



Setting up a TOMNET Peer Support Group

TOMNET is about older men supporting each other through hidden hardships, to improve mental health and well-being, and prevent suicide.

Our aim

To create Member led or Peer Support networks of older men who genuinely care about the welfare of each other, and who reach out to support other older men in the community. Our Members commit to 'Older Men Supporting Older Men' – we achieve this through networks of peer support and community care programs of Aged Care Visitation, Home Visitation, Affiliate Peer Group Support, Mentoring Disadvantaged Youth, and Telephone Support to isolated Members in our communities. TOMNET grew from 8 men in 2001, to over 280 men in Toowoomba aged over 50 and we have 12 affiliated groups in regional, rural and remote locations.

We are different to Men's Sheds...

We work closely with Mens Sheds as both organisations hold in common the importance of a place where men can gather together and share each other's company. Mens sheds are activity focussed centres which meet the needs of many men. TOMNET Members prefer to engage in conversation, as many have moved beyond, or have never had manual work interests. They value providing emotional support to each other and reconnecting through peer support volunteering programs that reach out to isolated older men in their community.

Our peer support groups reconnect older men with their peers, fostering an environment of social and emotional support on a regular basis. Our Members have in common the challenges of hidden hardships of older men – dealing with retirement, the grief of losing a partner, loss of work & social networks, loss of purpose and identity, health issues and moving to a new town.

Through peer support, TOMNET Members rediscover productive lives, regain purpose, the ability to connect, and contribute to the community. Our Members feel like they belong again. At TOMNET, our Members hold weekly gatherings, events, interest groups, and offer barbecue services. We organise community care programs and provide professional support to assist Members with unresolved issues.

Identify a purpose for the group

It is important the group agrees on the purpose as it creates group ownership and sense of belonging. Without this critical step, commitment is likely to wane quickly.

To identify the potential purpose of your group, some options you could consider include:

- Are you willing to adopt the 'older men supporting older men' model in your community? If so, what ways could you support older men locally?
- Could you adopt a TOMNET Community Care Program that meets a need in your community?
- Is there a volunteering opportunity as a group you can participate in? e.g. volunteering to look after the hospital gardens, or provide books to patients?
- Is there a common skill set amongst your group that you could share with your community?
- Is there a service to the community your group could assist with, such as cooking barbecues for local community organisations or fundraisers?
- Are your group's Members willing to share their stories to raise community awareness of hidden hardships faced by older men?
- Is there a shared interest amongst your groups eg. cards, chess or a hobby that you could offer to older men in aged care facilities?
- Other ideas?

Scoping a Format

Each group has a different style or format based on their community's needs. Before approaching potential Members or seeking community support, give some thought to the practical considerations of the group. The potential meeting locations, group size, how often it may meet, who could the group help in the community, and where to source potential Members.

Who could help you with this?

- Are there fellow Members in your community that could help you brain storm ideas?
- Is there a community focussed organisation that may be willing to assist you? Groups such as Rotary, Lions Clubs, Red Cross, Health Centre's, Local Councils. The TOMNET team can help you too, or help to identify groups in your local community?

Finding potential Members

It is important that new Members make a choice to get involved.

Options for promoting your peer support group

TOMNET's only requirement is that Members be over 50. All men are considered equal regardless of their circumstances or capacity to contribute.

- Present the 'need' for a group, and the TOMNET model to Community Organisations and local groups.
- A flyer or media release for your local paper are available as a resource to assist.
- Personal invitations are quite successful, along with asking community organisations to support and encourage those in their networks.

Potential Members are encouraged to make up their own mind whether to join or not, as your group won't suit all. Men are encouraged to take as much time as they need to get a 'feel' about TOMNET prior to making a commitment. There is never any pressure or coercion into becoming a Member, and Membership will always remain voluntary. When inviting new Members, ensure that the purpose of the group is clearly communicated. Important principles of successful groups include communicating the standards of behaviour, contributions required, confidentiality and common courtesies that are expected.

Groups can vary in size, from as little as 2 or 3 Members to our size of 280. Start with a few, and numbers will grow as word of mouth occurs.

Our experience stands true that Members themselves are the best promoters of TOMNET.

