

Community, Culture, and Care

Peer Support Group Guidance for Iranian Communities



Authors

Sohail Jannesari, Nava Kazemi, Alinah Azadeh, Saeideh Babashahy, Farinaz Rassekh-Ghaemmaghani, Mojdeh Nassirpour, Parviz G. Zadeh, Elham Ramezani, Delaram Akhavein, and Bhavna Sennik

Supported by

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) Rapid Response Fund at King's College London

With thanks to

The Iranian Association, Iranian Disability Association, and Farsophone Counselling Service, and all attendees and contributors to the pilot sessions.

1. Purpose

This guide is for adult Iranians living abroad who want to start a peer support group in the context of loneliness abroad, grief, dislocation, and political division. It aims to support members of the diaspora and related charities in creating spaces where people can gather, speak, listen, witness, reflect, make meaning, support each other, and reduce isolation.

Groups may also choose to welcome non-Iranian partners, relatives, friends, carers, or others connected to Iranian communities, depending on the kind of space they are trying to create. This guide particularly encourages connection around culture, art, and shared memory.

2. How We Made This Guide

This guide draws on insights from Mind, NHS England, and National Voices guidance (see Further Resources), as well as academic literature on migrant-led, culture-centred, and trauma-informed approaches to mental health. It was supplemented through a pilot session and attendee review and feedback. This guide was supported by an ESRC grant that Dr Sohail Jannesari received through King's College London.



A photo banner of shared experience from the Migrant Connections Festival

3. Definitions and Approach

Peer support groups bring together people with shared experiences to provide a space where people feel accepted and understood (Mind). Shared experience allows for mutual acceptance and understanding (NHS England), and the support provided can include knowledge, experience, or practical help (National Voices).

Groups may be facilitated by volunteers, artists, community organisers, or charity staff. They can offer connection, listening, shared reflection, and practical mutual support. They are not a substitute for therapy, safeguarding support, immigration or legal advice, or emergency

care. The group can acknowledge that people's distress is shaped by politics — however, it is not a space for testing one another's political positions. Facilitators should be clear about the limits of the group and always arrange access to external clinical or safeguarding guidance.

This guidance takes a culturally grounded approach to Iranian peer support, working through shared language, memory, and arts-based forms of expression. Research with Iranians in the UK shows that language, stigma, and lack of cultural understanding can limit access to support (Simkhada et al. 2021). Research following the Grenfell Tower fire also suggests that informal, culturally grounded, community-led support spaces may improve engagement, trust, emotional expression, and well-being among communities who do not readily engage with mainstream mental health services (Hammad et al. 2020).

Broader work highlights that distress is often tied to political history, generational rupture, and social uncertainty, and is expressed through shared cultural forms such as metaphor, narrative, and poetry (Behrouzan 2015; Jannesari 2021). In these contexts, practices such as poetry, storytelling, and shared language are central to how people make sense of and communicate distress (Olszewska 2015).

This guidance also takes a trauma-informed approach. Trauma is not just a single past event, but is often shaped by ongoing conditions such as repression, displacement, racism, and uncertainty, affecting individuals, families, and communities simultaneously and often remaining unresolved (Peeren et al. 2026). A trauma-informed approach prioritises safety, trust, and choice while recognising that people may not want to disclose or revisit painful experiences (Herman 1997; Sweeney et al. 2018).

4. Core Principles

Share experience, embrace difference

Peer support requires something in common, but people are not the same. The pilot showed a wide range of experiences: people who had not been to Iran since 1979, people raised in exile, Kurdish attendees, recent arrivals, mixed-heritage attendees, and people only recently discovering their Iranian identity. This diversity can create connection, creativity, and shared understanding, but it can also bring tension and mistrust.

The key is to hold shared concern for Iran and its people, without erasing differences. All Iranians are living through uncertainty, with interrupted communication, internet blackouts, inability to reach loved ones, or ongoing fear without confirmation or closure.

Safety is relational and uneven

People may experience the same space very differently depending on identity, political history, trust, language, and prior experiences of harm. The pilot showed that attendees were already assessing whether the space would feel safe before attending — including researching the organiser and venue, and looking for clarity about purpose and tone. Once in the room, safety also depended on what was established before anyone began sharing, including clear expectations and ground rules.

There is no single way to participate

People take part in different ways, shaped by language, comfort, and personal preference. The pilot showed that even “hello” opened differences, with salaam and dorood carrying cultural and political meaning. Language influenced how people participated, with some wanting Persian to “ring through” their body and others relying on English for access. For some attendees, groups may also become part of strengthening their Iranian language after

an absence, interruption, or loss. Groups should allow for different languages, forms of expression, and levels of involvement.

