

PATHWAYS COMICS

Study Guide for Vol. 1, “Natural Supports”

What’s the point?

Those of us who work with young people, and older youth and young adults in particular, recognize the importance of helping them to identify supports and build relationships that will endure after certain paid services and supports may no longer be available to them. We also recognize the importance of helping them build skills to reach out and ask for help from their support network when they need it. But many youth and young adults who have been system-involved during their adolescent years may lack these so-called “natural supports” for a number of possible reasons: time spent in residential care, having moved through various foster care placements, having “burnt bridges” with family based on behavior, and/or simply having isolated themselves or struggled to form connections due to mental health challenges and the stigma that comes with mental illness and system involvement. Similarly, young people might have people who do support or would be willing to support them, but do not identify them as such, or feel unwilling or unprepared to ask. Indeed, asking for help can be a challenging skill for anyone to master, and identifying who to ask in the first



place can be difficult, especially when you’re already faced with a demanding and possibly stressful situation.

James, the protagonist of our Pathways comics series, tackles some of the obstacles that go along with building these particular self-determination skills in the first three installments of the comic, collectively entitled “Natural Supports.” Though we see him struggle with negative thinking throughout, he is able to overcome this and identify a supportive person, prepare to ask that person for help, practice doing so, actually do so, and obtain an offer of support. He is able to do all this, in part, thanks to one great natural support he already has present

from the beginning – his dog, Jarvis. While Jarvis’ internal dialogue may only be visible to the readers, it is evident that he provides a great deal of emotional support to James as he works through his problem. Indeed, it is through reflecting on his bond with Jarvis that James is able to initially identify his neighbor, Mike, as a possible support in helping with his job application.

These comics were developed by people with lived experience in the youth mental health system, and are intended to deliver information about what it’s like to be a young person living with a mental health challenge in a way that differs from the normal methods of doing so. For example, as we read “Natural Supports,” we do not learn about any diagnosis for James, nor do we hear from him directly about his mental health challenges. In addition, James does

not engage with the formal “mental health system,” and these comics are not meant to provide direct instructions to providers. Nevertheless, a narrative emerges of some things that might be helpful to a young person like James, and other things that might not. Conversations about identifying and engaging supports will likely come up in various contexts in which providers serve youth and young adults, from Wraparound teams to individual therapy to youth peer support. As we see in James’ story, several important self-determination skills have the possibility of converging and developing over the course of these conversations. It is our hope that this study guide can be used as a tool in coaching, training, and discussion to help providers consider how to have conversations about natural supports with young people in a way that is natural, genuine, effective and most importantly, youth- or young adult-driven.

Things to keep in mind

- * Having conversations with young people about their “natural supports” might feel weird, especially if done in too structured a format. It’s best to let information about a young person’s natural supports emerge over time, and to use your own conversational skills to draw this out through reflections and making connections between things the young person has mentioned.
- * Avoid making suggestions about who a good support might be or telling a young person how to access a particular support. Instead, use open-ended questions to help the young person think about what type of support is best for them.
- * Finding support and planning to ask for help is a great time for you to help the young person build self-determination skills. Be sure to label those skills as you teach them: for instance, identifying support, planning, anticipating the situation, and making a “plan B.”

Discussion questions

1
In part 2 of this series, James says “Jarvis, I’m gonna ask Mike for help with applying for this job, but how should I do that?” If you were working with James, how would you respond to this question and support him in making a plan without being instructive?



Scene from Vol 1, “Natural Supports,” Issue 2

2
When James starts practicing to ask Mike for help, he says “Hey Mike, I kind of need your help with something. I get that you probably don’t have time to help me...” Jarvis is not a fan of this strategy, thinking “Don’t ask him like that!” If you were working with a young person who was approaching their planning with a negative mindset, how might you use open-ended questions to help them turn things around?



Scene from Vol 1, “Natural Supports,” Issue 2

3
Jarvis, the dog, is a great natural support for James. How might you use a young person’s relationship with their pet as an entry point into exploring who their other natural supports might be?



Scene from Vol 1, “Natural Supports,” Issue 1

Reflections

- * What are some questions you might use to learn about the important people in a young person's life?
- * How might you help a young person build new natural supports without being leading or instructive?
- * What are some questions you could ask a young person to help them anticipate the situation before they ask someone for support?
- * Have you ever used any tools to explore a young person's relationships and connections? How did that go?
- * Have you ever worked with a young person who had an unexpected natural support? Who were they? How did you learn about them?

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Read comics at:

www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/comics



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