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Our Voices Too

PEER SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Research findings

BRIEFING PAPER THREE

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April 2020

KEY FINDINGS:

- The primary role of peer support initiatives in the field of sexual violence is to provide emotional and social support to young people¹. This support can complement support provided by traditional mainstream services.
- Peer supporters can add value as: a young person can relate to them; a peer supporter can be a credible and motivating role model and; a peer supporter can 'translate' and advocate for a young person².
- The relatability of peer supporters may be enhanced through 'matching' for language, cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, geography and experience.
- The peer support relationship can be valuable for young people in addressing sexual violence. The relationship can counter negative relationships developed between a young person and an exploiter or abuser; create space for 'normality' (and less pathologising forms of support) and; provide choices for young people through the voluntary nature of support.
- Providing support to others may be beneficial for peer supporters by helping them: develop self-empathy; reframe negative experiences and; build confidence and skills.
- Organisations may benefit from involving peer supporters in their services as this can lead to better engagement and uptake of support by young people.

INTRODUCTION

This briefing is based on exploratory research into 'peer support' for young people who have experienced sexual violence. For the purposes of this briefing, 'peer support' is defined as a formalised supportive relationship between individuals who have lived experience of sexual violence in common³. This briefing paper explores the perspectives of those designing peer support initiatives together with those in peer supporter roles for young people affected by sexual violence. This paper focusses on one area of the findings related to the perceived value for those: receiving peer based support; giving support and; organisations supporting such initiatives. The paper also reflects on the implications of this for practice and future research.

METHOD

Semi-structured individual or group interviews were set up online or face-to-face with a total of 25 key informants from 12 different organisations and initiatives in Europe and North America. Of the 25 respondents, seven of those had experience in the role of peer supporter working with young people (representing four different organisations and initiatives). Eighteen key informants had been involved in setting up group or peer support initiatives and supporting, supervising or managing peer supporters from a further eight organisations. All data was anonymised. Data was coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 11, and a thematic analysis was undertaken. The study received ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire's Institute for Applied Social Research⁴.

1 For the purposes of this paper sexual violence is defined as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (Jewkes, Sen and Garcia-Moreno, 2002). In this briefing the term 'sexual violence' is used to cover varied forms of sexual harm, abuse and exploitation. However, it is worth noting that the majority of the 12 organisations and initiatives represented in the study were working predominantly with young people affected by commercial sexual exploitation, non-commercial forms of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

2 In this paper the term 'peer supporter' is used as a broad term to refer to individuals with lived experience of sexual violence providing support to young people affected by the issue. The term 'peer supporter' includes individuals with lived experience mentoring young people, running workshops and groups and engaging in other supportive activities.

3 See Briefing Paper Two for more information on definitions.

4 For more details on the method and respondents see Briefing Paper One.

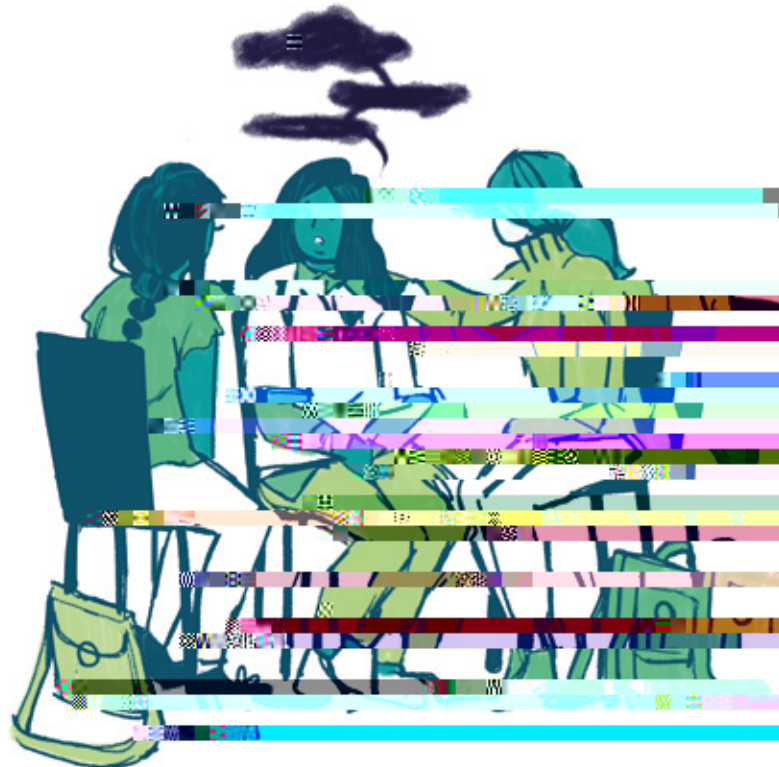
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Context