Build on what people bring

Peer support works best when it draws on the strengths already in the room. People arrive with relationships, care, lived knowledge, humour, creativity, and ways of surviving. This includes forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) such as:

- Social and familial capital (care, relationships, ways of supporting each other)
- Navigational capital (knowing how to deal with systems and institutions)
- Aspirational capital (hope and the ability to keep going)
- Resistant capital (experience of holding dignity and challenging injustice)

In the pilot, cultural wealth appeared through poetry, music, writing, food, hospitality, and practical knowledge. The group also wanted to make space for celebration as well as distress. Cultural events such as Nowruz, Yalda, music, dance, film, and food can help people feel connected to Iranian culture and to one another.



Plates of food served at the Migrant Connections Festival

5. Practical Facilitator Guidance

a) Before the session (recruitment and expectation-setting)

Reduce uncertainty and provide reassurance around safety early. In invitations or sign-up messages, say clearly what the group is for (support, reflection, community) and what it is not for (debate, campaigning, political debates or persuasion). Explain how language will be handled and make it explicit that people will arrive with different experiences, identities, and views. Think about using intentional language to reduce shame and stigma.

b) Opening the session (boundaries and safeguarding measures)

Say clearly what the space is and is not, acknowledging political realities while being clear that this is not a space for argument. Reiterate points about language and respect, and establish clear ground before peer introductions. Establish confidentiality, non-judgmental listening, respect for difference, and the option to pass. Consider beginning or ending with a short grounding or check-in prompt to help people arrive, regulate, and transition into or out of the session. Once people begin speaking, emotional intensity rises quickly, so boundaries need to be in place early.

If possible, have two facilitators: one to guide the session and another to support the practical running, notice when someone may need a pause or check-in, and help manage language and group dynamics. Facilitators are not expected to provide therapy, but should know how to pause the session, signpost support, or seek additional help if needed.

c) Structuring participation (during the session)

People have different levels of comfort, language ability, and emotional readiness. Keep introductions contained. Without structure, they can take over the entire session. Use smaller groups when needed. Breakout pairs can help when language is mixed, or when emotions feel too intense to share in a large circle. Facilitators should think in advance about referral or support pathways if someone requires more specialist help.

Build in multiple ways of taking part including speaking, listening, writing, paired conversation, or sharing something cultural like music or poetry. Make it clear that listening without speaking is a valid form of participation.

d) Holding the space (during the session)

Name early that mixed emotions are normal. People may feel grief, anger, guilt, numbness, or contradiction all at once. This reduces pressure to present a single “acceptable” response. Acknowledge sharing simply and respectfully, without over-praising trauma. If tension rises, intervene early and calmly.

Some topics need to be contained because they destabilise the space or risk re-traumatisation. These include detailed military analysis, graphic content, conspiracy claims, arguments about identity, or pressure to disclose personal histories.



People in a circle considering questions of migration and belonging at a Speaking Statues workshop

e) Building mutual support (not just sharing)

Turn the group into an ongoing network of support. Create a short, structured moment where people can offer or ask for something: practical help, ideas, skills, contacts, or time. Make space for culture as part of this support. A mutual support moment might also be an opportunity to encourage people to share the strategies they use to cope with day-to-day mental health pressures.

f) Accessibility and inclusion (throughout)

Arrange chairs in a circle with a clear and easy exit, and ensure there is access to toilets and a quiet area where people can step away if needed. Allow Persian and English and make space for minority languages. If possible, provide food and tea as part of hospitality. Avoid assumptions about touch, prayer, or how people express emotion.

g) Closing and reflection (end of the session)

Do not end with a difficult disclosure and then disperse. Close the session in a contained way. This might include a short grounding exercise, sharing a practical resource, inviting people to stay connected, and reminding attendees they do not have to carry everything alone. A brief reflective closing prompt might include: 'What am I taking with me?', 'What helped today?', or 'What am I leaving behind?'

h) Aftercare (follow-up after the session)

Think about getting feedback and improving the session too. Simple reflective practices — such as anonymous feedback, facilitator reflection, or optional check-in questions — can help groups adapt over time. Over the longer term, groups may also choose to develop collective creative outputs such as zines, poems, exhibitions, guidance, or research reflections.

6. Limitations of Peer Support

Peer support can do important things, but not everything. It cannot resolve war, immigration precarity, racism, or the long afterlives of trauma. It may also trigger facilitators and attendees.

Facilitators should think in advance about what the group can realistically hold, when additional support may be needed, and what signposting, referral, or safeguarding pathways are available if concerns arise. Avoid over-promising; avoid building dependence on one organiser; plan for facilitator debrief and rest; share labour; and stay realistic about what a community circle can hold.

Crisis and safeguarding support (England)

If someone indicates they may seriously harm themselves or someone else, urgent mental health support is available in England via NHS 111 (select the mental health option).

