Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University

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Research Update on Peer Support for Youth and Young Adults

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Findings and Challenges from Previous Research

In 2018, Pathways RTC published a report entitled Peer Support for Youth and Young Adults Who Experience Serious Mental Health Conditions: State of the Science. The report summarized existing research related to peer support—particularly peer support for youth and young adults—and highlighted challenges and barriers described in research and commentaries. The report noted that peer support for youth and young adults had been expanding very rapidly in the United States, in large part because stakeholders see peer support as a potential solution to low levels of engagement and retention that are typical in youth and young adult mental health services. Importantly, young people who have participated in mental health services have been among the most vocal proponents of peer support.

As of 2018, the report noted, there was very little research evaluating the impact of peer support implemented specifically for youth and young adults. Research on the impacts of peer support for older/all adults, while still quite limited, provided some reason to be optimistic; however, these studies did not provide definitive evidence that peer support is effective. The report described several key challenges that, according to multiple researchers and commentators, impede research on peer support. Perhaps the most frequently identified challenge had to do with the fact that peer support roles typically are not clearly defined (i.e., there is a lack of "role clarity"), with peer support specialists (PSSs) reporting that they are often unsure about what is expected of them on the job and/or that they are assigned job activities that are not part of peer support as they understand it. A related problem is the lack of clearly articulated theory that specifies the outcomes that can be expected from peer support for youth and young adults, and provides a rationale for why these outcomes should occur.

A lack of role clarity has been linked to job-related stress among peer support providers, potentially putting their own mental wellbeing at risk.

This lack of theoretical specification and role clarity is not just problematic for research on peer support. It also hinders implementation of peer support roles and makes training and supervision difficult. What is more, when non-peer staff do not understand the role of

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peer support in their agency—or the general value and purpose of peer support—they may react by ostracizing, stigmatizing or disrespecting peer support specialists. These kinds of attitudes toward peer staff have been widely reported in the research literature. More generally, numerous studies across a wide variety of job types have shown that a lack of role clarity is associated with heightened job-related stress, job dissatisfaction, turnover intentions and mental ill-health. A lack of role clarity has also been linked to job-related stress among peer support providers specifically, potentially putting their own mental wellbeing at risk.

Newer Research

Research studies and commentaries published since 2018 largely echo the conclusions of the state-of-the-science report. Studies published in the last few years show the continued rapid expansion of peer support (Adams, 2020; Gillard, 2019; Klee et al., 2019), including peer support for youth and young adults specifically (WESTAT, 2019). Research on the impact of peer support for young people remains sparse, although several recent small studies have piloted innovative approaches to providing peer support, and have contributed to optimism about the potential for peer support to produce beneficial outcomes for older youth and young adults, in areas such as self-determination, mental health empowerment/self-efficacy and college grade

point average (Blakeslee et al., 2022; Hiller-Venegas et al., 2022; Raymaker et al., 2020). Additionally, findings from one larger, correlational study suggest that peer support may have a positive impact on young people's engagement in other outpatient mental health services (Ojeda et al., 2020).

Authors of newer studies continue to call for work that clarifies the theoretical foundation for peer support (Jones et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2022). Additionally, the need to provide role clarity for peer support continues as a persistent theme in the newer literature (Adams, 2020; Gillard, 2019; Shepardson et al., 2019), with researchers noting that PSSs are quite frequently asked to take on tasks that are not usually considered to be peer support, (Adams, 2020) including delivering interventions typically offered by clinicians such as case management and cognitive-behavioral therapy, and supporting medication adherence (Gillard, 2019).

Problems arising from a lack of role clarity are highlighted in two recent studies that examine the implementation of peer support within agencies providing mental health services to older youth and young adults (Hopkins et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2020). Both of these studies point out the need to further clarify how the role of peer support specialist is different for young adult PSSs, and to develop training that reflects this difference, versus relying on trainings developed for older adult PSSs. Another recent study represents an effort to do precisely this, by examining the impacts of a skills enhancement and role-clarification training intervention specifically designed for young adults providing peer support (Walker et al., 2022). Study findings, based on participating PSSs' self-reports and video recordings of their work, showed post-intervention gains in their skills and confidence for their role; as well as reduced job-related anxiety and high training satisfaction.

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Another continuing theme in newer research on peer support is the lack of understanding or respect for peer support specialists among co-workers (Adams, 2020; Shepardson et al., 2019), which can lead to "burnout and emotional exhaustion, difficulty maintaining boundaries as well as low job satisfaction" (Watson, 2019). One study focused on peer support specialists' experiences of microaggressions at work, with almost 40% saying they experienced microaggressions often/frequently/daily. These microaggressions included disparaging comments about the peer support specialists themselves or the peer support role (Firmin et al., 2019). The peer support specialists in the study described how experiencing microaggressions had negative impacts on their personal well-being, job satisfaction, and job tenure.

Conclusion

Recent research studies have produced intriguing findings demonstrating a variety of ways that peer support has potential to contribute to beneficial outcomes for youth and young adults. However, several key challenges continue to impede research and implementation, including challenges stemming from a lack of clarity regarding theory and roles. Newer research also documents how these challenges can contribute to PSSs' stress and anxiety at work.

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