

Partnering Effectively with Young Adult Peer Mentors

transcript

Part One: Who are Young Adult Peer Mentors (YAPM)?

Course Overview

Welcome to Partnering Effectively with Young Adult Peer Mentors, a short series describing young adult peer mentoring and the impact it can have on your organization. Whether you are considering implementing a mentoring program or improving an existing program, this series is for you. These four lessons and the supplementary materials will help you understand and describe the young adult peer mentor role. They will also help you to better support and collaborate with future peer mentors.

Topics

Throughout this training series, you will learn who young adult peer mentors are, what they do and do not do, how they can enhance the services you provide, and what practices and tools you can use to support young adult peer mentors to thrive at your agency.

Who Are YAPM?

Young adult peer mentors are individuals who have experience living with a behavioral health condition, including mental health and substance use diagnoses; are close in age to youth and young adult service participants; and who have lived experience that allows them to relate to those with whom they work. What is lived, or living, experience in this context? Lived experience is the personal experience of living with and overcoming challenges with mental health, substance abuse, or traumatic life events. These are personal experiences that may have caused problems in one or more areas of life, but which peer mentors learned to navigate successfully. A person with lived experience will also have valuable experience in navigating or using community resources, therapeutic services, or other supports to overcome these challenges.

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What Is Peerness?

Peerness is an essential term for understanding young adult peer mentors, their role, and their effectiveness. Being peers means sharing relatable life experiences. This can include having similar mental health struggles or experiencing similar challenges with navigating life after receiving a health diagnosis. But it can also mean so much more. Peerness can include shared identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. Peerness can include sharing similar childhood experiences, neighborhood, community, culture, or religion. It may also include shared strengths, talents and challenges, or goals, hopes, and dreams. Finally, shared values, interests, or hobbies can contribute to peerness as well. One of the essential elements is relatability. A young adult peer mentor must be able to relate to the young person, and the young person must be able to relate to the young adult peer mentor. It is not essential that peers have identical experiences, but they must be relatable. The saying goes, "I may not have been in your shoes, but I've been to the same shoe store." Just having near-aged peer support positively impacts young people's engagement in treatment. A recent study found that 16- to 24-year-olds with serious mental health needs paired with near-age peers participated in more outpatient services than those paired with regular mental health providers.

The Promise of YAPM

Why are young adult peer mentors so promising for engaging and supporting youth and young adults?

Understanding

Youth and young adults can feel deeply misunderstood by adult service providers and are at high risk for mental health service disengagement.

Perspective

Because young adult peer mentors are relatively close in age and have lived mental health experiences, they have a unique perspective on the service system.

Empowerment

Young people often feel more connected, less alone, and more willing to open up and try new skills with someone whose role is to walk alongside them and support their self-determination and goals. Mental health peer support has been linked to decreased self-stigma and increased empowerment and hope.

Giving Hope

Young adult peer mentors positively affect their teams and support families by cultivating hope for the future. Just having a young adult peer mentor affects how the team perceives, believes in, and supports youth and young adult recovery.

Mutual Benefit

The young adult peer mentor role positively impacts and promotes the recovery of the youth and young adults participating in peer support services. It also promotes the recovery of peer mentors themselves.

Quote from a Young Adult Participant: Ana

"With peer mentors, they have gone through the same experiences that you're going through now. So, I think the feeling comfortable comes from knowing that they went through the same thing so they're not going to judge you. So I feel like that's where the comfort comes from, knowing that you feel comfortable and safe with this person. But if it's someone closer to your age, you can kinda look up to them in a way where like, 'Oh this person has been through the same stuff as me and they're also trying to improve and get their life on track, and it's possible.'"

