can we please introduce ourselves by first name, your current location and profession?

2. The following are a few reminders to ensure the safety of all participants:

- Please refrain from ingesting alcohol or drugs during these meetings.
- If you need to leave the meeting, drop a message in the chat to let us know you're ok.
- Please have your video on during the entire meeting unless you need to move locations. This is to ensure transparency during the meeting.
- Please do not record, either video or audio, photograph or screenshot any portion of this meeting.
- If on-duty, please have your radios inaudible or silenced and out of sight, as it can be a trigger for others.

3. This meeting is 1 hour long, so we ask that you keep your sharing to a respectable length in order for everyone to have an opportunity to participate. You can share on the selected topic specifically or on anything else related to your experiences with operational stress injuries and/or mental health challenges or you can simply say "pass". We suggest that you have a paper and pen available to make notes to remind yourself of topics that you would like to discuss further after the meeting.

4. Are there any announcements such as new Wings of Change chapters/meetings available or local mental health events?

5. At this time we gratefully acknowledge Syd Gravel, retired Staff Sergeant from the Ottawa Police Service and a Member of the Order of Merit for Police, and one of the founding fathers of the Robin's Blue Circle peer support group, whose group model has been adapted to create this meeting today.

\*If no new members are present you can add the PDF of the readings to the chat area. Let participants know they are available there.

6. Preamble (select someone to read this out loud).

7. Our Customs (select someone to read this out loud).

8. Eight Common Symptoms (select someone to read this out loud).

9. Discussion Time: Facilitator decides on a topic to discuss. Participants can either share on the topic or on anything else related to their experiences with operational stress injuries and/or mental health challenges or to simply pass. Break-out rooms should be created for more than 20 participants. You can use the same topic or use different topics. Always ensure there is a co-facilitator in the break-out room and knows the topic.

10. End of Discussion: It is now time to close this meeting. Thank you to everyone who has joined us today. Please remember that we always encourage further support from medical professionals.

11. Closing Circle: As we close out tonight's meeting, we would like for you to share:

- something that you are grateful for at this moment, OR
- a take away from the meeting, OR
- something you are focusing on in the coming week

*Facilitators are the core of our peer support community.*



# In-Person Meeting Guide

1. Welcome to today's Wings of Change - Peer Support meeting. I am \_\_\_ and I am pleased to be your facilitator. Coffee is available (point to where), please help yourself at any time. The washrooms are located (point to where). Can we please go around the circle and introduce ourselves by first name and profession.

2. This meeting is 1 hour long, so we ask that you keep your sharing to a respectable length in order for everyone to have an opportunity to participate. You can share on the selected topic specifically or on anything else related to your experiences with operational stress injuries and/or mental health challenges. Or, you can simply say, "pass". We encourage you to make notes to remind yourself of topics you would like to discuss further after the meeting.

3. Are there any announcements such as new Wings of Change chapters/meetings or local mental health events?

4. At this time we gratefully acknowledge Syd Gravel, retired Staff Sergeant from the Ottawa Police Service and a Member of the Order of Merit for Police, and one of the founding fathers of the Robin's Blue Circle peer support group, whose group model has been adapted to create this meeting today.

5. Preamble (select someone to read this out loud).

6. Our Customs (select someone to read this out loud).

7. Eight Common Symptoms (select someone to read this out loud).

8. Discussion Time: **Format 1:** The facilitator selects a topic to discuss from the basket of ideas. Participants can either share on the topic or pass. If no one accepts the offer to share, the facilitator shall start the discussion with their own share. **Format 2:** The facilitator selects multiple topics from the basket of ideas; depending on the size of the group and the number of rooms available. Assign a topic for each room. Participants then choose which topic they would like to discuss and go to that topic's assigned room. There should be a facilitator in each room.

9. End of Discussion: It is now time to close this meeting. Thank you to everyone who has joined us today. Please remember that we always encourage further support from medical professions. (Have the local crisis line number available on cards or written on a board and direct people to this.) If you didn't have an opportunity to share but feel the need to do so, please speak to myself after the meeting.

10. Closing Circle: As we close out tonight's meeting, we would like for you to share:

- something that you are grateful for at this moment, OR
- a take away from the meeting, OR
- something you are focusing on in the coming week

# Preamble

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Welcome to Wings of Change - Peer Support. During this meeting we participate in peer-led, confidential, solution-based discussion regarding operational stress injuries and mental health challenges public safety personnel and front line workers may encounter. These individuals are welcome to attend as often as they'd like and to participate in the discussion or to simply sit back and listen to what is shared.

