

# Abstract

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Over the last decade, evidence has mounted showing that young people with serious mental health conditions experience a variety of challenges as they mature into adulthood. On average, their educational, economic and vocational outcomes are distinctly worse than their peers', and they are more likely to experience homelessness, to struggle with substance use, and to be involved with corrections systems. In 2009, researchers at the Regional Research Institute at Portland State University applied for and received a grant from the National Institute for Disability Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR, US Department of Education) and the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS, US Department of Health and Human Services) to create the Research and Training Center on Pathways to Positive Futures. This Center, known as "Pathways RTC" or, simply, "Pathways," included eight research projects and related training, dissemination and technical assistance activities, all focused on improving outcomes for older adolescents and young adults who experienced serious mental health conditions (SMHCs).

Prior to the State-of-the-Science Conference, Pathways staff joined with young people, family members, researchers and service providers to develop a conceptual model that describes how providers can work productively and effectively with young people who experience SMHCs. This "Pathways model" also builds on evidence drawn from programs and interventions that have demonstrated success in promoting positive

outcomes among emerging adults. The overall aim was to produce a “common elements and common factors”<sup>1</sup> model that would be useful for guiding practice and shaping interventions that are developmentally appropriate, attractive to young people, and effective in achieving recovery-oriented outcomes.

The Pathways model is rooted in theory and research on positive development. In contrast to problem- and deficit focused approaches, positive developmental approaches focus on promoting wellbeing and flourishing. From a positive developmental perspective, promoting wellbeing and flourishing is particularly important for people who are struggling or at risk, and interventions are most likely to be successful when they support young people as they learn to guide their own lives toward outcomes they find personally meaningful. Though this process, young people are motivated to further their own positive development as they build skills and knowledge, expand their capabilities, and gain competence in their chosen roles in family, community, and society.

The State-of-the-Science Conference, held on May 20 and 21, 2013 in Portland, Oregon, brought together expert stakeholders to address key topics and questions related to the Pathways model and its implications for practice and policy. The conference was limited to 50 attendees so that participants could work actively in a series of tightly facilitated small and large group sessions. Participants included researchers, practitioners, administrators, young people, families, and policy makers. More than a quarter of the attendees were young people with direct personal

experience receiving services for serious mental health conditions.

This proceedings monograph summarizes the events of the conference, which began with a review of the Pathways to Positive Futures model. The first working session focused on identifying specific practice elements that providers use to help young people to activate changes they desire in their lives. During the second working session, participants discussed working with young people with diverse social identities, and the extent to which the Pathways model accurately described—or failed to describe—how providers could productively interact with them to promote positive development. The third session focused on strategies aimed at helping young people expand and mobilize their social support networks in service of positive developmental goals. During the fourth working session, participants identified the kinds of organizational and systems supports needed to fully implement a positive youth development approach, and called out barriers to full implementation. Finally, during the second day, participants were joined by conference attendees from the Emerging Adult Initiative’s national meeting, and the combined group participated in a small-group discussion focused on hard questions for service providers and policy makers that had surfaced during the previous day’s working sessions. The proceedings conclude with reflections on key themes from the conference, challenges and questions raised, and implications for an action agenda for practice, policy, and research.