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Supporting the Youth Peer Workforce

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The Audience

This brief may be of interest for anyone preparing to implement the youth peer role in their organization, those who have already introduced the role and may be looking for further guidance around organizational policy and procedure, and anyone who provides training, coaching or supervision to youth peers.

The Issue

Peer support is fast emerging as a promising and widely endorsed addition to the array of mental health services available to young people experiencing serious mental health conditions,[1] yet very little is known about the peer support workforce in general,[2] and even less about the peer workforce engaged specifically in providing services to youth and young adults.[3] While the need for more research into this developing professional population is evident, what data we do have available indicates several challenges that have frequently shown up in implementing the youth peer role, as well as several common themes around what youth peer support specialists need in order to be successful in their positions.

Key Points

- Youth peer support specialists are a rapidly emerging workforce; clarification is needed on how to define and support these roles.
- Role clarity, integration into clinical or treatment teams, a relative lack of professional experience, and difficulties surrounding career advancement are all major challenges facing youth peer support specialists.
- Organizations can mitigate these challenges with training for youth peers, training on the specific nature and value of the peer role for non-peer colleagues of youth peers, and frequent, supportive supervision.

The Approach

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Given the lack of a national training for peer support professionals and national standards defining the core competencies, ethics, or tasks of peer support specialists,[4] it can be difficult to define the nature and function of the peer support role within an organization. Consequently, confusion (and often wariness) regarding the peer support role among their co-workers often results. Indeed, research has shown that even peer support specialists themselves are often unclear about what exactly their role entails.[2,3,5] Further, qualitative research has shown that many youth peer support specialists felt they did not have adequate training and did not feel understood and respected by their non-peer coworkers [3]

Research on both adult peer support and youth peer support cites the lack of clarity regarding peer support roles among non-peer staff as a barrier to effective implementation.[3,5,6] Gates and Akabas found that peer staff studied were often given menial or otherwise inappropriate tasks, or their roles were not properly distinguished from those of clinical staff or caseworkers.[7] Stigma against peer professionals from their non-peer colleagues is mentioned frequently in the literature.[3,5,8] In the largest national survey of the peer workforce to date, 64.3% of those surveyed reported seeing or feeling stigma or discrimination from their non-peer coworkers.[2] Best practices suggest that youth and adult peers alike should be supervised by someone who understands the role - ideally, another certified peer specialist – yet research suggests that this occurs rarely.[9] In the same national survey referenced above, only 37.7% of respondents reported being supervised by a peer.[2]

Finally, certain challenges entirely unique to the youth peer support role exist: for many young people, this is their first professional role,[3,10] and although career advancement is a widely shared challenge in the peer world,[9] youth peers are inherently working in a role with an expiration date. A 2019 survey by Youth M.O.V.E. National found that 52% of youth peer providers surveyed were not having conversations about career advancement with their supervisors, and 11% felt that youth worker positions were a “dead end” career.[11]

The Techniques

Role Clarity

Equipping youth peer support specialists with a clear understanding of their role, as well as a strong foundation of training, is the most basic way to prepare them for success. Experts recommend that this process begins with the job posting for the position, which should clearly define what a peer is in the context of the agency (in terms of age, lived experience, etc.), what qualifications are required, and what the key functions and expectations of the role are.[12] These functions and expectations should then be reinforced with training when the peer is hired and throughout their

tenure at the agency - particularly training that covers unique aspects of the peer role, such as strategic sharing, healthy boundaries, and stress management.[12] In addition, it is important that youth peer support specialists be trained on specific skills around supporting young people to identify and carry out goals. This is in addition to what they might learn about peer support at, for instance, their state certification training, which tends to focus on basic practice principles. In 2017, Pathways Research and Training Center developed an enhancement for the youth peer support role called AMP+, an adaptation of the earlier, evidence-backed AMP training for youth service providers,[13] in order to address some of the gaps identified in research on youth peers. This web-based training focuses on specific skills and concrete practices for youth peers to use in their work with young people, including a focus on skills specifically related to peerness, such as strategic sharing and peer relationship building. In a pilot study of the AMP+ training, researchers found significant improvement in competencies for working with youth and young adults according to both the trainers' assessment of the youth peers' skills and the youth peers' self-assessments.[14] Perhaps more notably, the youth peers involved also reported significantly decreased role-related anxiety and increased understanding of their own role.[14] This research is grounds for optimism that a solid basis of training can address some of the challenges around individual role clarity that are prevalent in the literature on youth peer support. Also worth noting is a 2018 online survey which found that one-on-one training and a clear understanding of their role were significant predictors of job satisfaction for the 195 peer support specialists surveyed.[15]