Quote from a Young Adult Participant: Cody

"They just change your look on things. Like they kind of open your eyes without having to do it in a clinical way. Like they constantly motivate me to do better and to follow what I want to do and where my heart wants to go. Like they're constantly telling me, 'Like you can do this you just need the extra support for it.' And so, I would definitely be telling people, like, just get one. Like I can't, obviously no one can force you to, but if you need the help, you need the help and they're the best ones to do it. I feel like everyone should just have a peer mentor at this point."

Quote from a Young Adult Participant: Amarely

"It's just nice to know that they've also been through something similar and they can give you advice. It just feels good, like you remember you're not alone. Yeah, they remind you that there is hope."

Reflection

Each lesson in this series will end with a thought for you to reflect on. Feel free to jot down some notes or consider these statements and questions as you go about your day.

Think about someone who gets you. Someone who makes you feel seen, heard, and truly understood, and you really get this other person too. You easily relate to them, and they easily relate to you. When you're with them or talking to them, you feel less alone, and maybe more hopeful, too. Why do you think that this is? Could it be the power of peer connection? Is it because you share life experiences and can be authentic and connect on a personal level?

End of Part One

To learn more about the young adult peer mentor role, please visit the Children's Behavioral Health Knowledge Center website. Refer to the course landing page for this and other resources.

Part Two: What YAPMs Do (and Don't Do)

Topics

In the last lesson, we learned about who young adult peer mentors are and the purpose of the role. In this lesson, you'll learn more about the core elements of young adult peer mentoring.

YAPM Core Elements

The young adult peer mentor practice profile located on the Children's Behavioral Health Knowledge Center website describes six core elements of young adult peer mentoring and what the practice looks like at the level of saying and doing. You can learn more about each core element by exploring each of the areas listed on this screen.

Practicing Cultural Responsiveness

Young adult peer mentors do not make assumptions about how their lived experience is the same or different from others. Young adult peer mentors listen, learn from, and ask questions about the perspectives of youth and young adults, their families, support networks, and care teams.

Building Relationships and Collaboration

Young adult peer mentors make connections and build trust with youth and young adults and their family members, providers, and other adult allies.

Supporting Young Adult Vision and Goals

Young adult peer mentors promote youth and young adult choices and vision. Through curiosity and active collaboration, young adult peer mentors support youth and young adults in identifying goals, aspirations, and creating a plan to reach them.

Role Modeling

Through their words, actions and demeanor, young adult peer mentors promote self-discovery, self-reflection and growth. By modeling strong, confident and reliable behavior, peer mentors demonstrate their capacity to support young people in progressing toward their goals.

Demonstrating Safe, Ethical, and Professional Behavior

Young adult peer mentors adhere to practices that promote integrity and dignity. These include setting appropriate relational boundaries and attending to their own and participant physical and emotional health and safety.

Promoting Self-Care

Young adult peer mentors encourage discussions about coping skills and exploring different self-care strategies. By providing empathic encouragement, young adult peer mentors work to maintain their own emotional and physical health alongside the youth and young adults they're supporting.

What YAPMs Do Not Do

Now that we have an idea of what young adult peer mentors do, let's discuss what they do not do. Peer mentors do not speak on behalf of the youth and young adults with whom they work. They do not update parents or guardians as to all details of individual meetings. They are not solely responsible for note taking, filing and running program errands. They are not designated experts in tech support and social media for your organization. They do not work exclusively on tasks based on what their colleagues tell them to do. Peer mentors are not the sole source of transportation for participants, especially to and from medical appointments. Peer mentors do not share their recovery story on demand. This means that the peer mentor decides what, when and with whom they share aspects of their lived experience. While an agency or supervisor may encourage a peer mentor to share their experiences, they do not have to share if they feel uncomfortable. And, finally, they are not solely responsible for planning social events and group activities.

YAPM Work Settings

Young adult peer mentors work in many different service settings, such as community mental health centers, inpatient hospital units, and drop-in or access centers. Regardless of where young adult peer mentors work, the practice profile serves as a guide to the core functions of the role.

