

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLKIT

YOUTH PEER SUPPORT

FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE LEADERS AND CLINICIANS

THIS TOOLKIT AIMS TO PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK AND PRACTICAL TIPS TO SUPPORT THE INTEGRATION OF YOUTH PEER SUPPORT INTO A MENTAL HEALTHCARE SETTING.

It has been designed with service leaders and managers in mind, though other service staff, clinicians and youth peer workers may also find the toolkit useful.

The four stages outlined in this toolkit provide some key considerations for implementing youth peer support. Although you might just be starting on your implementation journey, it can be useful to look ahead and consider what you might need across all stages of implementation. Considerations for each stage are based on research evidence and the experiences of service leaders and youth peer workers. A summary of the research evidence related to implementation of youth peer work can be found in the Orygen resource: [What is the evidence for peer support in youth mental health?](#)

In your setting, there are likely to be elements of this toolkit that can be implemented relatively easily, and others that will need more time and resources. Your service can use the youth peer support [implementation checklist](#) to reflect on your progress.

All the considerations in this toolkit might not apply to your setting. Additional support options for those wanting more advice or guidance are included at the end of the toolkit.

FIGURE 1 YOUTH PEER SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION



**STAGE ONE
PREPARATION**



**STAGE TWO
RECRUITMENT AND
ONBOARDING**



**STAGE THREE
IN THE ROLE**



**STAGE FOUR
LOOKING AHEAD**



STAGE ONE PREPARATION

Stage one involves preparing your setting and staff for implementation of a youth peer support model. Considerations for this phase might include:

- **Confirm the organisation's rationale for implementing a youth peer support model** – at the leadership level, ensure there's understanding of the benefits and value of the model, rather than support purely for financial or reputational reasons.
- **Develop strong support from organisation leaders** – ensure there is genuine endorsement of young people's lived experience in the organisation to help promote positive culture change and avoid youth peer workers having negative experiences (e.g. tokenism).
- **Determine core and continuing budget requirements** – including salary for youth peer workers, cost of training and resources both for youth peer workers and other staff, and additional work hours for mentorship and/or supervision, including peer supervision.
- **Consider physical space needed for peer workers** – similar to other service staff, youth peer workers will need space to undertake their role including desk space for administrative work, areas for collaborative and group work and spaces for private discussions.
- **Define what client data is relevant for youth peer workers to access to help support clients** – ensure policies and procedures are updated as needed.



Ensure there is genuine endorsement of young people's lived experience in the organisation to help promote positive culture change and avoid youth peer workers having negative experiences (e.g. tokenism).

- **Establish a working group that can guide the implementation of peer support at your service** – members should include young people, service leaders, clinicians, non-peer staff and experienced peer workers from your own or another organisation if needed.
 - **Develop a communications plan** – provide information on the rationale for implementing youth peer work (benefits, value) as well as plans to collect feedback and provide training as part of the change.
 - **Create a safe environment for service staff to share any concerns about the implementation and delivery of a youth peer support model, and to develop shared strategies for mitigating any issues** – consider multiple options for people to provide feedback such as online surveys, one-on-one or small group interviews, or team workshops.
 - **Provide training and resources for existing staff** – include the core principles and values of youth peer work, as well as practical information about their role, responsibilities and processes for youth peer workers and non-peer staff.
 - **Establish who will provide day-to-day and performance management for youth peer workers** – this should be someone with relevant skills in supervising staff, preferably with experience in peer work although this could also be other staff.
 - **Ensure there are appropriate people to provide professional supervision to youth peer workers** – this will ideally be experienced peer workers, in the best case youth peer workers. If experienced peer workers are not available to provide direct supervision at your organisation, consider other staff who will work closely alongside peer workers, or partnering with another organisation that has peer workers who can provide supervision remotely.
 - **Ensure structures and processes are in place for new youth peer workers to have frequent scheduled meetings** (with or without unscheduled contact) with their supervisor/manager.
 - **Plan for career opportunities and leadership pathways for youth peer workers** – consider whether new roles will need to be created and how to support professional development of peer workers into leadership positions.
- Further information about youth peer support principles, values and responsibilities can be found in Orygen's [youth peer work toolkit](#) and [Youth peer support + youth mental health fact sheet](#).**

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY YOUTH PEER SUPPORT TO ASSIST TRANSITION TO ADULT SERVICES IN A UK MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE¹

This case study provides an example of how a peer support model was implemented in a mental health service in the UK. A multi-site mental health service trialled a peer support model to assist young adult clients through the transition from children's and young people's services to adult services. The project appointed six peer workers for a three-month trial. The role required a lived experience of mental health problems, education to secondary education level, an ability to share personal stories of recovery in a professional way and a sense of humour. There was no age requirement stated for the position.