Immediate danger: call 999.

7. Templates and Resources

Activities to co-create ground rules

Here are four different ways to co-create ground rules with a group:

1. "What helps / what harms" mapping: Ask people in pairs or small groups to reflect on two questions: 'What helps you feel able to be here?' and 'What makes it harder to be here?' Bring the group back together and gather responses on a flipchart under two columns. From this, shape ground rules together.
2. One-word or one-line contributions: Go around the circle and invite each person to offer one word or short phrase for what they need from the space. Write them up visibly as people speak, then briefly group similar ideas together and reflect them back as shared principles.

3. **Scenario-based discussion:** Offer one or two short, realistic scenarios and ask the group how they would want the space to respond. In small groups, ask: 'What should happen here?' Then bring responses together and turn them into agreed ways of working.
4. **Objects or images activity:** Invite people to choose or bring an object, image, or a line of poetry that represents how they want the space to feel. Each person shares briefly if they want to. The facilitator draws out common themes and translates them into simple ground rules.

Suggested ground rules

1. **Confidentiality.** What is shared in the group stays in the group, unless someone is at immediate risk of serious harm.
2. **Speak from personal experience.** Use "I" rather than claiming to speak for all Iranians, all women, all Kurds, all exiles, all Muslims, all secular people, or all protestors.
3. **Listen to understand.** Do not interrupt, diagnose, cross-examine, or debate someone out of their feelings.
4. **Difference is expected.** People in the room may have different histories, politics, geographies, and language relationships. Respect differences without contempt.
5. **No graphic detail.** Do not describe violence, torture, or death in graphic ways. Do not show violent videos or images in the group.
6. **No personal attacks, shaming, or shouting.** Strong feelings are welcome; intimidation is not.
7. **Participation is optional.** Passing is always allowed. Writing instead of speaking is allowed. Leaving the room is allowed.
8. If discussion turns into campaigning, persuasion, or ideological conflict, bring it back to support, reflection, and shared humanity.

Template agenda: two-hour poetry and peer support session

Time	Activity	Description
0:00–0:15 15 min	Opening Arrival and settling in	Tea, food, greetings, and seating. Optional prompt on arrival: write one word on flip chart paper about how things feel today.
0:15–0:25 10 min	Structure Welcome and explain	Explain what the group is and is not. All greetings and language pathways are welcome. No one has to speak. The aim is support, reflection, and community.
0:25–0:35 10 min	Structure Ground rules	Read ground rules aloud before introductions. Ask if anything essential is missing.
0:35–0:50 15 min	Structure Short introductions	Prompt: name, one reason for being here, and one word, image, poem, or object that reflects your mood. Keep brief.
0:50–1:05 15 min	Activity 1 Poetry or cultural sharing	Read one or two short poems, or invite someone to share a song, object, photograph, joke, proverb, memory, or music. Ask: 'What line, image, or feeling stayed with you?' and 'What did it make you think, remember, or feel?'
1:05–1:20 15 min	Activity 2 Pairs or triads	Break into pairs or triads. Facilitators may offer optional prompts such as: 'What has been on your mind lately?'

Time	Activity	Description
		'What has helped you through difficult moments?', or 'What helps Iranian community feel possible here?'
1:20–1:25 5 min	Pause Grounding moment	Tea refill, quiet reflection, stretching, music, breathing, or informal conversation before the next activity.
1:25–1:40 15 min	Activity 3 Writing or reflective activity	Options: a letter poem to Iran, to family, or to self; a short poem beginning 'Tonight I carry...'; a free-write on 'What I wish people understood'; reflections on humour, memory, food, or belonging; or a collective poem from anonymous lines.
1:40–1:55 15 min	Sharing Voluntary sharing and mutual support	Invite brief readings or one-line shares. Then ask: 'Is there anything practical the group might help with before next time?'
1:55–2:00 5 min	Closing Close	One word or line each, or silent close. Remind people of follow-up and support options. Ask for possible themes for future sessions.

Note: This is an example format to be adapted.

A peer support readiness checklist

Area	Questions for facilitators
Purpose	Can we explain in one sentence what this group is for?
Boundaries	Do we know what topics or behaviours we will contain?
Safeguarding	Do we know what to do if someone is at risk of serious harm?
Referral	Do we have local crisis, mental health, domestic abuse, immigration, or community support contacts?
Facilitation	Are there at least two facilitators or helpers present?
Accessibility	Have we considered language, disability access, travel, childcare, cost, and quiet space?
Aftercare	How will facilitators debrief and rest afterwards?

