

AMP COMICS

Study Guide for Vol. 4, “Dropping In”

What’s the point?

As mental health providers grapple with the challenges of engaging, retaining and serving youth and young adults, new and unconventional approaches, supports and spaces tailored to young people’s unique developmental needs and designed to “meet them where they’re at” are steadily emerging. One of these is youth peer support, in which a young person with lived experience in one or more youth-serving systems (such as mental health, juvenile justice, or foster care) uses that experience to relate to and engage with young people currently navigating these same (or similar) systems. Youth peer support specialists work in a variety of different contexts and settings, including on Wraparound teams, in residential facilities, at high schools and colleges, in emergency rooms, doing community-based work, and in drop-in centers.

Drop-in centers are another type of strategy that has emerged to meet the unique needs of transition-age youth and young adults. These spaces usually have low barriers to accessing supports such as peer services and leadership or support groups, and they allow young people to form connections with other youth in their communities. Drop-ins typically feel more youth-friendly than traditional “community centers,” and include features such as computer

stations, gaming systems, snacks and art supplies. By cultivating a fun, welcoming environment that does not carry the stigma of a community mental health clinic or a therapist’s office, youth drop-in centers may be engaging to young people who have never previously interacted with the mental health system, and they can also potentially re-engage those youth who may be burnt out on traditional systems and supports.

When we last saw James in volume 3 of the AMP Comic series, he had begrudgingly agreed to visit the local youth drop-in center with his schoolmate, Zoe. Upon entering the center in volume 4, the two friends are greeted warmly by youth peer support specialist Taylor, who introduces themselves with their pronouns. Taylor offers to introduce James to some of the other youth at the drop-in center and points out some of the youth-friendly features of the space, including pinball, video games, and pool. They also indicate that the drop-in center includes access to an “in-house” counselor, Claire. Having an onsite counselor is a low-barrier, low-stigma strategy often



employed by drop-in centers to offer counseling services to young people and to desensitize them to the concept. When Zoe leaves James to talk to Claire, he looks uncomfortable. Though he came to work on job applications, when offered help in doing so by Taylor he responds that he is no longer “feeling it,” perhaps overwhelmed by the unfamiliar environment. However, when Taylor invites him to play video games, James takes them up on the offer, and it is during this activity that James finally feels comfortable telling someone that things in his life have been “actually not so great” lately. Leaving the drop-in with Zoe, he reflects that Taylor is “pretty cool for, like, a mentor or a counselor or whatever.” When Zoe clarifies that Taylor is actually a peer support specialist and gives James some background on Taylor’s lived experience- getting kicked out of their house, experiencing depression- James is surprised to hear that this is Taylor’s job.

Like James, many young people may be unaware that accessing peer support is an option for them, but upon learning about peer support, they may respond positively to the idea of connecting with another young person who “really gets what it’s like,” as Zoe puts it. This ability to relate to system-involved young people on the basis of lived experience is one portion of what makes up the youth peer support specialist’s “peeriness.” The other piece is that

youth peer support specialists are usually “near peers,” that is, close in age to the young people they support, and therefore inherently have a different look (note Taylor’s blue streak and black nail polish), vibe, and access to a set of cultural references than many of the professionals youth may be used to interacting with. In volume 2, James shut down while meeting with his school counselor, and at the drop-in center he bristles at the idea of speaking with Claire, the counselor there; on the other hand, he is able to open up to Taylor while engaged in a fun, casual activity that does not carry the pressure of being explicitly about “mental health.” Additionally, should James want to engage with more formal mental health services, such as counseling, later, someone like Taylor can be a bridge to those services, using their lived experience to normalize the negative feelings and experiences James has had as well as to help him navigate aspects of the system that can be complicated or taxing.

These comics were developed by young people with lived experience in the youth mental health system. As you read them, and work through the study guide, think about how you, your agency, your community and/or the systems you are involved in attempt to engage, retain and serve youth and young adults while taking their unique developmental needs into account and “meeting them where they’re at.”

