

# What is peer work?

A peer worker provides emotional and social support to others with whom they share a common experience. They focus on building a mutual relationship that fosters hope and optimism. By being able to provide genuine examples of overcoming adversities in their own journeys, peer workers can inspire empowerment and self-determination. Peer work aims to support recovery of a person's whole life, inclusive of personal passions, social interactions, study and work.

Peer work is an opportunity for mutual learning and growth. It's about using shared experiences to come up with new strategies for future growth that ideally foster hope and possibility in both individuals. It's also about a balance of power and mutuality, not a 'helper-client' scenario.

## Lived experience

Peer workers have usually had similar challenges to those who they work with. Peer workers may use stories of personal struggles and success in order to support others.

## Mutuality

Peer workers attempt to minimise power imbalances, which allows for their experiences to be shared and for both people in the peer work relationship to work together. It can be beneficial for both people in the peer relationships.

## Hope and recovery

When peer workers evoke lived experience, they try to do so in an optimistic manner. Peer workers aim to inspire hope and frame experiences in a positive light. Peer workers provide a lived example of recovery and focus on the benefits of the lived experience.

## What are the benefits of having young people work as peer workers in youth mental health?

- Having significant gaps between the ages of two people can create unintended power imbalances, which is a dynamic peer work tries to avoid.
- Young people know what it's like to be a young person now. What it's like to be a young person changes over time (e.g. across generations).
- Young people are in a rapidly changing developmental stage where they are forming independence and autonomy. They may feel more comfortable talking with someone who isn't of a similar age to those who have authority over them in other settings (e.g. parents, teachers).

- Young people are more likely to have closer ties to family, peers and educational institutions. Other young people can empathise with the relationships experienced in these contexts.
- Sometimes the experience of mental ill health can be different for young people compared with older adults (e.g. irritability in the context of a depressive episode). If an older peer worker experienced mental ill health later in life, then the types of symptoms may be different to those experienced during adolescence.
- Young people are relatively new to their early experiences of mental ill health and seeking and receiving help from services. This means that they are more likely to have been treated in the same types of services.
- Youth specific services often have a strong focus on early intervention, which can involve a distinct philosophy about recovery and care. This includes a strong focus on youth participation and the important role that young people play in creating youth friendly services.



# Youth peer work in action

## EXAMPLE



Young person links with a service



Referred to see a clinician but is apprehensive about receiving help



Clinician refers young person to a youth peer worker



Youth peer worker makes contact with the young person and arranges to meet or have a phone conversation



Youth peer worker intentionally frames the conversation to be casual but rapport building in order to build a mutual and respectful relationship



Initial discussions may cover what's been going on generally for the young person and any concerns they may have



Young person outlines an issue they may be having, the youth peer worker may then draw on past shared experience or knowledge of supports available to come up with a new strategy together



Young person and youth peer worker collaboratively brainstorm a view of possibilities that inspire hope



The youth peer worker continues to support the young person as they explore those possibilities

# Diversity in youth peer work

## Youth focus

- mutuality
- lived experience
- hope & recovery

## Tasks

- Having positive social interactions
- Use shared experience
- Reducing negative experiences
- Demonstrating that recovery is possible
- Run groups (e.g. cooking, music, painting),
- Supporting for young people after leaving hospital, school/community presentations
- Creating awareness of available services
- Reducing stigma
- Helping young people to feel less nervous (e.g. before appointments)

## Types of youth peer workers

- Vocational peer workers
- Youth peer workers
- Peer educators
- Online peer workers
- Alcohol and other drug peer workers
- LGBTIQ peer workers
- Domestic violence peer workers
- Telephone peer workers

## Settings

- Inpatient Unit
- Community
- Post-discharge
- Online
- Primary mental health service
- Residential
- Detox clinic
- Schools
- Universities
- Other educational institutions

## People in the peer relationship

- One-on-one
- Small groups
- Large groups (e.g. whole of school)
- Community

Besides the actual act of 'peer work', we as peer workers are involved in a large variety of tasks. From completing admin, advocating for those we work with, and liaising with family members. A peer worker is a part of a bigger team where we work together with other staff members. This might be on tasks like identifying goals that young people are working towards and the information they need and want to share.