



beyondblue Forums

Community Champions Guide

Community Champions are volunteers within the *beyondblue* online forums who:

- Have the time, skills and empathy to support other members
- Make an effort to welcome new members
- Are regularly and actively engaged members that help set the tone of the community as a place of hope and recovery.

The purpose of this Community Champion Guide is to explain this role in more detail, so you can have an idea of what is involved before agreeing to become a Community Champion.

Why do we need Community Champions?

"Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. Peer support is not based on psychiatric models and diagnostic criteria. It is about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain."
(Mead, Hilton, & Curtis, 2001)

Like any community, the strength of our online forums lies in its members. People join because they're looking for a complement to other services: support from peers who have 'been there', can understand the struggles of living with depression and anxiety, and provide a listening ear as they move toward help-seeking and recovery.

For many people, joining the forums may be the first time they've ever acknowledged the struggles they're facing in their own lives. It's a huge step, like going into a roomful of strangers and telling your story. Some may fear being judged, that their issues are not important, some may even feel they can't be helped. Community Champions are a warm and welcoming voice that lets every member know they are understood and heard.

Having a space to 'vent' and let others know about the difficulties we're experiencing in life is important. Community Champions engage people in this space, using their personal experience of anxiety and/or depression as a way to increase hope, model new ways of problem-solving, show others the benefits in help-seeking, undertaking different forms of treatment (whatever may work) and proactive ways of improving wellbeing.

How much time do I have to commit?

It is important that Community Champions participate as regular, active members of the forums. We would request that Champions commit to **posting 6-10 times a week** in the forums in a variety of threads. We provide all Champions with a monthly report on posts made so you can keep track of your contributions.

Being a Community Champion is not a long-term or permanent commitment, so don't worry if you think at some point you want to take a break, or step down permanently. Positions will be reviewed regularly and we will appoint new Community Champions when required.

What are the minimum requirements for becoming a Community Champion?

- At least 50 quality posts on the forums
- Completion of a Community Champion Wellness Plan (see appendix) that you will keep updated and provide us with a copy of
- Current Working With Children check

Can I still be a Champion if I am currently unwell?

We know that living with depression and anxiety can have its ups and downs. Being a Community Champion doesn't mean you have to hold back from talking about your own struggles and seeking peer support from others.

Having said that, it's important that Community Champions embody the values of hope and recovery. If you're currently in a space where you often feel distressed, or need more support than you may be able to give to others, then continuing to contribute as a regular member would be best.

New Community Champions roles will become vacant from time to time, and you are more than welcome to get in touch about volunteering for this role when you feel ready.

What do I have to do as a Champion?

Help maintain a lively and friendly community by sparking new conversations, guide and welcome newcomers to the forum and remind members of the rules when needed. In particular we hope you can help by:

- Actively looking for and answering unanswered questions or posts
- Welcoming new members and helping them find their way around – particularly in connecting them with other members or threads that are similar to theirs
- Helping the community be a vibrant, respectful, and enjoyable place
- Starting new threads on topics of interest relating to hope, recovery and staying well
- Referring any concerns you have about a member's wellbeing to our moderators

Is this like a volunteer counsellor or moderator's role?

No, this is purely a peer support role and you are not expected to be responsible for the wellbeing of individual members.

Because of the nature of our community, some people posting are in need of more professional support. For this reason, we have clinical moderators monitoring the forums – these moderators are qualified to help when these situations arise. It is their role to assist any forum members who may require such assistance. It is not the role of the Community Champions to provide professional counselling for these members.

If Community Champions are concerned about the welfare of any forum members then they should contact our moderators by using the 'report post' function.

What sort of discussions would you like us to have?

Sometimes the forum topics can be quite heavy going. We're hoping that Community Champions will help start off as many conversations as possible to balance the tone of discussions and keep members engaged. You can do this by posting a relevant discussion topic and inviting others to respond. This can be examples of things you do to stay well, issues in the news, hobbies, interests, personal achievements or milestones.

When starting a discussion, offer your own opinion and invite others to comment. We find that invitations to 'comment' or 'discuss' will help get the ball rolling. If people answer, react and respond to their post as you would in a face-to-face conversation.

Possible conversation topics:

- News articles
- Personal experiences
- Events you've attended
- Reducing and managing stress
- Tips for eating well
- Tips for staying active
- Sport, movies, music, and other hobbies/interests

What support is available to me in my role as a Champion?

We understand that the nature of the forums involves the discussion of distressing topics and situations. It is natural to feel affected by this over time, perhaps by an individual's particular story, or by the ongoing impact of reading heavy stories daily. You feel this response because you care and empathise with other people, and this is part of what makes you a good source of peer support.

Community Champions have no obligation to participate in threads or discussions which they find personally uncomfortable or triggering.

That said, it is important to recognize the impact that participation in the forums is having on you, so that you can manage your own level of self-care. We want the forums to be a therapeutic, supportive and positive experience for all our members, including our Champions.

The following supports will be available to you in your role as a champion:

Peer support from other Community Champions

Community Champions will have direct contact with *beyondblue's* Online Communities Manager and the other Champions via a private online Champions Forum for any concerns they have about their role, or particular issues that come up in the course of their participation in the forums, including questions or advice about how to respond to posts.

While we encourage an open dialogue within this group about how Champions are feeling, there are limits to the support this group can provide. If you are experiencing a high level of distress, then we would ask that you do not use the Champions Forum, but instead get in touch with our Community Champion Support Worker (see below).

If you are at any time experiencing thoughts of death, dying, suicide or self-harm, then this is an emergency and you need to seek immediate help by contacting our support service on 1300 22 4636.