Things to keep in mind

- * Youth drop-in centers may feature pinball and pool tables, but they are not all, or merely, fun and games. By creating a youth-friendly environment, these centers can bring young people in the door and later spark their interest in services and supports like leadership groups, peer support and working on goal-setting and skill-building.
- * There are many misconceptions about youth peer support specialists, and how the role is different from that of a mentor or a caseworker. The most

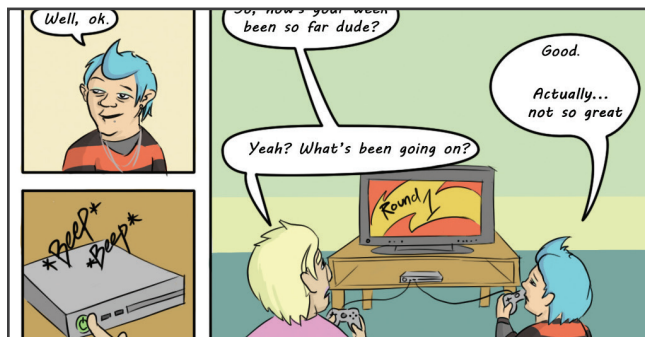
basic and essential difference is that youth peer support specialists use their lived experience in their role.

- * Youth peer support is not in opposition to the work of clinicians or counselors. Many youth peer support specialists work side-by-side on treatment or Wraparound teams with clinicians, and ideally both parties can work with other team members to support the young person in complementary ways.

Discussion questions

1

Taylor is able to check in with James about how he is doing while they are playing video games. Have you ever used a strategy such as playing a game during initial engagement with a young person? What did you try, and how did it go? Why do you think approaches like this are helpful in getting young people to open up?



Scene from Vol 4, "Dropping In," Issue 3

2

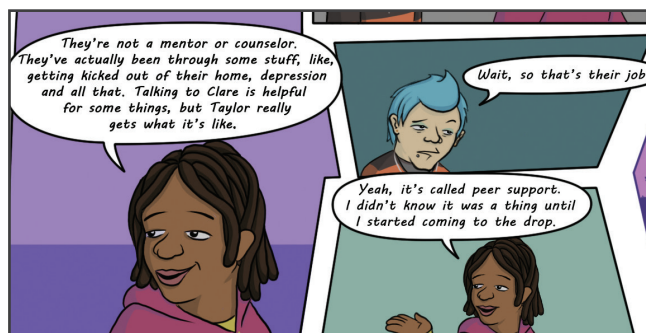
Though it seems that youth peer support specialists are the "front-facing" staff of the drop-in center that Zoe and James visit, the center also houses a counselor, Claire, who is available to meet with youth. What do you think about this approach to offering counseling services to young people? Why do you think peer support drop-in centers might employ this strategy?



Scene from Vol 4, "Dropping In," Issue 2

3

In issue 4, Zoe differentiates Taylor's role as a youth peer support specialist from that of a mentor or counselor and states that "Talking to Clare is helpful for some things, but Taylor really gets what it's like." What do you see as the potential benefits of peer support for young people as compared and contrasted with services like mentorship and therapy? How do you think these different supports might complement each other?



Scene from Vol 4, "Dropping In," Issue 4

Reflections

- * How does your own “lived experience” impact the way you work with young people? What do you choose to share, or not share, about yourself with the young people you work with? How do you think this shapes the way you build rapport, trust, and connection?
- * Have you ever worked with a young person who was “system-weary”? What strategies did you use to help engage them and earn their trust?
- * Does your community have services or spaces like the “Pacific Drop-in Center” depicted in the comic? Have you ever helped a young person access these services? What techniques and strategies are helpful in supporting young people to try new activities in their community?

Suggested citation

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Read comics at:

achievemyplan.pdx.edu/amp-materials



Achieve My Plan, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

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