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FACT SHEET

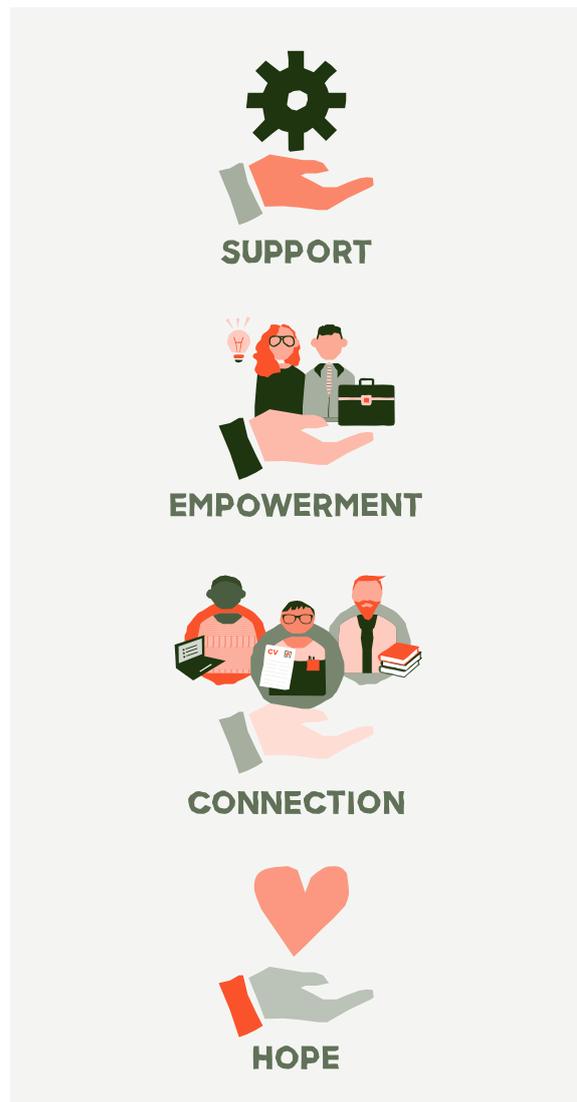
FOR
YOUNG PEOPLE,
CLINICIANS,
PEER WORKERS,
AND SERVICE
SUPPORT

VOCATIONAL PEER SUPPORT AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

This fact sheet provides a basic introduction to vocational peer work in youth mental health. It is for young people, peer workers, clinicians and service managers. It can be used to help new vocational peer workers understand the role, and to help young people know what to expect from engaging with a vocational peer support program.

WHAT IS VOCATIONAL PEER SUPPORT?

In youth mental health, peer support is a mutual relationship that involves a young person with lived experience of mental health and life challenges (vocational peer workers) supporting and advocating for another young person who is experiencing those challenges. Vocational peer workers specifically help to support young people experiencing challenges with jobs or education. Youth vocational peer workers work collaboratively with vocational specialists, providing emotional and social support to young people in employment support programs. They do this from the perspective of a peer with lived experience of mental ill health, incorporating their own experiences of work and/or study. Peer workers listen and offer support in a respectful, non-critical and non-judgemental way. They support a young person through their journey in a way that promotes individual strengths, empowerment, independence and hope.¹⁻⁴



VOCATIONAL PEER WORK IS:

- mutually beneficial support;
- two-way conversation;
- draws upon relatable experiences (e.g. work, education challenges);
- focused on individual strengths and hope;
- build life skills (e.g. job interview skills);
- an opportunity to engage and connect with a peer with similar experiences;
- advocacy: a voice for the young person when dealing with employment services (e.g. Centrelink, employment service providers);
- self-disclosure of either party is voluntary and case-specific;
- led by the young person and their individual priorities and needs;
- complementary to employment services;
- confidential; and
- flexible.

VOCATIONAL PEER WORK ISN'T:

- providing career advice;
- writing resumes or cover letters;
- a job-placement service or recruitment agency;
- therapy;
- case management;
- a relationship (or contact) outside the peer work role or working hours;
- a clinical relationship;
- assessment;
- risk management; or
- scripted or rigid, pre-planned sessions.

HOW THIS CAN LOOK:

- different for each young person;
- clear boundaries;
- checking in with each other;
- support and advocacy at appointments (e.g. Centrelink, employment service providers);
- support after employment or education attained;
- public transport support/training
- support to attend education provider open days;
- support on how to disclose to employers or education providers;
- a mutual relationship built together by the young person and peer worker;
- can be informal or structured conversations;
- can be ongoing sessions or accessed only when needed;
- face to face, via phone or online;
- providing information; and
- modelling growth.