Educating the Team/Destigmatizing the Role

Research has found that peer support professionals felt they were more successfully integrated into the team environment when the non-peer staff at their organization received training on the peer role.[3,16] Experts recommend that provider staff who will be working alongside youth peers receive training during their onboarding as well as on an ongoing basis. This training should cover the unique characteristics and value of the youth peer role, and the positive impacts that introducing a peer can have on a young person's treatment outcomes. In addition, it is recommended that non-peer staff be thoroughly trained on the practical aspects of what youth peers do and do not do, how to make referrals to peers, how to communicate with peers (especially regarding their lived experience), and how they can support youth peers to be active participants in team meetings.[12] Particular efforts should be made to prevent stigmatization of peers - as Myrick and Del Vecchio note, all too often the burden of destigmatization and education falls on the shoulders of the peer staff themselves.[4] However, researchers found that peer staff had a greater degree of satisfaction when their supervisor worked to broker support for peers within the broader organization,[17] and

indeed, experts recommend that youth peer supervisors use their position to foster understanding between peer and non-peer staff.[12]

Supervision and Opportunities for Connection:

As noted above, best practices suggest that youth peer supervision should be performed by someone with knowledge of and experience in the role. Supervision should also be regular, frequent, establish clear expectations of the role, and include discussions about burnout and self-care.[3,12,16] Youth peers have also advocated for the importance of on-the-job coaching from their supervisors.[3,18] Since peer supervision is not widely available, it is important that peers be given additional opportunities to connect with others in the peer role, and in general this opportunity is valued: Jivanjee, et al found greater enthusiasm among youth peer providers than other youth service providers for participation in learning communities,[18] and youth peers interviewed by Delman and Klodnick particularly valued trainings during which they had the opportunity to "meet other peer workers and experience a sense of validation and comradely [*sic*]."[3]

Professionalism and Career Advancement:

Since the youth peer support position is often a young person's first "professional" role, it is important that training and supervision address the basics of professionalism and establish workplace norms. Compared to older peers, youth peers are more likely to need coaching related to time management, professional dress, effective communication with their coworkers, stress management and wellness planning. Additionally, they should be well-informed of their workplace rights and responsibilities, the benefits available to them, and the organizational policies affecting them.[10,12] Youth peers interviewed have frequently underscored the importance of professional development opportunities such as access to ongoing training and possibilities for upward mobility within their organizations.[12,16] Supervisors should have these conversations early and often with their youth peer staff in order to address the challenges inherent with the "peer" aspect of the role as well as to mitigate burnout and the perception that the youth peer support role is a dead-end job.

Why this Practice Matters

Although much of the limited evidence available regarding the effectiveness of peer support comes from the adult peer world[1] the evidence that has been gathered on youth peer support is encouraging – for instance, Radigan and her colleagues found that young people who had access to a "peer advocate" had greater satisfaction with their mental health services.[19] There are indications that youth peer support specialists might be uniquely adept at reaching system-weary youth;[1] and systems-experienced youth have themselves identified youth peer support as an important strategy to address existing gaps in the youth service continuum.[20] Moreover, the

expansion of peer support in general has been advocated by SAMHSA, which has identified peer support as a fundamental component of recovery.[21] As youth peer professionals grow in number, it becomes increasingly important that we take note of the unique workplace challenges and stressors they experience and work to codify solutions and support. It is vital that supports such as those outlined in this brief be standardized, disseminated and implemented across youth-serving organizations.

Resources

- What is Peer Support and What is Not Peer Support
  https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/proj-5-AMP-what-is-peer-support.pdf
- E-Learning tools for building one-on-one conversational skills
  https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/learning-tools
- Register for a Youth Peer Support Community of Practice
  https://portlandstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cA1Yvc5KiTKgi6p
- Learn more about AMP+ or PLUS (Peers Learning and Using Skills) Training
  https://achievemyplan.pdx.edu/amp-plus-youth-peer-support

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