The development of peer support initiatives

In exploring with respondents why and how peer support initiatives were set up, a number of different reasons and motives were identified. These included that:

- Staff members within organisations recognised the unique contributions that individuals with lived experience could make to their services.
- Staff members recognised the 'natural peer support' that developed organically between young people when they were working in groups, sharing spaces or living in shared housing.
- Staff members were inspired after reading about peer support services within other organisations.
- Staff members working with broader groups of young people (i.e. not just those affected by sexual violence) recognised that within their services there were growing numbers of young people affected by sexual exploitation. In responding, they felt there was a need for a different approach to the traditional support being offered. In all these cases staff decided to set up a new mentoring model of support which included the use of peer mentors⁵.
- Young people recognised the potential benefits of peer support initiatives and wanted to be involved in setting something up to help other young people.



The support was described by respondents in different ways. A number of respondents talked about recreational activities helping to build the relationship between the peer supporter and young person:

“It’s just really building an authentic relationship, going out to eat, going to the movies, just hanging out.”

(Respondent 12, Organisation H)

“It ranges from just going to the mall or going to get pizza, things that are really developmentally normal but learning how to do that in a safe way.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Some respondents also talked about the work being primarily about emotional support that involved listening, acknowledgement and encouragement. One respondent described it as “emotional mentoring” whilst another used the term “quasi-case management”.

In discussing how similar or different the role of a peer supporter was as opposed to a case manager, two respondents explained what they felt the difference was. The case manager’s role was to help get things in place for the young person, and the peer supporter was there to encourage and support that young person to engage with those processes and structures.

“I think a mentor provides more of the emotional support and the case worker will provide more of the structural support so that case manager can say, ‘okay, what is it that you want to do in life?’ ‘Okay, well we need to get you these classes. How can I support you with these classes? What books do you need? And really providing that. I think the mentor is more, so, not ‘what do you want to do but what do you like and how do you feel when you are engaging in that activity?’ Why do you want to do that, how empowering is it? It’s more about emotional support, right, or when that youth is taking that class, it’s the case worker’s responsibility to make sure that class can be paid for and that youth can be there on time and they were able to have housing the night before, so that they’re not worried about housing and then being able to get to the class early in the morning. Or a mentor can be that additional support of ‘no, you can pass that’, and ‘you are great’ and really focusing just on that emotional aspect of it.”

(Respondent 12, Organisation H)

In summarising the type of support offered, the peer relationship was viewed as a mechanism to provide social and emotional support. Significantly, in some cases this was noted to be different to the support provided by more

The value for young people being supported

It’s different from working with other professionals

In exploring what is perceived as distinct about a peer based relationship, as opposed to a relationship with a case manager or other staff member without lived experience, this study uncovered three key themes:

- The degree to which a young person could relate to a peer supporter;
- The peer supporter as a credible and motivating role model and;
- The role of a peer supporter in ‘translating’ between the young person and other professionals.

Having someone who has been through it and can relate

The majority of respondents identified that those with lived experience were able to relate and develop a connection with young people who had experienced sexual violence that those without this experience may struggle to achieve.

