



Beyond Blue Forums

Community Champions Guide

Community Champions are volunteers within the Beyond Blue online forums who:

- Have the time, skills and empathy to support other members while exercising their own self-care
- 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 the forums for many reasons. In an online survey of forum members in 2017, these were the top five reasons given:

- I felt depressed or anxious and wanted support (54%)
- I wanted to connect with others in an anonymous way (32%)
- I felt suicidal and wanted support (25%)
- I didn't want to let family/friends know how I was feeling (19%)
- To complement support I was getting through a healthcare professional (15%)

Imagine going into a room full of strangers and telling your story. This is what many people feel when joining the forums for the first time. Some may fear being judged, or think that their issues are not important. Some may even feel they can't be helped. For many people, joining the forums may be the first time they acknowledge the struggle they are facing in their own lives. Community Champions are a warm and welcoming voice that lets every member know they are understood and heard.

Members in the survey were also asked about what they hoped to gain from joining the forums. This is what members tell us they're looking for on the forums:

- Tips/advice about how others have coped with certain situations (55%)
- Anonymous/confidential way to communicate (48%)
- Factual information about depression/anxiety (45%)
- Ability to communicate with others who know what I'm going through (43%)
- Just someone to talk to about how I'm feeling (39%)

This tells us that when people join the forums, they're looking to make sense of their experiences in an anonymous space where they can learn how to cope through the experiences of others. They also want to share their feelings, and be listened to by those who can really understand what they're going through. Community Champions model our mantra of 'give support to receive support'; by sharing your own experiences in support of others, you will also receive support in kind.

How much time do I have to commit?

It is important that Community Champions participate as regular, active members of the forums. We ask that Champions commit to **posting 8 times a week** in the forums in a variety of threads. You can make these posts at any time that is convenient for you. 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 are reviewed regularly and new Champions are appointed when needed.

What are the minimum requirements for becoming a Community Champion?

In the first instance, we need you to:

- Register as a Beyond Blue volunteer
- Complete the Community Champion expression of interest

The expression of interest contains a few questions about your reasons for volunteering, and asks you to complete a reply to a sample post. Our team will review your expression of interest and come back to you. If you're invited to become a Community Champion, we will need:

- 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 stop using the forum to seek support for your own struggles, but the role of a Community Champion is primarily one that provides support to others.

The key is in exercising self-care and balance. Reviewing people's stories, challenges, and struggles can become overwhelming. If you're currently feeling distressed most of the time, or feel empty after giving your time to others, we would advise continuing to contribute as a regular member until you feel comfortable spending time on the forums primarily to support.

New Community Champion roles will become vacant from time to time, and you are welcome to discuss with us whether this volunteering role is right for you.

What do I have to do as a Champion?

Help maintain a lively and friendly community by sparking new conversations, guiding and welcoming newcomers to the forums, and reminding members of the rules when needed.

Our Community Champions have developed five community values that should underpin all your interactions and help guide your posts:

Supportive

We encourage our members to give and receive support, sharing their stories and experiences in times of distress and wellness.

Respectful

We respect where members are on their recovery journey, and listen without judgment.

Empowering

We empower our members to make decisions that support good mental health and wellbeing.

Safe

We support our members to talk openly about difficult subjects in a safe manner.

Friendly

We approach all our discussions with kindness, warmth and always assume the best intentions.

You can live these values through your volunteering role by:

- Actively looking for and responding to unanswered 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
- Directing members to factual information and resources on the Beyond Blue website where appropriate
- 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.

Human moderators are looking at forums 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. These moderators are qualified to intervene in the event that a member requires offline assistance. It is not the role of the Community Champion 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 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.

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 are available to you in your role as a Champion:

Peer support from other Community Champions

Community Champions will have direct contact with Beyond Blue's online community staff via a private online Champions Forum. This separate forum can be used for any concerns you have about your role, or issues that come up in the course of volunteering. This includes questions or advice about how to respond to posts. It can also be a place where self-care tips are shared between champions.

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 high levels of distress, we ask that you do not use the Champions Forum, but instead get in touch with the 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.

Online Communities Volunteer Co-ordinator

The Online Communities Volunteer Co-ordinator is part of the Community Support Services team at Beyond Blue, which is responsible for running the forums. In addition to managing the Community Champions volunteer programme and private champions forum, the Online Communities Volunteer Co-ordinator also supports the day-to-day maintenance of the online community.