Community Champion Support Worker

The Community Champion Support Worker offers Community Champions an additional avenue for support as they volunteer on the community forums, primarily via email using modsupport@beyondblue.org.au but also via phone during business hours if necessary.

The Support Worker's role is to listen and understand the Community Champion's perspective and assist them to contribute to the forum in a positive and helpful way. It allows Champions a chance to reflect on their own experiences, discuss their response to conversations on the forum and review their role in supporting others.

Conversations with the Support Worker may look at how a Champion's involvement on the site is affecting their own mental health, what additional supports they need to draw on for their own personal health and wellbeing, their role on the forums and importantly, ensure that the work does not compromise their own mental health.

The Support Person will have a copy of each Champion's Wellness Plan and will use this in the conversation to ensure they have the support they need.

At all times the information shared with the Support Worker is respected with regards to privacy, in according with *beyondblue's* [Privacy Policy](#). Brief notes will be held by the Support Person for future reference and these notes can also be accessed by related staff at *beyondblue*. Where the decision is made that the Champion needs to take a break then the Support Worker will advise the Community Manager of the plan in collaboration with the Champion.

Champions can contact the Support Person when:

- they are unsure whether they are able to continue to contribute in a positive way on the forum due to their own personal health and wellbeing
- when activity on the site affects them personally and they notice this stress/worry does not lift

Champions are expected to maintain their health professional support and contacts while working as a Champion and to talk with them as required. A Champion's role often means that they are supporting others through their journey and it is important that they too have the support, care and treatment that they need to be healthy and contribute in a positive way to the community.

How big is the community?

Larger than you might think. Around 90,000 people visit the forums per month, making up 20% of all traffic to the *beyondblue* website. Over 1,200 new members join each month.

- 72% of members say their first preference for interacting with the forums is to read threads – they are participating by reading what other people write, not by posting themselves
- 19% of members rank replying to others as their first preference for interaction, while 9% rank starting their own threads as their first choice

Such a skew is typical for online forums, although the barriers to participation in a forum that deals with depression and anxiety are higher – 24% of our users report a sense of anxiety when thinking about responding to posts, so assuring people that they will not be judged and to encourage them to keep posting is a big part of the Community Champion role.

Our goal is to support as many people as possible towards recovery, to create a welcoming and friendly environment that takes people from passive readers to being contributors.

Feeling isolated and alone is a big part of depression, and being part of a community and interacting with others can make a big difference in encouraging people to seek help and make important changes in their lives to get better. Recent user research has shown that our forums play a significant part in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety:

- 67% of users report feeling less depressed or anxious after accessing the forums,
- 69% indicate that they have been implemented tips or strategies to improve their wellbeing as a direct result of using the forums.

How will I be identified online?

Your profile will contain a badge that identifies you as a 'Community Champion', and there is also a thread on the forums dedicated to our Community Champions that explains their role, and allows you to provide a short introduction and background about yourself for new members to recognize you.

How will a Champion's time on the forums come to an end?

We encourage Champions to continue in their role on the forums for as long as they feel comfortable, have wisdom to offer and feel positive about the role.

However, a Champion will be asked to step down if:

- They are not posting regularly (as per the suggested guidelines)
- They require regular and consistent feedback about the content or tone of their posts
- They ignore feedback provided directly to them about their participation that provides guidance on how to behave as a Champion
- Their posts do not promote a respectful, enjoyable or thoughtful place in the forums
- Inappropriate behaviour, abuse or harassment of other Champions and/or *beyondblue* staff

Appointment and removal of Community Champions is entirely at the discretion of *beyondblue* staff.

How will Champions be asked to step down?

Champions who no longer meet the requirements of the role will be contacted privately to provide feedback about the decision that has been made and the rationale for this decision.

Champions will be encouraged to continue on the forums as a regular member (provided their conduct on the forums has not been in breach of the community rules), and we will discuss with them how they will refer to his change in status in future posts on the forums.

The Community Champion group will be advised of the change of status via the champions private forum. Access to the private forums would then be ceased, and their Community Champion badge removed.

The Community Champion will be advised of this process when the contact about stepping down is made and the Community Champion Support Worker will offer follow up phone calls if appropriate.

What if Champions wish to appeal the decision?

Any Champions who are unhappy with the decision can voice their concerns via the *beyondblue* complaints procedure.

Who do I contact if I would like to know more about being a Community Champion?

You can get in touch with Christopher Banks, *beyondblue* Online Communities Manager, via email christopher.banks@beyondblue.org.au or phone (03) 9810 6132.

COMMUNITY CHAMPION WELLNESS PLAN

The purpose of this plan is to support your personal wellbeing during your time as a volunteer on the *beyondblue* forums. It will assist you and our moderation team in recognising when you may need extra support or if you need to take a break from the forums.

1. HOW DO I KNOW WHEN I'M NOT COPING? (MAY INCLUDE THOUGHTS, SITUATIONS, MOODS, BEHAVIOURS)

2. WHAT HELPS WHEN I'M UNWELL? (MAY INCLUDE DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, PLACES YOU CAN GO ETC)

3. WHO CAN I CONTACT WHEN I'M NOT COPING AND NEED SUPPORT? (MAY INCLUDE HEALTH PROFESSIONALS, FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS)

NAME

ADDRESS

PHONE CONTACT

I have fully read and understood the *beyondblue* Forums Community Champions Guide, and am comfortable with the requirements and responsibilities of this volunteer role.

I understand that *beyondblue* will not use or disclose my personal information as set out in this Wellness Plan, except in accordance with the *beyondblue* [Privacy Policy](#); unless I have consented to the use or disclosure, or where disclosure is necessary to prevent injury to life or health.

SIGNATURE

DATE OF PLAN COMPLETION