“What we realise and have seen now, throughout the years with the girls, is that there’s nobody else that can relate to them the way that the survivor mentors can, and they do not feel as understood, they don’t feel that they can open up or trust anyone else as easily as the systems have failed them so much... it’s just an alliance and a trust and a bond that’s built, that none of us can give them, and it’s really vital, in my opinion, for the girls... I think to have that ability to relate to the girls the way that they do, and they feel a connection as well, in their own way of being able, because they understand each other in a way that none of us do.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

“The thing that I do recognise is that only a former ‘whatever’ [a person with lived experience of whichever issue is being addressed] really understands the situation from a very visceral perspective. So, I think that having peer mentors is really critical because before people are really ready to delve into their situation, talking to someone who has been where they’ve been helps them open up, helps them recognise that maybe the situation they’re in is not exactly healthy; that maybe that boyfriend isn’t really a boyfriend, more so than talking to a professional would in the very beginning stages, because in the beginning, ‘well you don’t really understand you’ve never been there’ well with the peer mentors, they have.”

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

“I think a professional may know things through books, I think that the person who has experienced something like that [sexual violence], it’s something that she feels in her spirit and her soul and she really knows really what has happened.”

(Peer supporter respondent 23, Organisation J)

“She [the peer supporter] is talking from her experience with them and I think this is really, really important for the other beneficiaries and I think that what she has to say has much more stronger impact on the others than what we can say.”

(Respondent 6, Organisation E)

Respondents reported a relatability associated with the experiential knowledge of peer supporters – an intuitive sense that only those who have experienced sexual violence can understand and which other young people respond to. As one of the respondents referred to above, trust is also a part of this relatability. When young people have been let down by professionals in the past, having someone who they view as different in some way to other professionals may help build rapport and trust.

One respondent, themselves a peer supporter, talked about how when accessing support she had wanted the opportunity to talk to someone who had been through what she was going through:

“Yea, at the time I said ‘is there someone I can talk to who experienced the same things? I mean not even like directly talk to them about their experience. Like the thing I always

said is like oxtFEFF0001 -1..2T[tOem mseltnZm[ft she.9g c 01 0d[*(Y)ssu)ssusaid is like oxtFEFF0001 -1..2T[tOem mseltnZm[ft s@ Tf1@aturG

This respondent went on to explain that following this experience, they subsequently tried matching boys with female peer mentors and that this was working well. Cross-gender mentoring was also viewed as a positive way of supporting boys by another respondent in the study.

In the quote above, the respondent identified a number of other potential areas to consider in matching. One dimension that organisations were required to consider was the perceptions of the parents of the young people being supported. A different respondent also noted that in some cases matching for language and culture was more important for the parents than the young people themselves.

Through exploring the data garnered through this study, there was a sense that experience alone did not necessarily guarantee a connection between individuals and that to enhance the likelihood of establishing supportive relationships it was helpful to reflect on what might increase comfort, relatability and understanding. One implication of this is that organisations may need to actively target peer supporters from particular backgrounds, areas, groups or with specific characteristics to be able to offer this choice to young people.

Peers as credible and motivating role models

The literature surrounding peer support suggests that peers can act as a role model for those who are less far along in the process of recovery⁷. The language of 'role model' was not expressed explicitly by respondents in this study, however respondents did talk about how it was helpful for young

Space for normality

One respondent identified that a relationship with a mentor provided space for a young person to talk about 'normal' things and this was different to the relationship developed with other professionals:

"Having a space to just have the conversation openly, so being able to say 'hey, this is what happened to me, the end'. It's not now 'okay well how are we going to intervene?' that's what our job is as the experts and the service provider. 'Okay we're going to intervene, how do we get law enforcement involved? We need housing'. I think what we found our mentees were having with their mentors is just being in a space to talk about it, right. To say how they felt during that and also to have a space to not talk about it, to have a space where people who have shared experiences and they understand it, where all we're doing today is eating ice cream. That's it. It's all we're doing today is going rock climbing and allowing them to have just that human connection... When you're talking to your mentor it can just be about 'what's your favourite hairstyle?' or 'what you didn't like today.'"