You can contact the Co-ordinator for queries about performing your role as a volunteer and suggestions for improving your experience as an online peer volunteer. You will have the opportunity to catch up with the Online Communities Volunteer Co-ordinator once a month for development sessions. These sessions will

be spent going over your recent posts, highlighting your wins and ways to improve as an online peer volunteer at Beyond Blue. The Online Communities Volunteer Co-ordinator will be in contact to set up a time that works for both of you each month. For emotional or reflective support related to the personal impact of volunteering in this role, you can contact the Community Champion Support Worker.

Community Champion Support Worker

The Community Champion Support Worker is a registered mental health nurse that offers Community Champions an additional avenue for support. The Support Worker allows Champions a chance to reflect on their own experiences, discuss their responses to conversations on the forum, and review their role in supporting others through 1:1 and facilitated group discussions.

Individual debriefing by phone is offered on a monthly, six-weekly or three-monthly based (as preferred by the individual). During these debriefings, champions reflect on their previous period of volunteering, focusing on strengths as well as any challenges or triggers. This ensures that Community Champions do not suffer compassion fatigue, and are continuously working on self-care strategies. The Support Worker will exercise an early intervention approach for potential issues and put strategies in place to support Community Champions so they can continue to contribute to the forum in a positive and helpful way.

Conversations with the Support Worker may focus on:

1. Your involvement on the forums and how it affects your wellbeing
2. What additional supports you need to draw on for your own personal health and wellbeing
3. Ensuring your role on the forums does not compromise your own mental health
4. Individual self-care strategies and review of the Wellness Plan
5. Balance – reviewing hours of work and/or volunteering being completed in addition to your Champion role

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

At all times the information shared with the Support Worker is held in accordance with Beyond Blue's [Privacy Policy](#). Brief notes will be held by the Support Worker for future reference, and these notes can also be accessed by the Community Support Services team. If a decision is made that you need to take a break from the forums, the Support Worker will advise the Online Communities Volunteer Co-ordinator of the plan in collaboration with the you.

When can I contact the Support Worker?

Champions can contact the Support Person when:

- A regular check in is scheduled, as set up in the Wellness Plan
- You are unsure whether you are able to continue to contribute in a positive way on the forum, due to your own personal health and wellbeing
- When activity on the forums affects you personally and you notice this stress or worry does not lift

Champions are expected to maintain their own health professional support and contacts while volunteering as a champion, and to talk with them as required.

Training and group debriefing

Regular group debriefings are conducted by the Community Champion Support Worker over videoconference. All Champions are welcome to attend these. Details of dates/times are provided on the champions private forum. Champions are encouraged to bring along examples of recent challenging or satisfying posts for discussion with the group.

An annual training day for Champions is also held in Melbourne. Throughout the year, champions contribute to the agenda for this day by providing feedback about desired areas for training. This feedback is gathered via the private champions forum, and group debriefings.

How big is the community?

At least 125,000 people visit the forums per month, making up nearly a quarter of all traffic to the Beyond Blue website. Over 1,500 new members join each month, contributing more than 50,000 posts over the course of a year.

- 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 there are unique barriers to participation in a forum dealing with mental health issues:

- 26% of members say they have felt anxious about responding to posts
- 18% agreed they had been distressed by reading posts about topics such as suicide, sexual abuse or domestic violence
- 18% felt a fear of being judged

These numbers highlight the important role that Community Champions play in reassuring members that the forums are a safe and respectful place for sharing, and providing support around difficult conversations about distressing topics.

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. Members tell us that the forums have played a significant part in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety:

- 54% of members say they felt less depressed after their last forum visit
- 56% felt less anxious
- 66% accessed at least one form of offline support as a result of their forum conversations
- 66% made lifestyle changes to support their wellbeing

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.

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 recognise you.

Forum members are anonymous, and this includes Community Champions. It's important that you do not reveal information through your posts that could personally identify you to someone reading.

When volunteering as a Community Champion, forum members may think you are a Beyond Blue staff member and may respond to you online with this expectation. It is best to be clear and advise them that

you are a volunteer. If a forum member asks a question related to Beyond Blue that you are unable to answer, you can report the post to moderators for a staff member to respond.

Can I discuss my Community Champion role offline?

The forums are anonymous, but they are also public. Every post is indexed and searchable by Google. We ask champions to think carefully about disclosing their champion role or online identity to others, for your own safety and wellbeing.

Private contact with members is not possible through the forums, which places a natural boundary between your offline life and the support you provide for others in the moderated group environment of the forums.

Most members on the forums highly value the anonymous nature of the forums, as it allows for free and frank discussion of personal experiences. Once posts are made to the forums, they cannot be removed because they become part of the shared community resource for others to benefit from. Many of our members spend significant time and energy replying to posts, and the subsequent discussions are often beneficial to many.

