

## **Our Voices Too**

# **PEER SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE?**

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The rationale and key themes from the literature

**BRIEFING PAPER TWO**

## SUMMARY

- There is a spectrum of activities and interactions that may be described as 'peer support'.
- There are different understandings amongst professionals of what is meant by the term 'peer'. When discussing young people, age is often seen as the most salient issue. However, wider literature on peer support identifies 'shared experiences' as the most significant factor.
- The flexible and evolving nature of peer support makes it challenging to define and there are varied views on what constitutes 'authentic' peer support.
- The impact of sexual violence on a young person's ability to trust others, and the sense of isolation and 'difference' that young people may feel due to their experiences, suggests that support from peers may be valuable.
- Research shows that relationships are key when working with young people affected by sexual violence and that young people show a preference for non-judgemental, flexible, consistent, informal, long-term support.
- However, there is limited evidence surrounding the value, or effectiveness, of peer support for young people affected by sexual violence.
- Key features of 'peer support', identified in the broader literature, include that peer support is often: centred on an equal relationship; based on a foundation of shared experience and; viewed as mutually beneficial.
- Studies that have explored elements of peer support identify some potentially unique benefits. This includes a peer's ability to establish trust and be a credible role model.
- Despite the limited research, the wider literature highlights a number of challenges and risks that may be associated with peer support for this group.
- There may be transferable learning from other fields where there is a longer history, and significant research and practice, relating to peer support interventions.

## INTRODUCTION

This briefing is based on a review of the literature that was carried out in preparation for a scoping study that aimed to learn lessons from those engaged in peer support interventions for young people who had experienced sexual violence. This briefing paper:

- Provides a rationale outlining why there may be value in peer support interventions for young people who have experienced sexual violence.
- Considers the spectrum of activities that have elements of peer based work.
- Outlines key themes from the limited existing research on peer support for those impacted by sexual violence.
- Outlines relevant themes arising in the broader literature on peer support.

### What makes a 'peer', age or experience?

The term 'peer' in itself is contentious. The Oxford Dictionary defines a 'peer' as *'a person of the same age, status, or ability as another specified person.'* In the context of discussing young people, 'a peer' is often conceptualised as someone of the same age or a 'friend', someone who is at the same developmental life stage. In reviewing the wider literature exploring peer support across a range of fields, the key feature of what makes someone a 'peer' does not however appear to be linked to age. In the fields of mental health and addiction for example peer supporters are individuals who themselves have experienced these issues, and are in recovery. Shared experiences rather than age therefore appears to take precedence. In the context of this briefing paper, 'peer support' is defined as a formalised supportive relationship between individuals who have lived experience of sexual violence in common. However, within this definition the similar developmental stage of 'peers' may also be significant.

## Why explore 'peer support' for young people who have experienced sexual violence?

In order to understand the relevance, and potential value, of peer support interventions for young people who have experienced sexual violence, it is helpful to summarise notable key messages from the existing evidence base surrounding: the impact of sexual violence on young people<sup>1</sup> and what young people and professionals consider to be important elements in responding to sexual violence and supporting those affected.

### The impact of sexual violence

The impact of sexual violence on young people can be far reaching effecting a young person's physical, sexual and mental health (McClelland and Newell, 2013; Stanley *et al.*, 2016; Fisher *et al.*, 2017; Warrington *et al.*, 2017). Research highlights the impact that child sexual abuse (CSA) can have specifically on a young person's ability to trust others and develop healthy positive relationships (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985). Moreover, studies highlight how young people may feel isolated and stigmatised due to their experiences or feel that they are the only ones who have experienced CSA (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985; Taylor-Brown *et al.*, 2002; Beckett, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013; Warrington *et al.*, 2017).

### Supporting young people following sexual violence

When it comes to supporting young people who have experienced sexual violence, research evidence highlights a number of consistent themes. For young people who have experienced child sexual exploitation (CSE) there is consensus that important elements include:

- non-judgemental support;
- a warm and friendly environment;
- openness, transparency and clear communication;
- respecting privacy and confidentiality;
- 'downplaying' the formal nature of interactions;
- flexibility;
- consistency and longevity of relationships;
- giving power and control back to young people (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013; Hallett, 2013; Smeaton, 2013; Warrington, 2013; Gilligan, 2015; Ahern *et al.*, 2017; Harris *et al.*, 2017; Lefevre *et al.*, 2017; Scott *et al.*, 2019).



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<sup>1</sup> 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).

A sense of 'reconnection' and the development of trusting interpersonal relationships, whether with professionals or others, have been identified as important in the aftermath of sexual trauma (Mendelsohn *et al.*, 2011; O'Brien, 2018). For those who have experienced sexually exploitative relationships, this emphasis on healthy relationships is considered to be particularly pertinent (O'Brien, 2018). This is one reason why mentoring, for those impacted by CSE, has been identified as a "theoretically promising form of support" (Dubois and Felner, 2016, p.7).

