

What's a Battle Scars support group like?

I've been using the Battle Scars Facebook group for support for about a year now, and it's been really amazing to be able to interact with people of all ages and from all over the place who also have experience of self harm. Before that it honestly felt like it was only me, especially as I don't fit the "teenage girl" stereotype. After a few months, I plucked up courage to add myself to the mailing list for the zoom support groups, but the thought of actually attending one was really daunting – what will it be like, who will be there, what if I have to speak loads, what if everyone else knows each other, what if I somehow Get. It. Wrong...?!?!

Fast forward to 2022, and I'm now a Battle Scars online support group facilitator. I'm so proud of myself for having the courage to reach out and join a group that first time. The groups have been so helpful as a supportive safe space to connect with people with similar experiences, and I wanted to be a part of providing that space for other people. But I can still remember how daunting it was that first time, so I thought I'd write a bit about what the groups are like to give anyone in the same position an idea of what to expect. Kind of like google-streetviewing the parking situation before going anywhere new (yes, I do that, and yes, I have chronic anxiety, what of it?).

Battle Scars online support groups generally follow a similar structure – we start with an icebreaker, just to, well, break the ice. This is usually whatever ridiculous question the facilitators have come up with, ranging from "what is your favourite weather" (snow) to "would you prefer to be an apple or a banana" (tricky one, but probably banana). Then we do a round of introductions where each person briefly says hi, sometimes sharing a little bit about their self-harm history, or what kind of day they're having (or often just sticking with "hi"). With both of these it is absolutely ok to have your camera off, or participate using the chat function. People do it all the time, you won't stick out. Sometimes I do it too, when I'm at group as a service user rather than a facilitator, and I'm having a bad anxiety day. Each group has a main facilitator and a co-facilitator who usually have "Battle Scars" in their screen names – if you're nervous, or you're not feeling up to participating and you just want to listen, drop them a message in the chat to let them know.

The main part of the group will usually be on a topic that the facilitator has put together – things like exploring difficult emotions, how to ask for support, or ideas for self-care. The facilitator will ask questions to get a discussion going, or we'll capture ideas on a shared screen (demonstrating that, even after 2 years of zoom, I still regularly forget how to share my screen). For me, a successful group is one where lots of people participate - I love it when the group feels like a safe space to discuss things it can be hard to talk about elsewhere. But having people there just to listen is totally ok, I know what it feels like when that's all you can manage – the safe space is there for you too, just as much as everyone else.

So if, like I was, you're teetering on the edge of coming along to your first group, I hope this has given you an idea of what to expect. If there's something you're unsure of that I haven't covered, just drop us an email – it's honestly fine.

## From a Facilitator's Perspective

I joined Battle Scars three years ago, and spent about a year facilitating face-to-face groups, gaining a bit of confidence (I had very little to begin with!), starting to find my feet. Then – boom! COVID hit. And all of a sudden, the support groups were gone.

Then Jenny (she's the Battle Scars' CEO) came up with the absurd idea of starting virtual groups instead, just while COVID was keeping everyone pretty much confined to their homes. I call the idea absurd, because technology and seeing our own face on screen was not something any of us were keen on! With my issues with how I look, low self-esteem – yep, it definitely seemed absurd (and scary) to me! But I love Battle Scars, and I wanted to help, so despite all of that I agreed to lead a group with another volunteer, and Jenny was going to lead one too.

And so our virtual groups were born! It took quite a while for me to find my confidence as a facilitator. I managed to get my head around the tech side of things, with Zoom, but having to see my face in the groups was not something I got used to easily – I still don't like it! It's totally fine for service users not to use their camera, but I knew if I was leading groups I would have to use mine.

Our groups took off though, and I was determined to keep up. It was still early days when I began to realise that we were building this amazing community. As the groups grew more popular, we opened them up to people outside of Leeds and soon we had people attending from all over the UK – it was incredible!

We added more groups to keep up with demand and I took on a couple more of them. I fell in love with the community I had been part of creating, a network of people who showed up to groups and never judged one another, only reached out a hand to support each other. The generosity and kindness of the people who attend the groups I lead never fails to impress me; every newcomer is welcomed into the groups with open arms by those who are present. I think the fact that the groups are very informal and relaxed really helps. There is never any pressure to contribute; nobody is ever put on the spot or expected to participate. Everyone who comes joins in at their own pace.

Most groups have their own topics, planned by the facilitator, but there are a couple of groups called "What's Bothering You?" groups, and I lead one of those. It is a safe space for people to bring things that they are struggling with, to ask the group if anyone has had similar experiences – or it can just be a place for you to have a rant about something – and move on!

Two years down the line and Battle Scars holds an even bigger place in my heart, as I now work for them, as well as continuing to volunteer for them. We have built a wonderful, warm and welcoming community through the support groups – those who come seem to get so much from them; I know I do. We have also found that some people who have found the groups really useful want to give back – and so they become volunteers and start facilitating the support groups we have added along the way! It's amazing.

Part of my role (a part that I really love!) is to work with the other volunteers, to support them to facilitate their support groups and to be there for them as best I can. For me, one of the best things that has happened over the past two years is getting to see people start to attend our groups, then to watch them grow in confidence, to participate more, to offer support to others. Some of those people then tell me they would like to become volunteers themselves – and that, for me, is one of the best feelings ever!