For the safety and comfort of our participants, please allow for the person sharing to have a safe and uninterrupted space. We do not participate in trauma-talk which is the discussion of details that are grotesque or intensely personal details surrounding an event. Those types of shares are best suited for the clinical setting. If trauma-talk occurs, the facilitator will mute/stop you to help steer the conversation back to solution-based. Please do not take this personally if this happens to you as we realize that it is difficult, especially in early recovery, to avoid trauma-talk.

Wings of Change is a trauma informed organization, and we want all our participants to feel welcome, accepted and safe in this space. We respect each other's use of pronouns, and refer to each other by these pronouns. If you realize that you have accidentally misgendered someone by using an incorrect pronoun, please acknowledge this, correct yourself and continue.

For the comfort of all participants, confidentiality is a fundamental component to Wings of Change's attraction. Please do not disclose identities or comments of participants outside of this meeting. However, we encourage discussion and sharing outside of this meeting on personal terms in order to combat mental health stigma.

# Our Customs

## 01. Peers Helping Peers



We claim no qualifications other than to have personally experienced the difficulty a public safety or front line worker may have in dealing with life after trauma. We advise that foremost, each person interested in attending these meetings understand that we are here simply to share, educate and listen. We suggest anyone interested in attending these meetings seek professional help concurrently. We do not make psychiatric diagnoses or dispense medications, nor do we provide religious guidance.

## 02. We Value Trust and Honesty



In Syd Gravel's own words; "Trust is absolutely paramount. Without trust, no amount of listening will make any difference. Without trust no amount of encouragement will make any difference. Without trust no amount of caring will be accepted. Feeling safe, amongst safe people, to speak from the heart and soul without regrets or fears of being judged is absolutely required before anything else can be built. No one should be left behind in reaching that state."

## 03. Confidential



We assure each participant that confidentiality is practiced. We answer only to the participants we are supporting. We do not take attendance, keep records or do case management.

# Eight Common Symptoms

The following eight symptoms have been identified to assist a public safety or front line worker in recognizing the possibility of a traumatic stress response which could progress if not addressed.

1. **Denial:** May feel that they are well despite others' concerns that they are not.
2. **Loneliness:** May feel alone in dealing with their experience.
3. **Poor Self-Confidence:** May second guess decisions which normally pose no difficulty.
4. **Mood Swings:** May experience a loss of emotional control and experience outbursts.
5. **Change in Sleep & Eating Habits:** May experience a disruption to normal sleep and eating patterns.
6. **Obsessive Behaviour:** May become hyper-vigilant, and obsess over things such as public opinion, stigma, etc.
7. **Fear of Loss of Support:** May fear that after expressing their need for help, that family and friends may turn away.
8. **Fear of Loss of Protection:** May fear that by expressing their need for help and support, family members may be exposed to ridicule associated with stigma.

Gravel, Sylvio (Syd) A., M.O.M. "56 Seconds", 1st ed., Ottawa, 2012; pages 46-47



# Topic Suggestions

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- Coping With Symptoms
- What Is The Best Mental Health Advice You Have Ever Been Given?
- Family Struggles
- Finding Motivation
- How Do You Define Wellbeing?
- Returning To Work
- Stigma – How Does It Affect You?
- Financial Struggles
- Substance Abuse
- Losses
- Incorporating Nutrition
- Mindfulness – How Do You Achieve This?
- Healthy Boundaries
- Healthy, Supportive Behaviour
- Managing Anxiety
- Finding Purpose
- Setting Realistic Goals
- Feeling Left Behind
- Saying "No"
- Being In Crowds/Public
- Talking to Children About PTSD
- How Do You Find Calm?
- Coping With Anger
- Recovery – Is It Possible?
- Grief
- Acceptance
- Loss Of Identity
- Relationship Changes
- Relapse – What Is It?
- Self-Care – How?
- Denial
- Sleep Issues/Nightmares

# FAQ's

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Question	Answer
<b>Where can individuals find meeting locations and times?</b>	<b>All locations and times can be found on our website <a href="http://www.wingsofchange.ca">www.wingsofchange.ca</a></b>
<b>Why does Wings of Change refrain from trauma-talk?</b>	<b>Wing of Change falls within the "friendship" category of peer support according to the Mental Health Commission of Canada Peer Support Guidelines* and therefore clinical care is not offered at our meetings. Traumatic details are best shared in a professional setting with immediate clinical care available if needed.</b>
<b>Can family members attend Wings of Change meetings?</b>	<b>If the family member is a first responder they are welcome to attend. Family members are encouraged to attend our Wings of Change Families meetings. For more information go to our website.</b>

**\*<https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Guidelines-for-the-Practice-and-Training-of-Peer-Support.pdf>**