TRAINING FOR PEER WORKERS AND SERVICE STAFF

Social workers, occupational therapists and nurses were identified to provide training and continuing mentorship to new peer support workers. Training for peer workers was also provided by an external mental health institute with relevant expertise. Training was co-facilitated by two trainers who had clinical expertise, lived experience of psychological distress, and a professional knowledge of recovery and peer support. This was important for demonstrating teamwork between someone with lived experience and someone with professional experience. Training was co-delivered to peer workers and their mentors over five days. Workshops were also delivered to existing staff separately before the peer workers commenced in their roles. This provided a safe and supportive space where staff hopes and concerns could be voiced and heard before the peer workers were in post.

REFLECTIONS ON IMPLEMENTATION

Staff attitude was identified as an initial challenge to implementation. This included suspicion and lack of clarity about the role and its benefits, and concerns about sharing potentially traumatic experiences in front of peer workers. Positively, this was only observed among a minority of staff, and improved over time. Peer workers highlighted the value of staff mentorship, although some staff reflected that this created extra work for them. While mentors were clear on the aims of the model and its benefits, peer workers had some difficulty in understanding the structure of the model. Peer workers reflected that the work benefited their mental state, and feedback from service users indicated the model improved transition between services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from this project include ensuring adequate preparation and training for peer workers and service staff, providing group supervision, ensuring wellness and work planning, and practical guidance around personal boundaries, making referrals for peer support and discharging clients.





STAGE TWO RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING

Stage two of implementation involves recruitment and onboarding of your new youth peer workforce. Considerations for this phase might include:

- **Develop a clear position description for new youth peer workers** – include skills and knowledge related to the core values and competencies of peer work, responsibilities related to peer support and direct client contact, and information about professional development opportunities in the role.
- **If employing people of a certain age, consider the reasons why and check that any position description does not fall outside Australian federal and state laws that protect against age discrimination** – if employing within a certain age range, establish a clear policy and plan for continuing employment or other career pathways when the person reaches the maximum age for the role.
- **Explore creative avenues for recruiting youth peer workers** – consider advertising through social media or through various youth network and agencies that engage with young people.
- **Consider diversity in your youth peer work team** – encourage applications from youth peer workers who reflect the demographic of young people who use your service; have a young person on interview panels for the recruitment of all staff, including peer workers.



TIP Make sure the position description for your youth peer work role includes clear examples of tasks. Include activities related to providing peer support as well as administrative or other duties associated with direct client contact, such as reporting or maintaining file notes

- **Ensure safe and accessible recruitment procedures** – make sure staff conducting interviews and operational onboarding understand the competencies and requirements of a peer support role, including age if relevant and lived experience of mental ill-health.
- **Wherever possible, recruit and sustain a minimum of two youth peer workers in your service at all times** – having a colleague in the same role will help provide a supportive environment for youth peer workers, reduce isolation, and move towards creating a critical mass for culture change.
- **Consider timing of recruitment to allow full handover and shadowing between new and established youth peer workers** – a staggered approach to onboarding may also help to ease change-related stress for new youth peer workers and existing staff.
- **Create opportunities for new peer workers to shadow experienced peer workers and learn on-the-job** – if this is not possible at your service, consider enabling this through another service where peer support is already established.
- **Provide information about health and wellbeing support for all new youth peer workers including information about flexibility in working hours, leave and your employee assistance program** – only offer wellness plans if these are part of wellbeing support for other staff at the organisation.
- **If youth peer workers include previous clients of the service, ensure information is available regarding continuing care access and provision** – consider the need to support previous clients and staff in the transition as care teams or patients become colleagues.
- **Provide training for new youth peer workers before they work with young people** – include information on roles, responsibilities, processes, as well as mandatory reporting requirements and processes around who to talk to if a client indicates that they may be at risk or present a risk to others.
- **Don't wait too long to start youth peer workers in their new role** – harness the enthusiasm and energy of new recruits by organising essential training to occur before they start direct client contact, with the possibility of additional training and support to continue in the first weeks of employment.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUTH PEER WORKER POSITION DESCRIPTION

A well thought out position description for recruitment of youth peer workers can help clarify the role for candidates and for other staff. When writing the position description for your new youth peer worker roles, consider the following questions in relation to key selection criteria elements.

KEY SELECTION CRITERIA	QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION
Lived experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does your organisation define lived experience of mental ill-health and positive recovery? How will this apply to this role? Does this role require experience of using the mental health system? In what way, and how recently? Is this role open to current or previous clients of your service? Are there time limits around when they last used the service? What are the options for transferring care to another service if preferred?
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will there be an age limit for this role? What is the reason for this? Check that any position description does not fall outside Australian federal and state laws that protect against age discrimination. How does your organisation define 'young'? Are there competencies or experiences that might help youth peer workers to relate to young people even if they are older?
Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does your organisation define diversity? E.g. age, culture, faith, sexuality, gender or other experiences. How is diversity reflected in your local service area? How will you ensure diversity in your youth peer workforce, so that it reflects your community? How can you be creative in how you advertise and interview for these roles, to ensure representation of your community in these roles?
Competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What competencies are required to embody the youth peer support principles of mutuality, hope and recovery? What competencies are required to work in your service setting? Are there time pressures, team or other environmental factors that require certain qualities? Do all employees need certain computer or administrative skills? What competencies are required for managing personal-professional boundaries, risks and dual relationships? What supports and strategies will youth peer workers need to support their wellbeing in the role? Will this role be interacting with clients one-on-one or in groups? What different skills are needed for these contexts?
Education, training or professional experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does this role require educational attainment or professional experience? What is the reason for specifying this type of experience? E.g. to prepare the person to engage clients to support goal attainment, or to engage with other members of staff or carry out general workplace tasks?
Salary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the salary for a youth peer worker role differ based on experience coming into the role? Is there pay progression for this role?