“ Sometimes we do stuff like dropping off resumes at the local shopping centre together. And then other people, we just go have a coffee and a chat, or go for a walk, or go get interview clothes. ”

VOCATIONAL PEER WORKER

HOW CAN PEER SUPPORT HELP?

Sometimes the mental health challenges young people experience make it difficult for them to cope and do the things they would usually enjoy doing, including obtaining or continuing work and education. During this time, young people might also have some anxiety about their future. They may be nervous about not knowing how long recovery will take or what it will look like. Vocational peer workers have recently been through these experiences themselves and are living examples of functional recovery (e.g. work, education). This means that they can offer young people credible support by sharing their experiences and what they have learned from them.



There is not a lot of high-quality evidence for peer support in youth mental health yet, but the small amount available says that peer support might help improve:²

- school progress and results;
- keeping jobs;
- life skills;
- relationships and social skills;
- confidence and empowerment;
- hopefulness;
- mental health;
- drug and alcohol use; and
- behaviour problems.

WHY ARE WORK AND EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

Meaningful work and education can have many benefits, including:

- providing structure and routine;
- financial empowerment and independence;
- increased confidence; and
- increased social connectedness.

They can be a key part of a healthy and satisfying lifestyle in general, as well as bolstering and maintaining mental health.⁵ It is therefore important that young people facing mental health challenges feel enabled and supported in obtaining or continuing work and education.

TOP TIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Below is a list of top tips from our Orygen vocational peer support team to help you decide how to get the most out of peer work:

SET BOUNDARIES TOGETHER.

Peer support relationships fit into a person's support system and play a specific role. In the same way a young person has a specific relationship to a friend rather than a teacher or clinician, peer workers have defined and contained roles to play in providing support. It is important that peer workers and the young people they work with decide on their boundaries

together, including what is ok to discuss and what might make either or both of you feel uncomfortable. A peer worker is not a psychologist or doctor, so they might not be comfortable talking about everything. It's important to be understanding and open to this. This doesn't mean that it isn't a genuine, authentic relationship! Rather, it means that it is a time (during session or work hours) and place (in the centre or at pre-

determined locations) specific relationship. Peer support relationships work best within boundaries as they maintain everyone's safety and comfort.



“ A lot of the time, what I feel like other young people are looking for is someone to be like: ‘I’ve been in that circumstance,’ or ‘I’ve experienced that,’ or ‘I know what this feeling is,’ to normalise it, and make them feel like they’re not alone in that situation.”

VOCATIONAL PEER WORKER

“ I think it would be really helpful for young people to know that they have control over the process of peer support, that it’s led by them... Just knowing this is something where you [the young person] have control would be really helpful.”

VOCATIONAL PEER WORKER

VOCATIONAL PEER WORKERS ARE EXAMPLES OF RECOVERY; THEY ARE NOT PERFECT.

It's important for peer workers and the people they support to remember that a peer worker is a lived example of what recovery from mental ill-health looks like. This does not mean that they are perfect or that

they don't still have their bad days. Vocational peer workers also have their own experiences of work and study which may vary from your own. They can only offer what they have learned through their experience.



PEER WORKERS ARE NOT CLINICIANS OR VOCATIONAL SPECIALISTS.

A peer worker's job is to support other young people using the lessons they have learned from their personal experiences.

They can offer information, resources, advice and support; but they are not psychologists, doctors or career advisors, and they can't find a job for you.



EXPECT A TWO-WAY CONVERSATION.

The mutual nature of peer support is what makes it so special and helpful for young people. Be prepared to talk to someone who might share the same experiences as you.

Peer workers appreciate that both people have strengths and that both people might therefore benefit from the peer relationship.



BE FLEXIBLE.

Some peer support is face to face. However, it can also be over the phone or online. It's important for a peer worker and young person to decide what will work best for them, and to

be open to collaborate on a relationship that works for both people.



FURTHER INFORMATION

- Peer support: [Orygen peer support team](#)
- Vocational specialists: [Orygen vocational services](#)

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, Family 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](#)
- [Webinar, Doing the whole job: vocational recovery in youth mental health](#)

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3. Gillard S. Peer support in mental health services: where is the research taking us, and do we want to go there? *J Ment Health*. 2019 Aug;28(4):341-344.
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5. Modini M, Joyce S, Mykletun A, Christensen H, Bryant RA, Mitchell PB, et al. The mental health benefits of employment: Results of a systematic meta-review. *Australasian Psychiatry*. 2016;24(4):331-336.



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Disclaimer. This information is not medical advice. It is generic and does not take into account your personal circumstances, physical wellbeing, mental status or mental requirements. Do not use this information to treat or diagnose your own or another person's medical condition and never ignore medical advice or delay seeking it because of something in this information. Any medical questions should be referred to a qualified healthcare professional. If in doubt, please always seek medical advice.

Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

GET IN TOUCH

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