



NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH CONSUMER ALLIANCE

Engaging safely policy

1. Introduction

The National Mental Health Consumer Alliance (NMHCA) is committed to ensuring safety and respect in all our interactions. This shared commitment with those who choose to work with us provides the structure to ensure everyone stays safe when engaging with the NMHCA. This engaging safely policy and procedures will be used for all NMHCA engagements including co-design, consultations, events, meetings etc.

Our approach recognises the impact of trauma and distress and aims to create inclusive spaces where everyone feels valued and safe. At the NMHCA, we are committed to fostering a supportive environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued. By following these principles and practices, we aim to ensure that every interaction promotes safety, trust, and collaboration. Together, we aim to create meaningful change while prioritising the well-being of all involved.

2. Our shared commitment to engaging safely

Our safe engagement approach

At NMHCA, we understand that individuals experience emotional, physical, and environmental distress and trauma differently and as such our engagement approach prioritises safety, trust, and inclusivity in everything we do.

Here's how we apply these principles:

1. **Safety and trust:** We prioritise emotional, physical, and environmental safety for all—consumers and staff alike. Our processes ensure transparency and sensitivity in all operations.
 - a. When the NMHCA is facilitating a codesign or consultation session, we will always endeavour to use a facilitator who has lived experience of mental health challenges. Whenever possible, the NMHCA will ensure a consumer peer worker is available during, and after, each session.
 - b. When an external party is facilitating a codesign or consultation session, we will request that the external party has a document like this one in place.

The NMHCA will also request that a support person is available during, and after, each session.

- 2. Choice, collaboration, and connection:** We offer members opportunities to choose their level of involvement. We promote collaboration and meaningful connections through respectful engagement.
- 3. Accessibility and inclusion:** Our operations support the diverse strengths and perspectives of our members and staff. We celebrate inclusivity and ensure everyone feels valued.

Levels of engagement

Our approach is embedded at three levels:

- **Personal:** Encouraging self-awareness and self-care among staff and members.
- **Relational:** Promoting respectful communication and regular check-ins among participants.
- **Organisational:** Ensuring our entire team upholds our safe engagement practices.

Deciding to engage

Invitation

When receiving an invitation or being advised of an opportunity to engage with the NMHCA you will be advised:

- what the topic of discussion will be
- what specific characteristics the NMHCA is looking for in participants, such as a current NDIS recipient
- the purpose, expectations, and confidentiality considerations for the engagement, including whether you will be expected to share from your personal experience and whether the discussion will be recorded
- what you will need to read or know to participate, such as the Easy Read guide to new Federal Government policy proposals
- how long the engagement will go for, such as 2 hours or twice a week for 2 months
- what the paid participation amount will be per hour and in total, and how this will be paid to you such as payment into your bank account or by voucher
- where the engagement will be and how you will join, such as via Zoom or Teams or in-person meetings.

Before attending

Once you have been selected to attend an event, engagement or meeting at NMHCA, you can expect:

- clear information about the event details, including time, location, and duration
- the details for parking or public transport availability if this is relevant
- to be advised of the key staff contacts and support people for the engagement
- to be advised who else will be participating/in the room at the engagement
- clear advice about the purpose, expectations, and confidentiality of the engagement, including what we hope to achieve
- to be advised whether the engagement will be recorded and if so, what the recording will be used for and where it will be stored prior to being deleted
- to be advised that you will be contacted for your permission to use a direct quote of what you said in the report (you can say no)
- to be advised what will happen with the notes that come out of the engagement and how you will be able to access them
- information about what supports will be available during the engagement
- information about reasonable adjustments that can be made, such as submitting notes via email instead of attending online events if unable to access the internet
- to be provided with engagement materials, including documents that need to be read, within a reasonable time frame prior to the event so participants know what to expect
- to be advised how, and when, you will be provided a copy of the report if relevant
- clear advice as to what you need to provide to receive your participation payment, such as an invoice, statement of supplier form etc.

During engagements

During our engagements, we will:

- create a **welcoming environment**
 - introduce ourselves, explain our role and clearly outline the purpose of the engagement to participants
 - allow participants to introduce themselves, and advise their role (participant, adviser, note taker etc.)
 - respect individuals' choices to opt-in or opt-out during discussions
 - develop and share 'ground rules' with participants which clearly outline shared ways of working together during engagement activities.
- orient participants
- outline our safe engagement principles
- advise when breaks will be and how long we will break for (see the *Taking breaks* section below)
- create a **non-judgemental environment** by:
 - providing facilitation of engagement to keep the discussion within the scope of the agreed topic
 - encouraging listeners to bring forward support and understanding and support an environment of sharing where individuals can feel seen, heard, and valued