STAGE THREE IN THE ROLE

Stage three of implementation involves youth peer workers commencing in their role.

Considerations for this phase might include:

- **Provide regular, personalised and developmentally appropriate supervision by experienced peer workers** – this may be within or outside the organisation, but should include formalised (scheduled) supervision to offer the best support.
- **Provide clear expectations around performance management and establish processes for day-to-day management** – ensure youth peer workers know who to talk to about operational questions.
- **Provide opportunities for communication and co-learning between youth peer workers and other service staff** – consider team-building or other joint activities for youth peer workers and staff that align with usual organisational people and culture initiatives, to ensure peer workers feel part of usual operations and not singled-out as a workforce.
- **Facilitate access to youth peer work peer support networks internally or externally** – allow time and resources for internal youth peer work peer support meetings and structures even where the youth peer work team is small.
- **Provide opportunities for continuous professional development with a focus on career pathways beyond the youth peer support role** – consider options for attending conferences or external training, as well as internal education opportunities and mentorship by service staff in other roles.

AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY COMBINED PEER WORK AND SHARED DECISION-MAKING PROGRAM IN A REGIONAL EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICE²

This case study provides an example of how a combined youth peer support and shared decision-making model was implemented at a youth enhanced primary care service (headspace) at a regional city (Gosford) in New South Wales. The project appointed eight peer workers aged 16 to 25 years.

TRAINING FOR PEER WORKERS

Peer workers initially completed five days of training led by an experienced peer worker from an external peer-led service, and one day of training on shared decision-making by an external expert on this topic. After commencing their roles, peer workers identified further training needs around domestic violence, cultural competency, understanding intellectual disability and working with family and friends. These topics were covered in half-day workshops. Continuing support was received daily from line managers, monthly from the project manager and monthly through group supervision from an external expert in peer support. Ad hoc support was provided by mentors who worked at the organisation and were identified as champions, but were not part of the project.

REFLECTIONS ON IMPLEMENTATION

Age and limited work experience meant that peer workers required more training and support than anticipated. Youth peer workers experienced confusion around the role, their responsibilities and how to approach their work. This was thought to be exacerbated by having a flexible model. Having eight peer workers commence at the same time but with shifts occurring at separate times made it difficult to build relationships with non-peer staff, for clients to see the same worker more than once in a week, and for peers to build skills as their part-time roles involved short shifts. Staff attitudes were also a challenge, including concerns about confidentiality, speaking freely about potentially traumatising events, and uncertainty about how the model would integrate with the service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from this project included providing clear guidance on role scope and day-to-day tasks, involving more experienced peer worker in the development and implementation of roles and responsibilities, considering a staggered approach to hiring with longer and more frequent shifts to support development of confidence and integration with service processes.





STAGE FOUR LOOKING AHEAD

Stage four of implementation involves looking ahead to career pathways with your youth peer workforce. Considerations for this phase might include:

- **Provide support around personal professional goals while in the youth peer work role** – supervision should include discussion of longer-term work aspirations, acknowledging that many youth peer workers may be starting or early in their careers in this role.
- **Ensure youth peer workers are clear on what career pathways might be available beyond the youth peer work role within or beyond the organisation** – this is particularly important if there is an age limit on the youth peer work role (see ‘Considerations for youth peer worker position description – Age’ section within this resource).
- **Ensure peer workers are included in exit interview processes to support continuous improvement of peer support practice and implementation** – allow youth peer workers to nominate how they would like to provide feedback (written or verbal, face-to-face or other) and to whom.
- **Integrate evaluation of your peer support model to support continuous improvement, determine positive contributions and avoid unintended harm** – evaluation can help support the broader peer support workforce by building evidence and influencing policy.



RELATED RESOURCES

Evidence summary, [What is the evidence for peer support in youth mental health?](#)

Fact sheet, [Family peer support + youth mental health](#)

Fact sheet, [Vocational peer support + youth mental health](#)

Fact sheet, [Youth peer support + youth mental health](#)

Implementation checklist, [youth peer support](#)

Toolkit, [Youth peer work](#)

Training module, [Youth mental health peer support 101](#)

Video, [Thoughts of a family peer worker](#)

Video, [Thoughts of a youth peer worker](#)

FURTHER INFORMATION

Australian Government (2020)

[Australia's anti-discrimination law](#)

Jones, N. (2015) [Peer Involvement and Leadership in Early Intervention in Psychosis Services: From Planning to Peer Support and Evaluation](#)

Delman, J. and Klodnick, V. V. (2017) [Effectively Employing Young Adult Peer Providers: A Toolkit](#)

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