What Is Peer Support and What Is NOT Peer Support?

What's a Youth Peer Support Specialist?

A youth peer support specialist (YPSS) works with young people transitioning to adulthood, who are usually involved in a child-serving system (e.g., foster care, mental health) or experiencing a unique challenge. YPSSs are typically close in age with the young people they work with. YPSSs use their own lived experience with mental health and child-serving systems to relate and engage with the youth they serve. In their work together, YPSSs help youth to identify goals and advocate for themselves. YPSSs achieve this through the following strategies:

Building Hope

YPSSs use their lived experience to relate to the young people they are working with and show them that there is hope for a brighter future, even if things seem bleak in the present. Lived experience refers to a person's journey through a system, trauma, or unique challenge that a young person might relate to. The purpose of sharing one's lived experience is to empathize, relate, and inspire hope. When talking about their lived experience, YPSSs are very intentional about how and what they share (see strategic sharing definition on the next page) so as to not discourage, overshadow, or mislead a young person. It is also important for the YPSS to remember that they are not a superhero, and are not expected to be a perfect role model or example of "what to do" for a young person. Rather, the YPSS can normalize feelings, thoughts, or situations that the young person might be experiencing, so the young person feels less alone or alienated by what they might be going through or experiencing.

Strategic Sharing*

When a YPSS talks about their lived experience, they only share parts of their story that are relevant to the young person, and do so in a way that helps to advocate with and/or for the youth, make them feel like they are not alone, or show them that there is hope. The YPSS is careful not to share unnecessary parts of their story or share in such a way where they monopolize the conversation or divert attention from the youth and their goals. The YPSS also needs to be conscientious of their own triggers and vulnerabilities while sharing their story, and should ensure that they take care of themselves as this can be sensitive. Doing strategic sharing well is not easy and can be tricky.

**Strategic Sharing: As a peer support specialist, you should learn about this in depth at your peer delivered services certification training.*

Shared Understanding

The YPSS is able to empathize with the young people they encounter through shared understanding. The YPSS is able to draw on their own experience to relate to the young people they are working with, even when they do not share the same experience as a particular young person.

Affirmation

The YPSS helps young people identify their goals, and offers validation. They affirm the young person's goals and ideas by helping them explore the situation, identify a plan, and come up with action steps. The YPSS consistently checks in about goals and plans, and affirms the youth's perspective by supporting them to pursue and/or change their goals.

Normalization

The YPSS helps the youth they serve feel less isolated by reminding them that other people experience struggles similar to theirs. The YPSS does this through sharing their own story, validating the youth's feelings, offering shared understanding, and destigmatizing the young person's experience.

Destigmatization

Young people who have been involved in systems often internalize stigmatizing beliefs about themselves. By normalizing the youth's feelings and sharing some of their own struggles and successes, the YPSS helps to challenge these stigmatizing labels and assumptions about young people who have systems experience. YPSSs also serve as advocates within their communities, and thus work to destigmatize mental health challenges and system experience in the public arena.

Relationship Building

The YPSS builds relationships with youth through rapport building. This includes tapping into their *peerness** by relating to youth culture; talking with the youth one on one; learning about the youth's interests, goals and experiences; sharing parts of their own story; and (most importantly) listening to the youth and affirming their voice. By building a healthy relationship with a young person, the YPSS is helping them gain skills to build and maintain new relationships in life. Furthermore, by building a trusting relationship, the YPSS is able to help the youth identify their strengths and use those as tools to meet their needs and accomplish their goals.

**Peerness: YPSSs are usually peers or near peers, meaning that they are the same age or near the same age of the young people they work with. This allows them to share their "peerness" and engage in conversations around youth culture and have similar knowledge and experience with things like media, pop culture, technology, etc.*

Individualized Support

The YPSS acknowledges that each youth they work with has a unique set of strengths, needs, and goals. Considering this, the YPSS uses different methods to support youth as needed, and relies on their relationship-building skills to learn more about the young person and what kind of support they would like. YPSSs help to "build a bridge" so that young people can better connect with their providers or connect with new supports. In doing so, the YPSS uses individualized approaches to help young people connect with their professional team members and other resources.

