

A brief guide to health forum design

What is this guide?

This brief guide is for anyone designing or managing online health forums. It includes research-informed insights into design goals, key questions, and example actions to help you build communities that support users and moderators to feel safe and connected.

Where does this guide come from?

This guide was developed as part of the iPOF project (<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/health-and-medicine/research/spectrum/research/ipof/>)

The ideas here are based on research grounded in Self-Determination Theory, which shows that people thrive when three basic needs are met:

- Autonomy (having meaningful choice)
- Competence (feeling effective and informed)
- Relatedness (feeling connected to others)

This guide includes strategies for promoting these needs amongst the users of health forums. Our research has also shown that moderators are essential for health forums to run effectively, so we have included suggestions for training and supporting moderators.

Principle 1: Support User Autonomy

Design Goal:

Greater autonomy in the user experience supports motivation, trust and sustained participation. To provide this, try to provide users with meaningful choices and control over how they engage with the forum. When people feel they can choose both when and how they interact, they are more likely to use forums in ways that fit their own goals and circumstances.

Action	Key Questions	Example Features
Let users customise how they engage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Can people choose what topics they see?- Can they manage notifications easily?- Can they control anonymity and visibility?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Topic filters- Mute or hide threads- Anonymous posting options
Use non-coercive, transparent language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are nudges framed as suggestions?- Do prompts explain <i>why</i> they exist?- Can people decline easily?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- "You might find this useful..."- Balance direct and supportive language when moderating the forum
Make rules and moderation clear	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are community rules accessible?- Do users know who moderates and why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Plain-language guidelines which are easy to find (e.g. forum side bar or pinned post)- A clear description of what forums cannot be used for and how moderation is applied
Be open about privacy & consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Give people options about how their data is used and shared- Can people adjust their privacy choices later?- Are privacy risks clearly stated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Include an option to sign up for data to be shared anonymously for research purposes at sign up- Privacy dashboard- Consent toggles- Simple cookie or data statements

Principle 2: Support User Competence

Design Goal:

Enable users to feel informed, capable and confident to participate. Forums that strengthen users' sense of competence help people share experiences, navigate challenges, and use trustworthy information to manage their health more effectively.

Action	Key Questions	Example Features
Provide reliable resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are resources accurate, current, and relevant?- Are sources clearly marked?- Are links accessible in context?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Pinned resource threads- Downloadable factsheets
Offer simple onboarding & help	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do new users get clear instructions?- Is 'how to participate' help easy to find later?- Are guidelines for safe posting available?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Welcome emails/posts- Quick-start tutorials- FAQ pages
Signpost to external help when needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Is there clear guidance for crisis or specialist issues?- Are helplines easy to find?- Is it clear what the forum can and cannot do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Emergency helpline banners- Local service directories with trusted organisations
Show appreciation for contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do people know their input is valued?- Are helpful posts recognised publicly?- Is peer knowledge visible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Upvotes, badges- Featured posts- Peer expert labels

Principle 3: Support Relatedness

Design Goal:

Foster a sense of connection, belonging and peer solidarity. When people feel seen, heard and valued by others with similar experiences, it reduces isolation, builds trust and makes it more likely they will contribute supportive content themselves — which strengthens the whole community.

Action	Key Questions	Example Features
Welcome and include new members	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do new users feel acknowledged quickly?- Are they encouraged to introduce themselves?- Is the tone warm and inclusive?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Automated welcome messages- Intro threads- ‘Community host’ roles
Encourage peer-to-peer help first	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are users encouraged to reply to each other?- Do moderators know when to wait?- Are peer replies recognised?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- ‘Wait before staff reply’ guidelines- Peer supporter badges- Nudges to reply
Model healthy, respectful dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are norms for interaction clear and visible?- Are moderators trained to gently guide tone?- Are users shown good examples?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Community ‘tone’ guide- Positive post examples- Friendly mod interventions
Highlight community stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are success stories shared?- Do people see how the forum helps others?- Are milestones celebrated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- ‘Success story’ threads- Annual round-ups- Community awards

Principle 4: Support Moderators

Design Goal:

Protect moderators' wellbeing and sustain their capacity to maintain a safe, supportive environment. Moderators often absorb emotional labour and exposure to distressing content; clear structures, realistic role boundaries and reflective support reduce burnout and make moderation sustainable long term.

Action	Key Questions	Example Features
Define clear roles & boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are moderators clear on what's expected?- Do they know the limits of their responsibility?- Are role conflicts managed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Written responsibilities- Clear escalation rules
Provide forum-specific, practical training	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Is training designed with input from experienced moderators?- Does it cover realistic scenarios?- Is there time for practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Peer-led inductions- Shadowing sessions- Role-playing scenarios
Enable reflective supervision & peer support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do moderators have space to debrief?- Is there regular check-in time?- Are peer networks active?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Reflective practice meetings- Buddy systems- Peer social media channels
Give clear risk protocols & backup	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do moderators know how to handle risk posts?- Is there an up-to-date protocol?- Do they know when to escalate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Stepped risk guides- Crisis flowcharts- Supervisor contacts
Promote moderator wellbeing & sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Are breaks and boundaries respected?- Is self-care encouraged as standard?- Are contributions recognised	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Flexible rotas- Wellbeing reminders- Proportionate

Action**Key Questions****Example Features**

and rewarded?

payment or perks

Further reading and resources

- A paper describing the guidelines and how we developed is being prepared and will appear here soon.
- For more information on moderator training and support, see here: <https://preprints.jmir.org/preprint/58891/accepted>
- To request access to free online moderator training developed by the iPOF team, see here: <https://forms.office.com/e/PtQCG9Aks9>
- For further reading on how self-determination theory can be used to support technology design, see here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10447318.2022.2089812>