Quote from a State Administrator: Carly Sebastian

I do think it's important for us to all like know and realize. And I find I say this to people that haven't worked in this. There's so much training that goes into it and so much supervision. like the young adult peers I'm working with, they've done like five and six major respected trainings and are certified and licensed, whatever the words are, right. And that's very different than I'm just gonna pick a kid off the street and let them do this work. And so it's legitimate.

Reflection

Before moving on to the next lesson, think about your role and the practice principles you follow in your work.

Are there guidelines that you follow? A code of ethics? An evidence-based practice approach? A philosophy? Young adult peer mentors have defined practice principles and guidelines too. Regardless of the difference in education or professional responsibilities, mentors share the same commitment to principles and service as you.

End of Part Two

To learn more about the young adult peer mentor practice profile, you can view the online training "What is a Practice Profile?" This free training can further orient you to what a practice profile is and how they can be used to support training, coaching, and supervision activities. Refer to the course landing page for this and other resources.

Part Three: How YAPMs Enhance Your Program

Topics

In the last lesson, we learned about young adult peer mentoring principles and practices. In this lesson, you'll learn more about the positive impact young adult peer mentors can have in providing services.

The Influence of Young Adult Peer Mentors

Young adult peer mentors encourage the idea that people are the experts of their recovery. They aim to cultivate a safe, nonjudgmental, and hopeful space, the sort of space in which young people become open to learning new skills, gaining new insights, and reaching their personal goals. While the work of a young adult peer mentor may not be clinical in nature, it is certainly therapeutic. They can be powerful partners in engaging youth in treatment, and helping to support youth and young adults in reaching their goals.

Young Adult Peer Mentors

Young adult peer mentors provide a necessary, parallel service experience that is developmentally, culturally and age appropriate. They empower youth and young adults in finding their voices, goals and path. Peer mentors are familiar with navigating mental health treatment providers and systems. Thus, they can translate and validate these complex and sometimes challenging experiences. They validate young person experiences by sharing their own recovery journey. Young adult peer mentors provide encouragement and advocacy when a young person gets stuck or feels misunderstood by a treatment provider. And, finally, they can bring youth and young adult perspective to their team and program.

Quote from a Program Administrator: Andrea Salzman

"It goes back to something I said before, which is some of the greatest change I have seen has been via work with young adult peer mentors, specifically. So, I think when we have the opportunity to include a peer mentor in a team, working with a young adult struggling, we see better results. And at the end of the day, what does insurance want to see? They want to see good results. They want to see kids staying out of the hospital. They want to see people being able to function and be productive in their communities. And we figure out how to make that happen in a way that's going to be most helpful."

What the Research Says

Research shows that peer support results in inspiration and hope for the future, increased knowledge about mental health services, expanded social support and connections to resources, enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy, improved quality of life, decreased symptoms and isolation, and decreased need for further and more intensive mental health services.

Supporting Development

Peers are critical for adolescent and young adult development. Connecting with peers who share similar interests is very important during adolescence and young adulthood. The opinions of peers matter deeply. Many young people feel like treatment settings are made for younger children or older adults. Peer mentors can make them feel a sense of belonging. Mental health issues profoundly impact self-esteem, socialization and sense of self during adolescence and young adulthood.

Quote from a Clinician: Kynthia Lai

"I was worried about a few things, I was worried about like a peer mentor, could they sort of, you know, handle their own sort of mental wellness and mental health while also just handling all the complications, and the sort of mental health issues that our clients and our families deal with, so I think that was sort of one piece. I think as well, you know, it really sort of gave me, you know I'd seen in my previous work what recovery looks like, but I don't think it really hit home until working with the peer mentor, because, you know, here is someone who, again, like had this experience, and was able to sort of take this professional role, and like, very thoughtfully, bring their own stuff to the table, also like keeping it focused on the client. So, yeah, I think like it just instilled, you know, and when we think about like psychosis, there's a lot of thoughts on chronic serious mental illness, and there's some hopelessness I think with that at times, and just seeing a young person who's been

through that, again, been through psychosis, seeing them work, and talk, and like— like was just a game changer I think for me.”

