



FOR YOUNG  
PEOPLE, FAMILIES,  
CLINICIANS,  
PEER WORKERS  
AND SERVICE  
SUPPORT

## FACT SHEET

# FAMILY PEER SUPPORT AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

This fact sheet provides a basic introduction to family peer support in youth mental health. It is for young people, families of young people, family peer workers, clinicians and service leaders. It can be used to help new family peer workers understand the role, and to help young people and their families and carers know what to expect from engaging with a family peer support program during their recovery.

### FIRST, A WORD ON WORDS

The word ‘family’ has a particular meaning in everyday language. However, in the context of family peer support in youth mental health, we refer to ‘family’ as anyone who is providing unpaid support to a young person they know in recovery from mental ill-health. These people can be family members, friends or others.

### WHAT IS THE FAMILY EXPERIENCE IN YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH?

First episodes of mental ill-health can be challenging for young people. Families of these young people may also experience some challenges during these times, including feeling as though:

- they do not have enough information, guidance or support throughout their loved one’s recovery;
- they are uncertain about the future, including how long recovery will take, what recovery will look like and what their current and future relationship with their loved one looks like; and
- systems and processes are moving too slowly.

It is common for families to experience feelings of grief, guilt and anxiety at these times. They may also neglect their own mental and physical health, withdraw from their usual social supports and activities, or resign from their jobs in order to focus on the young person they care for.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore important to support the families of young people with mental ill-health. It has been suggested that peer support is an effective way to do this.<sup>1</sup>

Recovery from mental ill-health can involve unpredictable, fluctuating periods of improvement and deterioration. During this time, it can be difficult for families to understand what is happening. They often feel as though they are **on a rollercoaster**. This can result in families feeling anxious and can make it difficult for them to make plans for the near or distant future. It also makes it difficult to do things like maintain self-care and meet social and work commitments. Family peer workers know what this feels like and can help set realistic expectations and provide emotional support, information and advocacy for families.



## WHAT IS FAMILY PEER SUPPORT?

In youth mental health, family peer support is a reciprocal relationship that involves someone with lived experience of caring for a young person with mental ill-health supporting families who may be newer to the experience. Family peer workers instil hope in the families they support. They listen and provide emotional support in a respectful, non-critical and non-judgmental manner. They can provide information, resources and referrals. Family peer workers can also act as a go-between and advocate for families while they are learning to navigate the mental healthcare system and how to communicate with case-workers and clinicians.<sup>2-5</sup>

Family peer support in youth mental health: what it is, what it isn't and what it looks like in practice.



### FAMILY PEER SUPPORT IS:

- short-term support;
- confidential;
- shared, relatable experiences;
- instills hope;
- respectful, non-critical and non-judgemental listening;
- emotional support;
- resources and information;
- referrals;
- self-disclosure of either party is voluntary;
- a voice for the family – advocacy and mediation with the mental healthcare system and its professionals; and
- expectation setting – how long recovery might take, and what it might look like.

### FAMILY PEER SUPPORT ISN'T:

- therapy;
- case management;
- assessment;
- risk management; or
- a breach of the young person's rights and autonomy (e.g. confidentiality).

### HOW THIS CAN LOOK:

- clear boundaries;
- complementary to therapy;
- conversation (can be informal or structured);
- face to face, via phone or online;
- providing information (e.g. about mental ill-health, resources available to families, etc.); and
- supporting a two-way conversation between families and a young person's healthcare professionals (e.g. clinicians, case-workers).

Whilst supporting a young person experiencing mental ill-health, families may sometimes feel as though they are **walking on eggshells** while they are figuring out how to communicate with and support the young person. This can lead to anxiety and at times, conflict. Family peer workers can provide emotional support, information and advice to families who feel they are struggling with this.

## HOW CAN FAMILY PEER SUPPORT HELP?

There is currently very little high-quality research on family peer support in youth mental health. However, the current evidence indicates that families find peer support to be helpful in a number of ways, including improvements to their coping, knowledge and empowerment. These benefits also appear to be long-lasting.<sup>6</sup>

## WOULD YOU LIKE TO TALK TO SOMEONE WHO HAS HAD SIMILAR EXPERIENCES SUPPORTING A YOUNG PERSON WITH MENTAL ILL-HEALTH?

### QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES

Family peer workers can help you as a family to explore some of the following questions:

<input type="checkbox"/> Do you feel as though you have enough information about mental health?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do you feel as though you have enough information about the treatment of the young person you are supporting?
<input type="checkbox"/> Do you know who to contact and how to contact them if you ever want more information for yourself or the young person you support?	<input type="checkbox"/> Are you happy with how you communicate with the young person you care for?
<input type="checkbox"/> Do you feel as though you are coping financially at the moment?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do you have support for you ? Who can you currently approach or talk to when you start to feel overwhelmed?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are you taking care of yourself?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do you feel hopeful about the future?

## WHAT NOW?

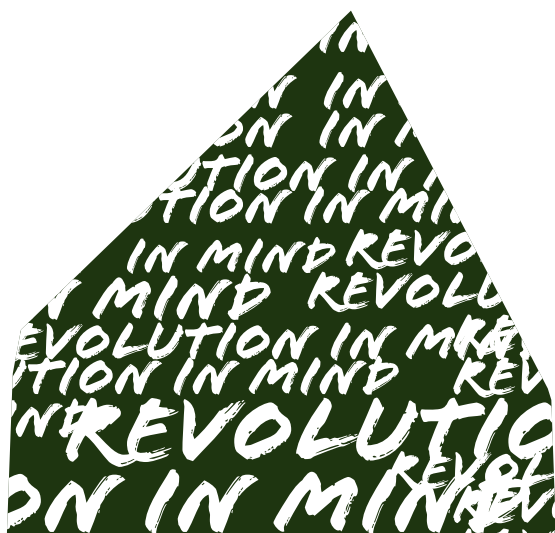
If you think you or a family you work with would benefit from family peer support, get in touch with your local youth mental health service to see if they offer it or can recommend somewhere. Otherwise, see the 'further information' section for more resources.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- [Orygen family peer support](#)
- [Sane Australia, What support is available for carers?](#)
- [Mind Carer and Family Support Services](#)
- [Centre of Excellence in Peer Support, Mental Health](#)

## RELATED RESOURCES

- [Clinical practice point, "How to peer." Introduction to youth peer work in mental health services](#)
- [Evidence summary, What is the evidence for peer support in youth mental health?](#)
- [Fact sheet, Vocational peer support and youth mental health](#)
- [Fact sheet, Youth peer support and youth mental health](#)
- [Implementation checklist, Youth peer support](#)
- [Implementation toolkit, Youth peer support](#)
- [Toolkit, Youth peer work toolkit](#)
- [Training module, Youth mental health peer support 101](#)
- [Video, Thoughts of a family peer worker](#)
- [Video, Thoughts of a youth peer worker](#)



## FACT SHEET WRITER

Rebekah Anderson

## FACT SHEET CONSULTANTS

Susan Preece

Magenta Simmons

## REFERENCES

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INFORMATION ABOUT  
ORYGEN, PLEASE CALL  
(03) 9966 9100 OR  
SEND AN EMAIL TO  
[INFO@ORYGEN.ORG.AU](mailto:INFO@ORYGEN.ORG.AU)

[ORYGEN.ORG.AU](http://ORYGEN.ORG.AU)

35 POPLAR ROAD  
PARKVILLE VIC 3052  
AUSTRALIA

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