Building Community Supports for Young People in the Transition Years:

A Tip Sheet for Service Providers

By: Pauline Jivanjee, Eileen Brennan, M. Carolina Gonzalez-Prats, and members of the Transition Training Collaborative

January 2016

What is social support?

Social support is vital for the well-being of children and adults of all ages. Social support includes information, advice, or practical help from others that has positive effects on the young people receiving it (Munson et al., 2015). Since formal support ends when a young person transitions out of services, providers can assist young people to strengthen their existing informal supports and/or to connect them with other supports.

Social support is particularly valuable during times of difficulty or stress. Support from family members, friends, romantic partners, neighbors, mentors, and other community members may be given during a single event or provided consistently over time according to needs and availability. Effective social support is based on a belief in the potential of the young person and it inspires the young person to be their best.

There is evidence that culturally diverse youth are less likely to access mental health services and instead rely on families, peers, other adult allies, and community supports such as faith communities (Alegria et al, 2015). Social support is especially important for young people to counteract the effects of stigmatization in response to their mental health challenges or their status as an LGBTQ young person. For these emerging adults, a network of people who have shared similar experiences can be a powerful source of strength and affirmation.

What types of support are needed by youth?

Young people vary widely in the amount and types of support they want, so it's always important to find out their preferences. Both formal and informal support can include several elements, such as:

- Emotional support, defined as comprising empathy, validation, and encouragement during times of loss and challenge.

- Assistance with problem solving, for example for a youth with transportation needs, exploring the costs and advantages of a bus pass.

- Information about community support groups, educational activities, and activity groups where youth can meet other young people with similar interests.

- Material assistance, such as resources to meet concrete needs, including clothes, food, basic materials needed for setting up a first apartment, or money.

- Practical help such as practicing interview skills for a job interview, accompanying a young person to a meeting, or teaching a new skill like driving or managing a budget.

- Adult supports that are not paid to be in their life but choose to be there regardless.

Think about your knowledge of community support resources in your area… Are you able to recommend possible sources of each type of support to young people you work with?

Supporting and strengthening family support

Service providers have important roles in strengthening the support families provide to their youth and young adult children by:

- Providing information and teaching families how to recognize and understand mental health difficulties,

- Assisting families to find a balance between protecting youth and letting them make and learn from mistakes,

- Encouraging families to provide needed supports for young people, and

- Facilitating access to resources and family-to-family support (McCann et al, 2012).

Connecting youth with community supports

You can seek clues about goals and areas of interest as you work with youth to identify possible sources of community support (Jivanjee, Kruzich, & Gordon, 2007). Like other youth, young people with mental health conditions want to engage with others, so you can explore their interests and connections and offer ideas about access to possible opportunities:

- Around shared interests such as music, sport, or hiking.

- Through meaningful adult roles, especially employment with colleagues and supervisors who have some understanding of mental health issues.

- To access basic needs and resources, such as food, housing, and use of computers for information seeking related to employment.

- To gain or strengthen connections to cultural supports, to enhance their sense of positive cultural identity, for example through language classes, participation in cultural crafts, or culturally-preferred sports.

- To express their creativity, such as through art or music.

- Through engagement in volunteer activities for practicing employment-related skills as well as feeling needed and forming relationships with others.

- To gain mutual support from connections with others who have experienced mental health conditions, particularly through organizations like Youth M.O.V.E., NAMI, and ActiveMinds.

"The Speak Up and Empower group helped me to come out of my shell, grow as a person, and give back to the community."

– [young adult]

Faith-based support

What do you know about the spirituality of young people you work with and/or their connections to formal religious participation?

- Prayer and spirituality may be coping strategies that can sustain some young people with mental health challenges through adversity and toward recovery.

- Traditional healing practices may be preferred, especially among Native American and Hispanic/Latino families.

- Members of faith communities can provide spiritual, emotional, social, and material support.

- Churches and other faith communities can provide support, although it is always important to know and follow youth and young adult preferences; LGBTQ youth in particular may be wary of faith communities, if they have received punitive treatment from them.

- Service providers can facilitate access of faith leaders to culturally appropriate sources of information about mental health conditions.

"My pastor from my church helps me understand the things I don't understand. He helps put meaning in my life."

