



NNEDV

## Online Support Groups for Survivors

Online support groups can be a valuable way for survivors to connect with support and other survivors when they are not able to meet in person. There are a wide variety of technology options to connect survivors using technology, including online forums where survivors can read and post messages at any time, and real-time online group web chats or video calls.

### Best Practices for Online Community

Whatever technology you choose to offer, platforms used for support groups should be private and secure with only survivors and the group facilitators allowed to participate. Online forums should be moderated by a staff person to monitor what is posted, check in with survivors, and offer additional information about available services as needed. Video or audio support groups should be facilitated much in the same way as in-person groups are.

As with any in-person group, online support groups should be clear about the purpose for the group, the method of facilitation or moderation, the length of time, and group agreements. Group agreements should include some points specific to technology, for example not saving or screenshotting other people's contact information or conversations. If the technology you are using allows for recording or downloading the content of conversation, do not use those features and be sure to turn off those options for participants.

Help survivors to navigate the privacy and safety risks of participating in the group.

1. Communicate with survivors about the safety and privacy of their devices.
  - For survivors using a phone to join the group, let them know that there are risks, and also steps they can take to increase the security of their phones.

You can adapt information or refer survivors to our handout, [12 Tips on Cell Phone Safety & Privacy](#).

- For survivors using a computer or internet browser to join the group, let them know that any website they visit may be stored in their browser history. You can share these [Internet Browser Privacy Tips](#).
2. For video and voice call groups, even if survivors' devices are secure, their voice or video conversations could be overheard by someone else in the space, including the abusive person.
  3. Let them know that any emails, texts, or other messages they receive from you might be seen by someone else with access to their devices or accounts. Share these [Online Privacy & Safety Tips](#).
  4. Provide clear, easy instructions on how to connect to the group using the technology. Since accessibility needs and comfort with technology may vary among survivors, be sure to test it out with other staff first so you know what the experience is like from the survivor's point of view. Note that many tools require each user's browser to be up-to-date.
  5. Ensure opportunities for informed consent about the personally identifying information (PII) your program or the technology will collect, and how your program will protect that information. Read more about [Digital Written Consent](#) and drafting [Privacy Policies](#).

Generally, programs should invite survivors who are known to the program and have expressed interest in participating. This can help ensure that group members are well-suited for the discussions, and minimize the risk of impersonation.

Support groups that are meant for survivors who are unknown to the program requires the program to develop criteria to ensure that the person is appropriate for the group. This approach has the potential to feel unwelcoming or

compromise survivor privacy. Additionally, since no screening would completely ensure a bad actor didn't get in, it would be critically important to ensure people are thoughtful about what personal information they shared during the group.

**Note:** If your program is planning to offer a therapeutic group facilitated by a mental health professional, you should seek additional guidance on HIPAA compliance<sup>1</sup> and best practices for “tele-mental health” provisions.

### **How do survivors want to connect?**

#### *Real-time vs. Anytime (synchronous vs. asynchronous)*

Online web chat and video calls can be planned to allow for everyone to be together at the same time, feeling more like a traditional support group. Alternately, online forums and messaging groups can be available 24/7, allowing survivors to drop in and out when they can.

#### *Establishing Connection vs. Anonymity*

Of all the technology options, video is the most likely to allow survivors to establish more personal connections with each other, as they allow for video and audio cues, and feel more like meeting in a group – just online. Online web chat and online forums allow for a great degree of anonymity; survivors only share the information that they choose to share, or that the program asks participants to share as part of the group. Email and traditional phone-based text messaging are not as personal, but do involve sharing personally identifying information associated with the email account or phone number (unless separate accounts or numbers are specifically created for this purpose).

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<sup>1</sup> NOTE: The Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulates how information is shared between health care providers and insurers, and is not relevant for community-based advocacy.

### *Time-limited or Drop-in*

As with in-person groups, an online group could be drop-in or time-limited. If the group is drop-in, the program likely will still want to have a method to vet potential participants to avoid prank users or abusive people from joining the group. See the above section on Best Practices for Online Community for more information.

### **Safety, Privacy & Accessibility Considerations**

There are also pros and cons to each option when you consider safety, privacy, confidentiality, and accessibility. Here are questions to ask about any technology you are considering for survivors to connect with each other:

1. **Accessibility:** What are the (tech) barriers to someone participating? This would include access via an app or browser, needed bandwidth for video, or additional charges for data used for the call, language, etc. Read more about [accessibility and assistive technology](#).
2. **Privacy in the Group:** What are the privacy options available to someone participating, in terms of the online space itself? Options include allowing survivors to choose what name or pseudonym is displayed, or setting up interaction to allow survivors to communicate directly with each other, or through moderation.
3. **Survivors' Devices:** What are the privacy and safety considerations survivors will need to consider for their devices? This would include apps, logs that might include the meeting, browser history, access of device by the abusive person, etc.
4. **Programs' Confidentiality Obligations:** What are the confidentiality implications in terms of how/if you collect and/or store participants' personally identifying information (e.g. name, phone number, IP address, or other information that in combination could be individually identifying) and

the conversations they have. This includes access to information about participants by other participants, your program, or the technology company.