- providing an understanding that diverse views are expected and acknowledge the individuality and intersectionality of lived experience
 - encouraging respectful communication and listening; empathetic, validating, and respectful listening, free from judgment or criticism
 - maintaining emotional and physical safety for all participants
 - promoting inclusivity and respecting diverse backgrounds
 - providing clarity and addressing concerns promptly
 - having a zero tolerance for lateral violence (see the *Zero tolerance for lateral violence* section below)
 - genuinely listening and do our best to ensure participants have the space and time to share their voice (through diverse types of engagement methods).
- **review confidentiality and informed consent** by reviewing what stays in the space, and what can be discussed outside the space. We ensure it is understood that stories shared do not get shared outside the space without explicit permission, even in ways that are ‘de-identified’. This includes:
 - discussing the potential impacts of sharing stories and firsthand experiences, ensuring that storytellers can make an informed decisions about what and how they choose to share
 - being honest about limitations (confidentiality rules and reporting obligations)
 - reminding participants what will happen with the notes that come out of the engagement and how they will be provided a copy of the report if one is written.
- **be trauma-aware** by acknowledging the possibility of triggering experiences while actively working to minimise harm through encouraging:
 - individuals sharing their stories to identify potential content triggers for listeners, allowing for preparation and informed consent for listeners to make choices about their participation
 - listeners to ‘take a break’ when or if it’s needed and seek support.
- **provide support:**
 - ensure there is a support person available during the engagement activity should participants require mental health support
 - ensure the group know who the designated support person is and how to access support during the engagement and after
 - provide access to information about counselling services, support groups, helplines, and other resources that individuals can access before, during, and after hearing or sharing stories.
- ensure effective **conflict management** to reach resolution that incorporates, and respects, views of all parties involved ensuring that all sides feel heard and understood contributing to a culture of empathy, respect, and collaboration (see the section on approaching conflict resolution safely below).

NMHCA Engaging safely policy

- address any barriers in the control of NMHCA that hinder participation to the best of our ability.

If meetings are held in person, we will induct, orient, and direct you to the site, including basic housekeeping, parking instructions, and the contact information of a staff member.

If meetings are held using an online platform, we will invite you to:

- use the chat function OR speak
- turn the camera off if you need a break.

After engagements

The NMHCA will, after the engagement is finished:

- provide access to a support worker the following day and assist with providing contact details of other support services if required
- remind participants to submit their payment for participation invoice and other documentation required
- pay participants within four weeks of the engagement providing relevant forms/invoices have been submitted
- check with individual participants to confirm whether a specific quotation from an attendee can be used, and if it can, how the participant wishes to be identified, if at all
- ask participants to provide comment on the engagement by completing the NMHCA's Engagement Evaluation survey as part of our continuous improvement strategy
- provide participants with a final copy of the outcome of the engagement (report, submission etc.).

Taking breaks

The NMHCA recognises the importance of including structured breaks during engagements, especially engagements that go beyond one hour. Unless otherwise advised in engagement material, the NMHCA will schedule the following breaks:

Length of meeting	Length of break
< 2-hour meeting	a 10-minute break after the first hour will be offered
between 2-3 hours	two 10-minute breaks will be offered
> 3-hour meeting	A 30-minute minimum lunchbreak will be offered, along with two 10-minute breaks (note that lunchbreaks are unpaid)

In addition, we will also consider any requests for a break outside of these guidelines. Remember, you can take a break whenever you feel the need to do so in both in person and online meetings. This will have no impact on your paid participation.

Approaching conflict resolution safely

Safe engagement requires effective conflict management and resolution when it arises. The goal of safe engagement with conflicting perspectives is to reach resolution that incorporates, and respects views of all parties involved, ensures that all sides feel heard and understood, and contributes to a culture of empathy, respect, and collaboration.

The facilitator holds the overarching responsibility for safe conflict resolution and maintaining a distinguishment between robust, generative discourse and unsafe or/ aggressive discussion. The facilitator should moderate the discussion accordingly.

People consulted because of their lived experiences offer different perspectives and opinions. We approach discussions with an understanding that diverse views are expected and acknowledge the individuality and intersectionality of lived experience.

We aim to support all participants in an engagement, including consumer lived experience representatives, to approach conflict resolution with the following strategies:

- **De-personalise the conflict**
Instead of attributing the issue to individuals, focus on the problem itself. For instance, if there's a disagreement over the direction of a project, refrain from stating "you're wrong," and instead offer an intention to "hear the different perspectives on the issue."
- **Avoid personal attacks and name-calling**
Maintaining a respectful and productive environment is crucial. If emotions run high, take a step back and remind yourself and others to keep the discussion focused on the problem, not on attacking each other.
- **Acknowledge the other side(s)**
Actively listen to the opposing, or different viewpoint and practice paraphrasing what the other person is saying to show understanding and validate their perspective. For instance, "I understand that you're concerned about the timeline, and I appreciate your attention to detail."
- **State an intention to find common ground**
Express a genuine desire to work towards a solution that benefits everyone involved. You might say, "Let's see if we can find a compromise that addresses both of our concerns."
- **Pursue an outcome centred on understanding**
Instead of focusing on 'winning the argument', prioritise mutual understanding.

Encourage open dialogue where others can express their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment. This could involve asking open-ended questions like, "can you help me understand your perspective better?"

Zero tolerance for lateral violence

In the context of a mental health consumer consultation or codesign context, lateral violence is when a consumer deliberately harms another participant. It may look like:

- aggression (including behaving in a passive aggressive manner)
- personal attacks
- hostility
- gossip
- putting people down
- shaming
- ignoring.

Lateral violence is not:

- disagreeing with another participant's view in a constructive manner
- having a view that is contrary to the majority view and stating that view in an assertive way.

The NMHCA takes a zero-tolerance approach to lateral violence. If a participant engages in lateral violence, they will be asked to leave the meeting immediately and will only be paid their participation fee up until the time they left the meeting.

3. Approval and version control

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Version control

Version number	Purpose/change	Author	Date
1	Final draft	CEO	21 January 2025