(Respondent 12, Organisation H)

This respondent identifies that the relationship provides an opportunity to be more young person led and less task and outcomes focused. The space is there for them to determine what they want to do with that time. This may be in contrast to other relationships a young person may have with their case manager or counsellor where the expectation is often that they need to address an issue and deal with the aftermath. This alternative approach therefore allows for a sense of 'normality', conversations that are about them and the everyday not solely about their experiences of abuse and harm. The importance of fostering 'normality' aligns with other studies with young people affected by sexual violence (Warrington *et al.*, 2017).

The voluntary nature of engagement

One of the key reasons why peer support evolved in the mental health field and in other sectors was to provide an alternative to professional services. There was a recognition that providing choice and making support voluntary was important, particularly when individuals may have been mandated to attend programmes. One respondent in this study reflected on how the young women she worked with were frequently told what they had to do by the professionals supporting them:

"I understood from the women coming to our groups that they were always 'done to', told what to do, and they'd been processed and often reprocessed through various different systems so mental health services, social work, criminal justice sector etc."

(Respondent 11, Organisation G)

A number of respondents emphasised how the initiatives they were involved in were voluntary not mandatory and how important that was. Given that many young people affected by sexual violence will have relationships with professionals where they feel they have no choice but to engage, these initiatives were developed to provide young people with choice. As others have identified, having choice is central in taking a participatory and strengths-based approach to working with young people (Warrington, 2016). Linked to this, respondents were also clear that peer support initiatives may not be right for everyone. For example, one respondent noted that some of their young people may be more comfortable working with a mentor without lived experience:

"I guess I could see some of our young people feeling very strongly about wanting to work with a mentor that had similar lived experience. I could see some of our young people actively wanting to work with people who did not have those experiences. I think a lot of it really comes down to the comfort and choice of the youth and the family that we're working with."

(Respondent 4, Initiative C)

Another of the peer supporter respondents also shared that from her experience, accessing support from peers was not for everyone:

"I think it was kind of like giving them more choices. It wasn't for everyone – not everyone would want that or it would be helpful."

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

Two respondents however noted that they had never come across a young person who did not want to work with a mentor with lived experience.

As with all services, ensuring that young people can engage in decision-making and have some choice appears to be a critical part of offering opportunities for peer support.

Value for the peer supporter

As identified in the literature, traditionally 'authentic' peer support has been viewed as a two way process where both individuals benefit from the relationship (Mead *et al.*, 2001). Due to the very different models that were included in this study, it was not clear whether and how different factors impacted on or benefited peer supporters themselves. However, respondents did identify a number of potential benefits.

Encouraging self-empathy

One respondent felt that for peer mentors, working with young people helped them understand their own experiences and develop more self-empathy:

"I think working with the youth, when being a survivor and you've experienced it yourself, you never have the chance to really remove yourself from the situation, and say 'dang, I was only 16' and to nurture that adolescence of you, right? Where, now they get to do that with another youth. So doing, being able to empower that youth provides the empathy that they can have for themselves where, yes, I'm a survivor and this is what happened to me but I'm a survivor, I'm here and

benefits.

just the knowledge that you're helping someone. Even though something bad happened you did something good with it and it's actually helping other people and they don't have to feel like you felt. That was really powerful and that was a really massive part in the healing process of it."

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

Respondents working with peer supporters also felt that through helping others this could help individuals make sense of their past experiences:

"She [the peer mentor] said 'it's like pulling a silver lining out of a horrible, horrible time in your life and using that silver lining to make a difference to another woman's life and it means that your experience wasn't worth nothing'. It's actually positive. So I think it helps our mentors in terms of their self-confidence and their ability to put that experience into perspective in terms of there is, all be it unfortunate, there is a benefit to their lived experience and their helping and it kind of, I think it reinforces their survival long term it puts distance between the events and the experience and what they're doing."

(Respondent 11, Organisation G)

"All of the [peer] mentors will say in some way or another... It's the thing that helps me understand why I went through what I went through and that wasn't for nothing, it was so that I could help these kids. And I think having that focus and that perspective changes your whole life."

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Three of the peer supporter respondents in this study had initiated the development of peer support initiatives. Two young people had suggested to the organisations supporting them that they would like to be involved in supporting other young people and had developed these initiatives together with staff members. The other young person had set up a support group with peers at her university. This aligns to a growing body of literature that indicates that young people affected by sexual violence often have a desire to help others and that this can be a positive experience for them (Batsleer, 2011; Levy, 2012; AYPH, 2014; Cody, 2017).

Building confidence and supporting career development

One respondent identified that providing peer support helped her to develop and build her confidence. She also noted how it provided different types of opportunities:

"It does build your confidence. And back then I had no confidence after coming out from court and things like that. It was really useful for me in a way. It opens a lot of doors as well."

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

For the same young person, who is now working in the sector, she noted that the experience helped her identify what she wanted to do in the future.

“Yea, just from meeting with so many different young people and seeing the impact that sexual violence and issues surrounding it have on so many people – for me anyway that was something that really drove my passion for working in this area and that really shaped my career choices and what I wanted to go into.”

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

There were divergent perspectives from respondents with regards to how they viewed peer support roles within their organisations. Some respondents for example felt that peer mentoring should be a stepping stone into other forms of employment, a way for individuals to gain some work experience and move on to something different. Whereas others felt that there should be room for progression within organisations so that these individuals could take on increasing and varied responsibilities⁸. Either way respondents recognised the value of peer supporter roles in helping individuals gain experience and skills.

Value for organisations

Perspectives on the inclusion of lived experience in services

As highlighted above, respondents identified a number of benefits for young people being supported, and to those providing support through peer support initiatives. However, there were differing views over how integral lived experience was to the overall work of their organisations. This ranged from respondents who felt that supporting young people affected by sexual violence could not be done without involving those with lived experience, to those who felt the experiences of these individuals were important, but were not sure how best to integrate these into the organisation:

“It’s kind of always been my mind-set and that understanding that there were pieces that those of us who are allies could do that were really effective. And there were pieces that we couldn’t.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

“I think that people can absolutely do this work without having lived experience, but I absolutely see that there’s a benefit and there’s something special [about involving individuals with lived experience].”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

“Well I think I, I have mixed feelings about it. I think [support offered by peers] is helpful. I also think when we talk about [how] only a former addict can really support current addicts I don’t really buy that perspective.”

(Respondent 5, Organisation D)

Respondents therefore could see the value but shared different perspectives on the inclusion of lived experience in services. Respondents therefore could see the value but shared different perspectives on the inclusion of lived experience in services.

⁸ See Briefing Paper Four for more on this point.

Peer involvement may keep young people engaged in the service

One respondent noted that research undertaken at her organisation identified that involving individuals with lived experience led to better engagement by young people:

“It’s what we see, and research is showing, at this point, that having survivor mentors working with the girls on staff [employed by the organisation], when the girls are trying to be involved in services, that it does increase them actually remaining at the services, and following through with services until the end.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

This same respondent talked about how the groups they offer at the service, that are led by individuals with lived experience, have much better attendance. Therefore, she recognised how important it was to employ peer supporters to increase the engagement and uptake by young people in their wider programme.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There were a number of limitations to this study which are important to acknowledge when reflecting on the findings.

Firstly, the majority of respondents involved were speaking from their experience of managing and supervising peer supporters. Secondly, the majority of respondents were speaking from their experience of managing and supervising peer supporters and the majority of respondents were speaking from their experience of managing and supervising peer supporters.

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