In reviewing a range of research studies exploring sexual violence in adolescence, a number of researchers highlight the potential value or 'promising nature' of peer based interventions for young people. For example, in a study in the UK exploring young people's views and experiences of help-seeking and support after CSA in the family environment, young people discussed the importance of receiving formal support in addition to other forms of support. They defined 'peer support' as "support from others with similar or comparable experiences, usually facilitated by an organisation" (Warrington *et al.*, 2017, p.151). The authors note that those who had experienced these forms of support noted their value. For those who had not, they shared that they thought peer support could be helpful in reducing isolation and helping them feel less alone (Warrington *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, young people affected by CSE have shared that group work may be helpful in similar ways (Gilligan, 2015).

A recent evaluation of a survivor mentoring programme for young people with experience of commercial sexual exploitation in the USA found that those who engaged in the programme experienced increased wellbeing and reduced levels of exploitation, drug use and problematic behaviours (Rothman *et al.*, 2019). Other researchers also suggest that peer or 'survivor mentors' may be helpful in supporting young people following CSE (Williams and Frederick, 2009; O'Brien, 2018; Bintliff *et al.*, 2018) and that more research into peer based interventions for this population is needed (Ijadi-Maghssoodi *et al.* 2018).

The increased interest in peer support aligns with the growing focus on trauma-informed approaches in a number of countries (Becker-Blease, 2017). The term 'trauma informed' has been adopted in different ways by organisations and services, however, in SAMHSA's (2014) 'six principles of a trauma informed approach', peer support is identified as being a key element of trauma-informed care. Those working in the field of trauma more broadly highlight how bringing young people together with shared experiences can be powerful in countering these feelings and 'normalising' emotions and responses attached to the trauma (Foy *et al.*, 2011; Knight, 2006; Avinger and Jones, 2007).

## Defining 'peer support'

The term 'peer support' includes a variety of models and activities, that involve some form of peer to peer interaction, that provide emotional, social or practical support. In peer support interventions, interactions between peers may take place one-on-one, in groups or online and may be attached to organisations and services or fall outside of these structures. It is clear that peer based interventions vary significantly. This may include differences in regards to:

- how formalised activities are;
- how professionalised they are (e.g. whether peers are employed and paid and whether initiatives are part of a service or standalone);
- how peers relate to one another (e.g. one-on-one or in a group setting, face-to-face or online);
- whether support is seen as unidirectional or equally supportive for all involved;
- how peer supporters are identified, supported and interactions monitored;
- the type of activities involved e.g. mentoring, providing information and support, providing a safe space to connect and;
- the frequency and intensity of activities.

Literature exploring peer support in the field of mental health identifies that due to the diversity of models and modes of support there remains a lack of clarity surrounding the nature and meaning of 'peer support' (Rebeiro Gruhl *et al.*, 2016). There is also recognition that the role of peer supporters is not static but has, and continues to, expand and evolve (Klee *et al.*, 2019). Although this may bring with it challenges and frustrations in some respects, Rebeiro Gruhl *et al.* (2016) propose that part of the challenge in defining the term is due to the flexibility of peer support in general and that this flexibility is also one of the key features and valued element to this form of support.

Despite the evolving nature of peer support interventions, there have been attempts to develop typologies to allow for categorisation and comparison and to enhance clarity. For example, South *et al.* (2016) created a typology of peer interventions within prison settings, identifying four modes of peer intervention: peer education, peer support, peer mentoring and 'bridging roles'. The authors explain that the main factor differentiating these types of interventions is their aims.

'Peer support', in itself has been further divided into several categories acknowledging the different modes that such support can take. Solomon (2004) identifies six categories of peer support in the field of mental health, which includes peer-led self-help groups, internet support groups, peer delivered services, peer run services, peer partnerships and peer employees. These attempts to try and 'map' and understand the different forms of peer interventions and peer support highlights the wide spectrum that peer support may take. Ranging from the relatively informal, naturally occurring support to the structured and formal support provided by a trained peer employee.

## Existing research on peer support for those impacted by sexual violence

The review of the literature highlighted that there is limited scholarship on peer support models for young people who have experienced sexual violence. Narain and Adcock (2017), in a rapid review of the literature on peer support for adults affected by sexual abuse, failed to identify any articles that identified clinical effectiveness of peer support interventions or evidence-based guidelines for this population. There may be a number of reasons for this, one being the fact that such models are rare and that there is a lack of evaluation data on such interventions. Patton and Goodwin (2008) hypothesise that there may be a limited number of peer group support initiatives due to the high levels of stigma attached to this form of abuse which may limit people talking about it. They also suggest that victim-survivors may have some unique challenges in regards to trust, boundaries and safety which may make engaging in such modes of support hard.

Despite the lack of evidence surrounding the role and value of peer support for young people who have experienced sexual violence, a handful of studies and papers were identified that provided useful insights into this mode of support. Key papers identified explore:

- Peer mentoring for young people affected by gang violence and CSE in the UK (Buck *et al.*, 2017).
- Peer mentoring for young people affected by commercial sexual exploitation in the USA (Rothman *et al.*, 2019).
- Mentoring for young people affected by commercial sexual exploitation (Dubois and Felner, 2016).
- Different models of peer support for adult survivors of CSA in Canada (Patton and Goodwin, 2008).
- The role of peers for adults exiting the sex industry in the USA (Hotaling *et al.*, 2004; Deer and Baumgartner, 2019).

Within this spectrum of support there are mixed views on what is 'true' or 'authentic' peer support work. For example, in the literature there are growing examples of paid peer support workers employed at mainstream services. Patton and Goodwin (2008, p. 21), in their report on peer support for victim-survivors of sexual violence in Canada, argue that such models are "not 'true' peer support, in that the support is generally unidirectional." Others however still recognise such work as peer support because the person providing the support has had similar lived experience which is the essence of this support.

Despite the ongoing discussions surrounding the definition of peer interventions and related terminology (e.g. peer providers, peer specialists, peer educators, peer counsellors, peer leadership, peer mentoring etc.) and the recognition that peer based interventions may constitute different models of support, there are some defining features which have been identified through the literature review. 'Peer based interventions' are built on an assumption that this mode of support is:

- different from professional mainstream support;
- based on a relationship where participants are on equal terms (Solomon, 2004; Nesta and National Voices, 2015);
- based on those involved having been in similar situations who draw on their shared experience to help one another (South *et al.*, 2017; Repper *et al.*, 2013; Gartner and Riessman 1982; Davidson *et al.*, 2012) and;
- mutually beneficial to the peer supporter and the person being supported (Mead *et al.*, 2001).

However, given the diversity of peer support models, one could argue that not all of these elements have to be present to make something 'peer support'. For example, the literature highlights how peer support evolved in the mental health field as an alternative support system from medicalised, professionalised services. However, today many peer support workers are employed within these services. In addition, literature points to the growing 'professionalization' of peer support workers where these individuals receive standardised training, certification and are employed on equal terms to other traditional mental health professionals (Chapman *et al.*, 2018.) In these contexts it is not easy to make clear cut distinctions between 'peer support' and 'professional support'.

Similarly, the notion that individuals in a peer support relationship are on equal terms may also be challenged. When one individual in a peer support relationship is paid for their role, at a different stage of recovery, older, or has involvement in meetings and discussions about the 'supported', questions can be raised about the degree of equality within the peer support relationship.

These ambiguities, contradictions and overlaps highlight challenges and tensions in definitions of peer based interventions. These have been particularly documented in the field of mental health, where peer support has gone from a natural, informal mode of support to a more formal, professionalised one which appears to be more widely accepted and integrated in the sector.

## Key themes from the literature on peer support in response to sexual violence

### The benefits

A number of elements were identified regarding the potential benefits or value of peer support for individuals impacted by sexual violence. Patton and Goodwin (2008), in their exploration of support in victim-survivor groups, identified the main benefits as:

- emotional support;
- transforming identities;
- realising that abuse was not the fault of the individual victim-survivor;
- a way to express and share experiential knowledge;
- increased social networks;
- feeling less alone and;
- a way to heal.

The authors note that from their study it appeared that emotional support was the key benefit rather than such modes of support actively addressing symptoms and responses to the abuse. They therefore argue that peer support may have a complimentary role alongside more formal modes of therapy which may predominantly focus on reducing symptoms.

In the articles and reports exploring mentoring for individuals who have experienced sexual violence, there appears to be four elements attached to being supported by a 'peer', that make it significantly different to being supported by a 'professional'.

- **Trust may be established more quickly between peers** – Hotaling *et al.* (2004), note that a peer supporter may not have to 'prove' they can be trusted in the same way as other professionals. Having mentors from the same community or local area may also be an important factor in fostering trust and mutual understanding (Buck *et al.*, 2017). Therefore there is a sense that trust and rapport is brokered quicker with those with lived experience. However, this may not be true for all individuals in all contexts.
- **Support, advice or guidance given by peers is viewed as more credible** – A number of studies and articles argue that due to the 'supporters' experience they are viewed as a more credible source of information and guidance (Buck *et al.* 2017; Hotaling *et al.*, 2004; Deer and Baumgartner, 2019),
- **Peers can become powerful role models** – A number of authors identify that peers may have a significant role in providing hope to young people that things can change and get better (Hotaling, *et al.*, 2004; Deer and Baumgartner, 2019).