Disclosing your champion identity offline may have unforeseen implications relating to posts you have made, including the possibility that forum members may try and contact you privately through other means to seek support.

We ask that you speak with the Online Communities Volunteer Co-ordinator before discussing your champion role outside the forums or your immediate family. This includes activity such as social media posts, public speaking, or media opportunities.

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 Community Champion
- Their posts are not in line with the community values
- Inappropriate behaviour, abuse or harassment of other Champions and/or Beyond Blue staff
- They are posting far in excess of suggested guidelines, or are at high risk for compassion fatigue and burnout (as identified by the Community Champion Support Worker)

Appointment and removal of Community Champions is entirely at the discretion of Beyond Blue 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 this 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 Beyond Blue complaints procedure.

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

You can get in touch with Beyond Blue's Online Communities Volunteer Co-ordinator, via email at modsupport@beyondblue.org.au .

Appendix: What is a volunteer?

Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain”. Beyond Blue is incredibly grateful to have a community of volunteers who give their time as champions to support others on the online forums. As champions, although you are not covered by awards or workplace agreements, you have the right:

- to work in a healthy and safe environment
- to be engaged in accordance with equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation
- to be adequately covered by insurance
- to be given accurate and truthful information about Beyond Blue
- to review Beyond Blue’s volunteer policies and any other policy that affects your work
- not to fill a position previously held by a paid worker
- not to do the work of paid staff during industrial disputes
- to have a volunteer position description that outlines hours and duties
- to have access to a grievance procedure
- to have your confidential and personal information dealt with in accordance with the principles of the Privacy Act 1988
- to be provided with sufficient training to fulfil your volunteer role.

Beyond Blue and Community Champion volunteers have a number of responsibilities.

Community Champion volunteers are required to:

- be reliable
- notify Beyond Blue in advance of any changes to their availability
- accept responsibility for their own actions and behaviour
- abide by Community Champion volunteer policies
- respect the rights and privacy of others
- carry out the duties listed in the Community Champions Guide
- undertake training as requested
- ask for support when needed
- value and support other Community Champions and forum members
- give advance notice before leaving voluntary roles at Beyond Blue

Beyond Blue is required to:

- provide a healthy and safe environment
- recruit Community Champions in accordance with equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation
- provide a Community Champion position description (this Guide)
- provide training that will prepare the Champion for the role
- provide adequate insurance for the volunteer
- support the Champion and provide an opportunity for two-way feedback about the performance of the Champion and the organisation
- communicate to Champions all information relevant to their roles
- maintain confidentiality
- appropriately screen all Champions.

Community Champion Wellness Plan

The purpose of this plan is to support your personal wellbeing during your time as a volunteer on the Beyond Blue forums. It will assist you and our moderation team in preventing compassion fatigue, recognising when you may need extra support, or if you need to take a break from the forums. This tool will be updated by the Community Champion Support Worker at your individual meetings and an updated copy will be sent to you.

Date: _____

Name: _____ Forum Name: _____

How often will I benefit from being in touch with the Community Champion Support Worker?

- Monthly Every six weeks Every three months

List signs of becoming unwell or that I might be giving too much to the forum? (This may include thoughts, feelings, moods and behaviours etc.)

List self-care strategies that you engage with to maintain wellness:

Who can I contact when I'm not coping and need additional support? (include health professionals, family members, friends, support lines etc.)

Name	Address	Phone/Email

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Community Champion Debriefing Form

To be completed and sent to the Community Champion Support Worker prior to your debriefing catch-up.

Date: _____

Name: _____ Forum Name: _____

Since your last debriefing:

1. How many hours per day have you spent on the forums?
2. How many hours per day / days per week have you spent in a caring role (including the forums)?
3. When did you last take a break from the forums, and what was your reason?
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how are you feeling about your volunteering currently?
1 = Feeling burnt out reading other people's stories; not making a difference; feel tired
5 = Feeling okay about the forum; I get frustrated at times but still enjoy it; feeling okay
10 = Feeling positive about the forum and that I am making a difference; feel well; balanced

Debriefing Support Agreement

I, _____, have fully read and understood the Beyond Blue Community Champions Guide, and am comfortable with the requirements and responsibilities of this volunteer role.

I also agree to commit to a regular debriefing session with the Support Worker for the Community Champions at Beyond Blue. The increment and length that these sessions will occur will be determined at my initial discussion with the Support Worker.

I understand that Beyond Blue will not use or disclose personal information collected during the Support Worker sessions or on the Wellness Plan, except in accordance with the Beyond Blue [Privacy Policy](#); unless I have consented to the use or disclosure; or where disclosure is necessary to prevent injury to life or health.

Name:

SIGNATURE:

Date: