Peer Recovery Support Implementation Guide | Collegiate Settings

Introduction

Peer supporters, also referred to as peers or Peer Recovery Specialists (PRS), provide recovery support based on their own lived experience of substance use and/or mental health disorder and recovery.[1] Peers are a rapidly growing workforce in mental health and substance use recovery in the U.S.[2] and bring unique value in their ability to **work across multiple settings, supporting a wide range of individuals**.

The implementation of peer recovery support services can signify a notable change in the way an organization operates, resulting in both logistic and cultural challenges that are specific to the setting.[3] **This guide offers recommendations to address common challenges of peer implementation in collegiate settings.**

Much of peers' impact comes from sharing their lived experience with disorder(s), which, as with the experiences and characteristics of those they serve, are highly individualized. In all strategies for overcoming obstacles to effective implementation of peer support services, consideration should be made to avoid over-developing professional mandates and approaches, which can undermine peers' contributions.[4] Thus, finding a collaborative and adaptable balance between the organization's needs and the peer's needs to do their best work is key to successful implementation.

For more information on the history, definition, and outcomes related to peer recovery services in mental health and substance use treatment settings, refer to the **Measuring Outcomes of Peer Recovery Support Services Literature Review** at omni.org/peer-recovery-lit-review

Collegiate settings have distinct features most prominently characterized by their emphasis on transitions. Students experiencing substance use or mental health disorders face unique challenges. **Substance use and/or mental health disorders often originate in the college setting due to developmental risk-taking behaviors, substance use-promoting cultures, and availability of substances.**[5] In addition to academic pressures, students experience significant emotional and developmental growth, which can exacerbate substance use or mental health symptoms.[6]

Peers have been used in a variety of college and university settings to deliver services that address campus needs. College peer programs tend to intervene foremost in drug and alcohol use,[7] but also academic concerns[8] and learning and social disabilities.[9] **Peer support is particularly salient for college students, as they tend to rely heavily on friends and social networks in ways that involve organic relationship-building that is similar to peer processes.**[10]

Collegiate peer services aid students in reducing anxiety and increasing student services usage and involvement in college activities. As with most peer support, the benefits are bidirectional: not only does the relationship serve as a protective factor for the individual identified as receiving services, but it also enhances the peer supporter's sense of accomplishment, interpersonal competence, and social approval from those helped[11]. Peer services in college settings tend to be highly accessible, with regularly operated peer support groups, hotlines, and programs with drop-in hours.

The difficulties of maintaining sobriety, managing symptoms, and engaging in recovery processes are different for a college student than for an older adult. Considerations should be made to ensure peers can effectively deliver recovery services in this setting.

Peer Recovery Support in Collegiate Settings

CHALLENGES

RECOMMENDATIONS

Normativity of Substance Use. High rates of substance use on college campus pose a threat to recovery efforts.[12] College students rely heavily on their perceptions of others to inform their own behaviors, including risk-taking.[13] The frequent presence of substance-using peers may overwhelm or counteract the impact of peers delivering wellness services.[12]

1 **Initiate a Collegiate Recovery Program.** Collegiate Recovery Programs offer drug- and alcohol-free housing, onsite recovery support meetings, and residential counseling, among other supports.[12] Students who join these programs note that their participation serves as a protective barrier between themselves and the "abstinence-hostile" university environment.[14]

Mismatches between Peer Supporter and Student. Traditionally-aged college students are in a developmental stage that increases sensitivity to social comparisons.[15] A student matched with a peer who does not possess similar traits or capabilities can become discouraged and be susceptible to activating negative schemas of themselves or holding competitive stances with others, which stifles the peer process.[16]

2 **Comprehensively Assess Peer-Student Fit.** In the selection of peer supporters and their assignment to students, special considerations should be made to evaluate the initial and ongoing fit between the peer supporter and student. Criteria to consider could include similar experience with a disorder, being in the same cohort or academic program, or age similarity.

Time and Demands in College. College involves multiple significant scheduling demands. These demands affect peer availability and the peer relationship-building process, which often does not fit neatly within regular time schedules.[17] Experiencing a substance use or mental health disorder can further limit availability to deliver and receive services.

3 **Build on Existing Capacity to Deliver Programming.** College infrastructures allow broad access to health services and exposure to health and recovery programming. When colleges provide students with a range of opportunities to become involved in peer support programs, there are more options for services to fits into busy schedules.[10]

Burnout. With the many demands of college life, peers in these settings report being overloaded with the responsibility of delivering services and managing their self-care related to a disorder diagnosis, leading to burnout.[17] Burnout with peers in college settings can especially be caused by feelings of not being effective in their work.[18]

4 **Leverage Community Connections.** Identity development is often linked to a person's role in their community. Similarly, the recovery process involves actively participating and reengaging in the community.[19] Community connections should be emphasized in peer recovery training and practices in college settings, both for peer supporters and students.

General Recommendations for Peer Implementation

- Incorporating peer supporter input into policies and procedures supports cultural change.[20]
- Training staff on the benefits of the peer supporter role increases buy-in and understanding across the organization.[21]
- Addressing stigma associated with peer supporters mitigates other challenges.[22]

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