The Growing Movement

You are part of a movement to redefine how mental health agencies meet the needs of vulnerable youth and young adults. Welcome to a journey that may be challenging at times yet can be deeply rewarding. It will require you to self-reflect, be open to diverse perspectives, and partner with your colleagues in new ways.

Reflection

Consider a time when you sought someone else's support but felt let down. You had a life decision to make, and you turned to someone you trust, maybe someone who knew more than you about the subject. When you connected with this person, there was a disconnect of some sort. You felt like you did not understand what they were trying to tell you. You just didn't believe what they had to say. Maybe the way they talked to you or the perspective they had felt like a bad match, or perhaps they just focused on something that felt unimportant to you at the time. You likely left this interaction feeling unsupported, frustrated, or confused. When young people feel unsupported, frustrated, or confused, how do you think this impacts the efficacy and operations of your agency?

End of Part Three

Refer to the course landing page for more resources.

Part Four: How to Support and Partner with YAPMs

Topics

In the last lesson, you learned about young adult peer mentors' impact on youth and young adults, teams, and programs. In this lesson, you'll learn about how to best support and partner with young adult peer mentors, so that they will thrive on the job, and how by doing so, you can improve youth and young adult engagement and outcomes.

Challenges YAPM Face

Some of the on-the-job challenges peer mentors can face in their roles include: on the job stigma and discrimination, unclear work roles, isolation, burnout and high turnover, difficulties in addressing personal mental health needs and a lack of support for accessing reasonable accommodations, such as time off and flexible work schedules, the need to be cool and always on as a role model, which can be emotionally taxing.

Difficulties on the Job

The peer mentor role can also be demanding because of: The need to balance professionalism with authenticity. Feeling targeted or activated by colleagues who use non-developmentally attuned, ableist, racist or oppressive language and behavior. For example, kid, kiddo, uneducated, low functioning, lacking insight, disengaged, or playing around. Feeling a responsibility to confront and educate team members while remaining professional and dealing with a lack of respect for their role. Deciding when to share, when not to share and how to share and weathering what happens if something is shared that changes how the team sees or treats them in their role as a young adult peer mentor.

What Agency Leaders Can Do

Things that an agency leader can do to support young adult peer mentors include: ensure that all staff at the agency learn about the role of young adult peer mentors through orientation, training, and via their website and other marketing materials. Create a culture of wellness, diversity, equity, and multi-disciplinary collaboration within your organization. Show that you value and respect clinical, peer, young adults and other perspectives. This includes hiring people with lived mental health experiences in all agency departments, not just in peer roles within clinical programs. Create a cross departmental team that meets regularly to examine and support peer mentor integration.

What Supervisors Can Do

Things supervisors can do to support young adult peer mentor integration: Be open-minded, using strengths-based language and support the self-discovery and self-growth of young adult peer mentors. Exemplify and encourage the practice of frequent ongoing self-reflection. Share strategically to cultivate an inviting, nonjudgmental and safe organizational culture. Promote a culture based on commonality and mutuality. This means actively practicing self-care and thoughtfully, authentically sharing your experiences with others. Strategic sharing extends to the young adult peer mentors you supervise and to your work colleagues and peers. Partner with young adult peer mentors. Encourage young adult peer mentors to provide feedback about program procedures, policies and practices. If they suggest changes, learn more and take action. Listen for how young adult peer mentors suggest more equitable, inclusive and developmentally attuned approaches to engaging and supporting young people. Be open-minded, curious and ask why and how before assuming we can't do that.