Your first meeting

Find a central location to meet, including community centre, library, or local hall.

Where possible, provide light refreshments and encourage all those who attend to wear a name badge (even a temporary label is sufficient) – it's a great way to break the ice.

At the outset, it is very important to get 'buy in' for the purpose of the group. It is a very important step in creating ownership – which will encourage Members to continue to participate and commit longer term.

During the first meeting, consider discussing the following points and remember that the purpose of the group may change as it evolves:

- Discuss the need for the group in the community.
- Ask Members if they can share any stories to support this.
- Ask each Member to introduce themselves as they speak.

As a group, work through the 'identify purpose' template.

Provide the meeting a list of items to consider in order to develop a 12 month plan.

1. Where could the group meet?
2. How often could the group meet, and what for?
3. Selecting a group leader?
4. Sharing roles and responsibilities (look at the options)
5. Setting a standard of behaviour or a code of conduct – include confidentiality, common courtesy, language (see template for developing your own code of conduct)
6. How to deal with any costs associated with meeting
7. Expectations of the group?
8. Naming of the group
9. Consider the practical requirements.

The idea is to keep it simple and not overwhelm potential new Members. Many have had long experiences with committees and community groups and may be wary of getting involved again.

Tips

- Make sure you keep within the allocated time – never go over time.
- Send reminder notices at the outset, until meetings become regular.
- Make contact with Members after the meeting to see how they are feeling about the group – certainly do not badger or coerce them into coming along next time.

A personal invitation to Members to get involved is very effective, however keep in mind they may feel vulnerable if going through a tough time. A gentle approach, asking them if they would like to get involved without forcing them, is a good way to ask. If they say they are not ready yet, tell them you would like to ask them to get involved in the future as you value their contribution. Sometimes Members need support to regain their confidence.

Develop a 12 month plan together

Provide each member with a copy of the 12 month plan template to take home to consider. It is an important tool to ensure everybody's ideas are valued. However, it is important to help them realise that not all ideas can be actioned at once, and a list of priorities will be developed. Your group should then revisit this plan regularly.

Set the next meeting date and time. The 2nd meeting will focus on developing the 12 month plan.

Ask if they are willing to leave their contact details with you (template provided).

Traits for Group Success

In TOMNET's experience there are a number of traits that groups can develop, which increases their likelihood of achieving their goals and objectives set for themselves. These include:

- Shared vision: having a shared vision of where the group was headed reduced conflict in the early stages and created a joint commitment to achieving that vision.
- Managing the expectations of Members as to the purpose and code of conduct of the group.
- Establishing an environment of non-judgement, empathy and support was paramount to encourage self-disclosure to occur.
- Self-disclosure occurred when peers were treated with dignity and respect, with equality and compassion and support.
- Leadership style: a democratic style works best in building teams because of its cooperative emphasis.
- Time availability: it is crucial that the group make the time available with their group and have the ability to be flexible.
- Group tasks lend themselves to cooperatively work together.
- Connections are stronger when working together.
- Building relationships of trust take time – have patience in allowing them to evolve.
- Share life stories, not the facts and figures, but the stories that made a difference, good or bad in the lives of the individual.
- Create some rituals, such as a handshake to greet each other.
- Connected to local services that provided support beyond what a peer support model offers.

What the TOMNET model is not:

- It is not based on a health care service or medical model.
- It is not a 'hand's on' type hobby group nor does it hold set activities like the men's shed programs.
- Women are not involved in the Membership, or setting the direction of the group, although women provide an active support role.
- There is not one activity that is the basis for the group meeting, for example like a chess club.
- All Members are equal, although a small group may be elected to manage on behalf of the group.
- It is not a program that is a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

The TOMNET Handshake – an act that holds significance

The frequent use of a handshake among TOMNET men has become more than a simple greeting.

It is a powerful gesture of mateship. It is a sign of substance where each man behind the hand matters; where mutual recognition as a man and a mate is shared and valued. A handshake also indicates that permission has been granted to be accepted, and is in a trusted zone. Men indicate warmth and potential friendship through the use of a firm handshake. It is the signature of TOMNET amongst Members.



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