## **Tools for Real-Time Groups**

### *Online Web Chat*

Use a service where survivors just click on a link or go to a specific web address at a scheduled time, rather than using personal accounts that survivors may already have such as social media or cloud accounts. This way, they don't need to sign up for an account or connect their personal information to the group. Read more about best practices when communicating with survivors using [chat](#).

- Pros: Chat via link or web address offers a way for survivors to connect with each other in real-time, while using far less data or bandwidth (an important consideration for people in rural areas or with limited data plans). Survivors also have options for relative anonymity depending on the guidelines the program sets up. Survivors can join the group even if someone else is nearby without being overheard.
- Cons: While online web chat happens in real-time, it may feel more impersonal than groups held over video. In addition, it is more challenging for facilitators to moderate messages. Support for language access is very limited with this technology, as real-time translation is only currently available via machine translation, which is not appropriate for this content.

### *Video Calls*

As with online web chat, use safer and more private options that allow survivors to simply click a link to join a call without having to download an app, set up an account, or share personal contact information. It's best to avoid personal accounts that survivors already have. Read more about best practices for communicating with survivors using [video](#).

- Pros: More personal connection between group members, as they can see and hear each other. ASL or other language interpreters can be conferenced into the group.
- Cons: Survivors with limited internet bandwidth or limited data plans may not be able to fully participate. Some survivors may not feel comfortable being on video and may need to find a private place where others can't overhear or look over their shoulder.

### **Tools for Anytime Groups**

With tools that allow people to post and read messages at any time, it is important that survivors are aware they might not receive immediate responses from other members or program staff. There are also additional privacy risks associated with creating a user account, receiving notifications about group updates, and impersonation risks if others use a survivor's account to access the group space.

#### *Online Forums*

These are websites that survivors can log into to read and post messages with other members of the group.

- Pros: Depending on the specific host forum and the guidelines the program sets, survivors can be fairly anonymous. Additionally, the group facilitator can moderate messages, provide resources to survivors, and approve and remove members as needed.
- Cons: The technology might feel "old-school" to some survivors, and survivors need to remember to check the group, and keep track of their log-in information.

### *Text Messaging Groups*

*Basic texting* uses the default texting app on our phones. Read more about communicating with survivors using [text or messaging](#).

- Pros: Survivors don't need to download apps or sign up for new services.
- Cons: Using survivors' primary phone numbers for a group poses privacy and safety risks.
- Options: Encourage survivors to set up virtual phone numbers such as Google Voice, or use a secure messaging app.

*Secure messaging apps* feel very similar to texting, but can offer a greater degree of security for conversations. Examples include Signal, WhatsApp, and many others.

- Pros: Survivors have more choices about the personal information that they share with each other, and messages can be accessed from more than one device (for example, if a survivor loses their phone).
- Cons: The app is only as secure as a survivor's device and account. If someone else is accessing their device and the app, then the privacy of the group could be compromised.

*Disappearing messaging apps* also feel similar to texting, but work by having messages disappear shortly after being read. These apps often allow users to create account or profiles not linked to a real name. Examples include Snapchat and Telegram.

- Pros: Messages are less likely to be read by someone else later, though [spyware](#) would remain a risk (real-time monitoring). As with other secure messaging apps, survivors may have more choices about the personal information that they share with each other, and the group could be accessed from more than one device.

- Cons: As above, the app is only as secure as a survivor’s device and account. If someone else is accessing the app or if spyware is installed, then the privacy of the group could be compromised.

### *Email Groups*

Programs can set up email groups through a small, secure, paid service. Emails to the group address are delivered to a survivor’s inbox, and they send messages to the group through their email account. Read more about best practices when communicating with survivors using [email](#).

- Pros: This is a common technology that many people have access to. Survivors don’t have to download an app or remember a new login, which can make the group easier to access.
- Cons: There are safety and privacy risks for survivors to receive email messages in their inboxes, and to have their messages in the “sent” folder.

### **Platforms Not Recommended for Online Groups**

- Email groups available for free such as Google Groups or Yahoo Groups often scan through email content for marketing purposes, and allow third parties to do so as well.
- Social media pages or groups, even “private” ones, are not secure enough for survivor support groups. Concerns include that their personal information and identity would be shared with other members of the group, and the social media company itself would have access to who is in the group. Some social media companies routinely scan content to build marketing profiles of users. There is also a risk of the group being hacked, as happened to a [private Facebook group in 2019, which was taken over by people hostile to survivors](#).



## **Additional Resources**

See our [Digital Services Toolkit](#) for more specific information about [assessing your program's readiness](#) for digital services, choosing a [platform](#) and [vendor](#), and [best practices](#) when using technology to communicate.

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