What Colleagues Can Do

Things colleagues can do to support young adult peer mentors. Apply nothing about us without us thinking to how you convey your ideas to colleagues when youth and young adult participants and families are present. Would you say it the same way if they were not present? Commit to actively changing your language to be strength-based and recovery-oriented at all times. Value and practice shared decision making. How involved are youth in developing the goals and associated tasks to guide your time together? Consider how you can better engage young people and their identified families in decision-making about their mental health treatment. Practice radical acceptance. Even though you may feel that your perspective and approach is right, hear out ideas that seem foreign or illogical to you before you dismiss them. Prompt deeper discussion with, tell me more. And embrace strategic sharing and mutuality. We often share who we are and disclose our own lived experiences with our colleagues, young people, and families. Sometimes we do this intentionally and other times unintentionally. We look for things to bond over, maybe a sports team or a hobby, or we have artwork in our office that conveys something about our values. Clinicians and other non-peer staff learn to minimize themselves in their work. Meanwhile, young adult peer mentors learn to strategically use their experience to engage, motivate, validate, and empower youth and young adults.

Respecting Boundaries

It is essential to respect young adult peer mentors' lived experiences and respect their boundaries. Young adult peer mentors learn and practice how to share strategically with

youth and colleagues. Therefore, avoid asking young adult peer mentors specific details about their medications, substance abuse, diagnosis, symptoms, and other experiences associated with mental health conditions. In general, consider what you are asking as a colleague. Sometimes young adult peer mentors feel pressured to tell their colleagues their personal information. Recognize how courageous it is to share your mental health struggles, treatment and associated experiences, and the risks that come with this.

Respecting the Role

Finally, remember that peer mentors are not your team's designated IT, marketing, or social media specialist. Even if the peer mentors you work with are savvy and willing, your agency has departments for this. Contact those experts even if it feels easier to ask the young adult on the team to make a flyer for your agency's upcoming event.

Quote from a Clinician: Kynthia Lai

"You know, it's one thing to say as a therapy clinician that to validate and be like, 'I can only imagine,' or like, 'That sounds hard,' or, 'It sounds like this,' and it's another thing to have someone come in and just say, 'Yeah, me too.' It just hits so differently. And I've watched it in sessions where I'm trying to validate and the peer mentor sort of comes in and they're like, 'Yeah, I had that too. It really sucked.' And just watch their expression change. And just, I've seen what it does, them just being more open about talking about the experience. That piece. There are things that we work really hard as a clinician to do. And with the peer mentor, they're just going to be able to hit notes that it's just so much harder as a clinician, if not sometimes impossible.

Quote from a Clinician: Shauna Hynes

"They've been a huge asset, because unfortunately, within my clinical role, yes, I can help with resources, but my time with them is so focused on one thing and a particular curriculum a lot of times, that I don't think I'd be able to fully support them in the way I'd like to without having that peer to be able to do that in addition. And just to really focus on those concrete goals in addition to the clinical work we're doing in session with safety planning and all that. And then you have somebody sitting here with lived experience that can say, 'This was really helpful for me,' or, 'This is what I wish somebody did differently to support me.'" And I think that's especially helpful in a family setting where my client might not feel comfortable talking about the experience yet. I think it opens up this space where, if the peer mentor's being open, it gives them the opportunity to say, 'Yeah, me too.' As opposed to just a clinician sitting there and having all of your family members staring at you and feeling like, 'I'm the one with the alternative experience here and I'm different.' And they might not feel good about that."

Reflection

Think about what it would be like to work in a setting where no one understood your role or perspective. Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt like that? If so, what did it feel like? If you haven't experienced that feeling, try to imagine: What would that feel like? Because young adult peer mentor roles are new in mental health services, young adult peer mentors often face resistance and a lack of understanding regarding their role and value.

End of Part Four

We hope that this series increases your understanding of young adult peer mentoring and the value it can bring to your agency. We've also created an organizational self-assessment that suggests actions that your organization can take to ensure that peer mentors thrive on the job. These resources, and many more, are available on the Children's Behavioral Health Knowledge Center website.