

Engaging Youth and Young Adults In and Outside of the Mental Health System through Youth-Informed Peer Support: A Factsheet for Peer Supporters and Allies

Many young people with mental health conditions do not receive mental health services that would benefit them. Further, disengagement from mental health services among young adults is a prevalent problem, with recent estimates between 20-40% (1). Research demonstrates that these young people tend to have poorer health outcomes as they age compared to those who continue to receive services (2).

Engagement in community life outside of the mental health system is also vitally important, but young people with mental health conditions do not participate in the community as much as they would like to.

A study including 105 young adults with mental health conditions demonstrated that while 81% considered working to be important and 77% considered going to school to be important, on average participants reported only 5 days a month working and only 2 days a month going to school. Only 36% of community participation areas considered important to young adults were done enough (3).

Youth - and Young Adult - Specific Challenges to Engagement

While there are many barriers to engagement, it is important to consider those that uniquely affect youth and young adults or are particularly challenging for them. These include:

Within the Mental Health System

- Poor relationships with treatment providers, including not feeling respected or understood as a young person
- Poor access to care given fragmented child and adult service systems
- Stigma / wanting to fit in with peers who do not have mental health challenges

Within the Community

- “Ageist” beliefs about the limited capabilities of young people given lack of life experience
- Constraints imposed by parents, caregivers, or other older adults in power
- Identity issues (e.g., lacking a sense of identity may lead to limited or inconsistent participation in the community)

Unique Role of Peer Supporters

Peer supporters can uniquely and powerfully impact engagement in mental health services (4), and can be champions of community participation efforts. Some ways in which peers may impact engagement are:

- Supporting self-determination / helping peers identify and pursue meaningful goals
- Increasing motivation, activation, hope, and empowerment
- Validating experiences
- Sharing personal experience / finding common ground / demonstrating that peers are not alone in their experiences
- Role modeling / demonstrating effective self-advocacy skills
- Identifying engagement barriers for non-peer mental health providers and working with them to address them
- Being a bridge between non-peer mental health providers and peers
- Doing activities in the community with peers
- Encouraging peers that they are more than their diagnoses
- Demonstrating that peers can make valuable contributions to others
- Communicating that “it is ok to be different”

How Peers Can Facilitate Engagement among Youth and Young Adults

Peer support that is *youth-informed*, or that accounts for the unique experiences, strengths, and issues of relevance to young people, may be especially effective at improving their engagement in and outside of the mental health system. A youth-informed approach may come more naturally to peer supporters who are near in age to the peers with whom they work. However, even older peer supporters may effectively engage youth and young adults if they:

- Acknowledge that there is an age gap
- Reflect on their own experiences of being a young person (and recognize similarities and differences between the experiences of younger peers)
- Let young people educate them (about youth culture, trends, and experiences)
- Show interest in what young people are doing and celebrate with them when goals are met
- Share the lived experience of younger peers (with their permission)
- Build trust
- Help young people adapt the system to fit their needs

Resources

Information and resources for peer supporters who work with youth and young adults, and for organizations seeking to implement youth and young adult peer support services may be found here:

- [Youth MOVE National](#): Provides training and technical assistance in youth peer support programming.
- [Doors to Wellbeing](#): Engages the assets, enthusiasm, and lived experience of youth and young adults, and provides webinars, resources, education, training, and support to peer specialists and others in order to energize the consumer-led movement for recovery and wellness in the United States.
- [Providing Youth and Young Adult Peer Support through Medicaid](#): A resource document produced by the Center for Health Care Strategies and Youth MOVE National detailing how to develop and implement Medicaid-reimbursable youth and young adult peer support services.
- [Effectively Employing Young Adult Peer Providers: A Toolkit](#): A toolkit developed by the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center (SPARC), Transitions Research and Training Center (RCT), which provides guidance to provider organizations that employ or want to employ young adult peer providers.

References

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