It is NOT your role as a Peer Support Specialist to...

...Be a superhero (but you can wear a cape)

YPSSs often work with young people experiencing crisis. While a YPSS should have some crisis intervention training, they should not be the only resource for a youth in crisis, nor should they be expected to be able to respond to or handle every crisis situation. YPSSs can help youth create a safety plan to help prevent crisis, and should debrief crisis situations with youth, but they should not be expected to serve as on-call crisis response support. YPSSs should also not be expected to represent perfection, have all of the answers or be seen without flaws; rather they should demonstrate that recovery is an ongoing process and normalize this for the young people they work with.

...Be their therapist

YPSSs help youth through difficult situations, and through relationship building speak with youth about difficult topics and feelings. While there may be a therapeutic element to their role, it is important to remember that YPSSs do not have a professional clinical background and should not be making clinical decisions for the young person. Instead, they should be helping the youth to identify and connect with resources that may work for them (clinical or not) and working with them to identify goals and strategies for achieving their goals.

...Tell them what to do

YPSSs are charged with helping youth make decisions for themselves by helping them identify their goals and strategies for achieving them. The YPSS should not make suggestions or be discouraging regarding a young person's goals or ideas. It is also not the YPSS's job to persuade the young person to do what the adults in their life want them to do; rather they should assist the young person in talking to the people in their social network about the goals that are important to them.

...Be their spokesperson

It is not the YPSS's job to speak for the youth, unless the youth explicitly asks them to and has vetted what they will say. Instead, the YPSS should plan with the youth around how they would like to communicate important matters to the adults in their life, and what kind of support (if any) they need to do that.

...Be the resource

Youth often look to their YPSS for answers, and it can be easy for the YPSS to become their main resource for answers. It is important for the YPSS to uphold their boundaries and help the youth identify and connect to resources rather than being the sole resource to meet their needs. The YPSS does this by providing the appropriate amount of support depending on the youth's needs, and helps the young person discover what resources are a good fit for them.

...Be the star

It is a part of the YPSS's job to share parts of their story with young people so they can see that someone with shared or similar lived experience has successfully overcome some obstacles, and thus find hope to do the same. It is extremely important that YPSSs only share their story when it helps the young person, and does not overshadow or draw attention away from the young person's ideas or goals. It is also important that the YPSS not compare the youth's experience to their own, but recognizes them as separate journeys.

...Be their chauffeur

YPSSs work in the community with young people, and often are present when a young person has a meeting or an important event. While there may be times when YPSSs drive young people, they should not be expected to be their primary source of transportation to meetings, groups, one-on-one visits, etc. Instead, the YPSS should explore transportation options with the youth and make sure they have plans to get to places they need to go.

...Be their babysitter

Often times adults involved in a young person's life will want their YPSS to "watch" them during unsupervised time. It is important for the YPSS to clarify that while they spend one-on-one time with youth, it is not within their role to monitor or discipline them. Other providers would not be asked to babysit youth, and neither should YPSSs.

...Be their friend

YPSSs build unique relationships with youth that are built on trust and mutual respect, but there are clear boundaries in place that allow them to work on specific goals. While YPSSs are friendly (because duh), they are still mandatory reporters, professionals, and have a code of ethics they are expected to abide by. YPSSs work with young people to help them build healthy social skills and connect to the community so they can build long lasting friendships of their own.

...Police them

YPSSs are agents of hope who help youth build skills by affirming their voice, helping them identify goals, and working with them to come up with plans to achieve their goals. None of this is accomplished through disciplinary, coercive, or shaming strategies. Sometimes, adults involved in a young person's life will want the YPSS to change the youth's behavior or report on what the youth is doing, which is not the YPSSs' role.

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