– [young adult]

Mentors

Many young people benefit from relationships with a mentor, whether an informal mentor in their family or neighborhood or a formal mentor who volunteers through a community-based program or works as a paid professional mentor. You can help link youth to effective mentors who:

- Focus on meeting the needs of the youth

- Are flexible, supportive, reassuring, and kind

- Allow time to build trust

- Encourage youth to select mutually enjoyable activities

- Provide help in a non-judgmental way

- Offer problem-solving ideas, and

- Avoid criticizing and lecturing (Keller, 2007).

The most helpful mentoring relationships are close and of long duration, with frequent contact. Mentoring may be more beneficial if mentors are members of same race or ethnic background. Mentoring relationships may develop in young adulthood with new connections in employment or education. Think about your community connections and encourage youth to seek mentorship from an adult or near peer they feel comfortable with. If they wish, offer to accompany them or offer to practice the skills of reaching out to a potential mentor.

"My mentor is like my diary, I tell her everything. She listens and gives good advice. I can be relaxed."

– [young adult]

Peer Support

Many youth and young adults prefer peer support characterized by mutual support and respect to supportive relationships with adults. Peer support provides opportunities for interdependence and reciprocity, contributing to reducing the effects of stigma and discrimination (Goldstrom et al, 2006, p.101). Near peers who are young adults who have had experiences receiving services from the mental health and other service systems may be particularly helpful to younger people because of their shared experiences and capacity to provide empathy, support, and encouragement.

Peer support programs employ peer support specialists focused on recovery and resilience to develop and offer support with goals to:

- Overcome stigma
- Prevent discrimination
- Promote self-help groups, and
- Promote recovery from mental illness (Galasso et al, 2009).

You might be able to connect youth with peer support or mentoring programs in your area or consider working with Youth M.O.V.E. to start one locally.

"Peer support helps young adults walk through the barriers of everyday life."

– [young adult peer support provider]

References

1. Alegría, M., & Green, J. G., McLaughlin, K. A., & Loder, S. (2015). *Disparities in child and adolescent mental health and mental health services in the U. S.* New York, NY: William T Grant Foundation.

2. Galasso, L. B., Arrell, A., Webb, P., Landsman, S., Holmes, D., Frick, K., ... Clark, H. B. (2009). More than friends: Peer supports for youth and young adults to promote discovery and recovery. In H. B. Clark & D. K. Unruh (Eds.), *Transitions of youth & young adults with emotional or behavioral difficulties: An evidence-supported handbook* (pp.209-232). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

3. Goldstrom, I. D., Campbell, J., Rogers, J. A., Lambert, D. B., Blacklow, B., ... Manderscheid, R.W. (2006). National estimates for mental health mutual support groups, self-help organizations, and consumer-operated services. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health Services Research, 33*(1), 92-103.

4. Jivanjee, P., Kruzich, J. M., & Gordon, L. J. (2007). Community integration of transition-age individuals: Views of young adults with mental health disorders. *Journal of Behavioral Health Services and Research, 35*(4), 402-418.

5. Keller, T. E. (2007). Youth mentoring; Theoretical and methodological issues. In T. D. Allen & L. T. Eby (Eds.), *The Blackwell book of mentoring: A multiple perspectives approach* (pp. 23-47). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

6. McCann, T. V., Lubman, D. I., & Clark, E. (2012). Views of young people with depression about family and significant other support: Interpretative phenomenological analysis study. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 21*, 453-461.

7. Munson, M. R., Brown, S., Spencer, R., Edguer, M., & Tracy, E. (2015). Supportive relationships among former foster system youth with mental health challenges. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 30*(4), 501-529.

Resources

Active Minds is a student-led organization with 437 chapters across the U.S. that works to change perceptions of mental health on college campuses and engages in support and advocacy:

http://www.activeminds.org

National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) is dedicated to improving the lives of people who suffer from mental illness through education, advocacy and support through local chapters, campus groups, and online resources:

http://www.nami.org

Youth M.O.V.E National is a youth-led national organization with local chapters devoted to improving services and systems that support positive growth and development by uniting the voices of youth and young adults who have lived experience in the mental health, juvenile justice, education, and/or child welfare systems:

http://www.youthmovenational.org

Suggested citation

Jivanjee, P., Brennan, E., Sellmaier, C., Gonzalez-Prats, M. C., and Members of the Transition Training Collaborative (2016). *Building community supports for young people in the transition years: A tip sheet for service providers.* Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University.

Please visit our project web page at:

www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/proj-pttp