Facilitator de-brief

Debrief question	Purpose
What went well today?	Notice strengths.
Was anyone left distressed or needing follow-up?	Identify support needs.
Did any safeguarding concerns arise?	Clarify responsibilities.
Were any voices missing or marginalised?	Improve inclusion.

Debrief question	Purpose
Did the facilitation feel balanced?	Prevent burnout and domination.
What should change next time?	Support learning.

8. Further Resources

Peer support guidance and frameworks

- **Mind: Thinking about peer support:** https://www.mind.org.uk/media/7107/2-thinking-about-peer-support_v4.pdf
- **NHS England: Peer support:** <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/peer-support/>
- **National Voices: Peer support:** <https://www.nationalvoices.org.uk/publication/peer-support/>

Mental health and crisis support (UK)

- **NHS urgent mental health helplines (NHS 111 – mental health option):** <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/>
- **Samaritans (24/7): call 116 123 or visit:** <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Research on Iranian communities and access to support

- **Simkhada et al. (2021) – Cultural issues accessing mental health services:** <https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/35835/>
- **Shishehgar et al. (2015) – Barriers to mental health care in migrant populations:** <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4537565/>

Relevant academic works

- Behrouzan, O. (2015). *Prozac Diaries: Psychiatry and Generational Memory in Iran*. Stanford University Press.
- Herman, J. (1997). *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books.
- Jannesari, S. (2026). *The Migrant Art of Coping*. Pluto Press.
- Olszewska, Z. (2015). *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran*. Indiana University Press.
- Peeren, S. et al. (2026). *Justice as Healing: The critical role of trauma-informed approaches in addressing inequity*.

“From our experience within a Persian-language counselling service, we strongly recognise the importance of accessible Farsi-speaking support that is culturally and politically informed. Community-based peer support can provide an important source of connection and emotional support... this project addresses a genuine and timely need within the Iranian diaspora community.”

— Parviz G. Zadeh, Counselling Service Manager, Farsophone Counselling Service

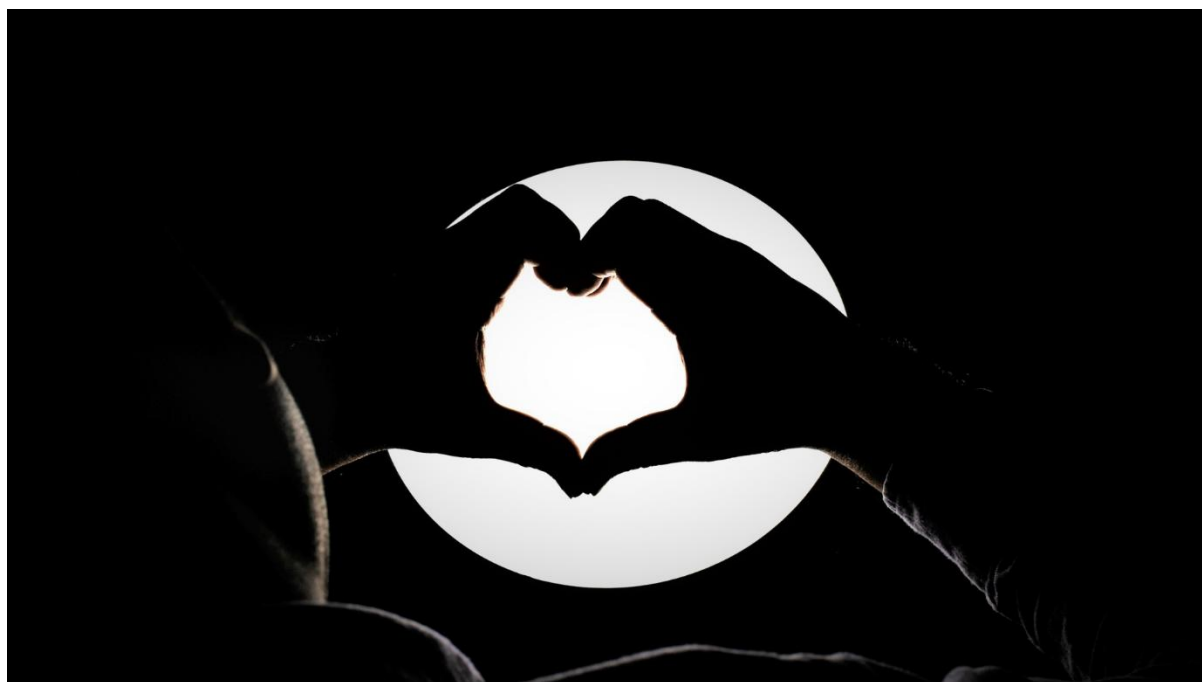


Photo from Ravi, a photography from Sri Lanka living in the UK

For more information, please contact Dr Sohail Jannesari at Sohail.Jannesari@gmail.com