- **Peer supporters can play a unique intermediary role between young people and professional services** – Studies indicate that peer supporters can encourage young people to disclose and seek support. Peer supporters may also help to connect young people to other services and strengthen their support networks (Allagia *et al.*, 1999; Dubois and Felner, 2016; Buck *et al.*, 2017).

These elements of what makes peer support different to other forms of support are broadly in line with the wider literature on peer support in the field of mental health. There appears to be agreement surrounding what peer support may bring, or enhance that other mainstream interventions may be unable or limited in their capacity to provide. There is however less research on the benefits, or value, for those providing peer support.

### The perceived risks

There are also tensions and concerns surrounding the use of peer support in the field of sexual violence. For example, Patton and Goodwin's (2008) report points to the risks for individuals with lived experience trying to help others and the importance of ensuring safe engagement. Patton and Goodwin (2008) also share how some professional respondents involved in their research were fundamentally against the idea of peer support noting that it was perceived to be dangerous and not as effective as formal therapy. The authors note that it may be difficult for peer supporters to listen to the highly traumatic stories of others and that self-care is imperative (Patton and Goodwin, 2008). Similarly research on peer providers in the mental health field echoes this noting that 'peers' are in effect in 'recovery' and in order to maintain that, it is important to have the time and resources to preserve that healthy state (Chapman *et al.*, 2018).

One of the concerns for practitioners in bringing young people with shared experience together, following sexual violence, in group support settings is that this may increase risk for young people. This is due to the potential of young people 'introducing' new acquaintances to different exploitative situations and relationships (Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz, 2017; Frost, 2019). There is also evidence that there may be instances in a group setting where young people may judge others or compare their experiences in some way (Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz, 2017). Other concerns noted in the literature include the need for consistency in supportive relationships and the importance of sustainability of support (DuBois and Felner 2016; Buck *et al.*, 2017). There is however recognition that a level of risk should not prevent services from facilitating participatory or group work with young people affected by sexual violence (Warrington, 2013; Fisher *et al.*, 2018; Hamilton *et al.*, 2019). Instead it is important to be aware of, and to consider and reflect on the potential negative impacts, balancing this with an appreciation of the positive outcomes that may emerge through such work.

## Key discussions in the broader field of peer support

Alongside specific concerns that may arise in utilising peer support in the field of sexual violence, it is helpful to consider current debates about broader forms of peer support and additional challenges or tensions identified.

Challenges in the literature identified by mental health peer supporters themselves report that there is a:

- lack of clarity in relation to their role;
- lack of support and supervision;
- continued sense of concern regarding self-disclosures and problems surrounding boundaries between peers;
- distinction between, and less respect and credibility associated with 'lived' as opposed to 'learned' knowledge by professionals and;
- sense that voluntary roles are less important than paid ones (Rebeiro Gruhl *et al.*, 2016).

The literature outlines moves that have been made to address these concerns. This in general has revolved around 'professionalising' peer support. This has involved the development of structured, accredited training programmes and the creation of paid roles within professional services. However, these moves have also led to a series of additional concerns and questions about the future of peer support. In sum this includes concerns that:

- As peer support is 'professionalising' it is diluting the essence and uniqueness of peer support.
- Peer support workers are spending more of their time on administrative tasks such as filling in documentation and attending meetings and less time on 'authentic' peer support work (Rebeiro Gruhl *et al.*, 2016).
- As peer support increasingly becomes integrated into mainstream services these services are essentially 'colonising' peer support work (Daniels *et al.*, 2010, cited in Rebeiro Gruhl *et al.*, 2016).
- There is a need to target training at 'non-peer' professionals as a way of creating more supportive and respectful environments for peers to operate within.

It is therefore clear that the evolving nature of peer support can bring with it various sets of challenges and tensions. For those who are interested in developing peer support for young people who have experienced sexual violence, being mindful of these issues may be helpful in navigating the development of such initiatives.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This briefing paper has provided an overview of some of the key arguments for, and issues and themes related to, peer support for young people who have experienced sexual violence. It is clear from the literature that there is growing interest in peer support for young people who have experienced sexual violence, particularly in the context of organisations and services striving to take a trauma-informed approach. This paper has outlined some of the arguments for why such forms of support may add value to traditional modes of support that are currently available to young people. The unique dynamics associated with sexual trauma suggest that finding ways to connect with others who understand and know how it feels may be important. The evidence regarding what young people who have experienced sexual violence want from services is clear and developing a trusting, non-judgemental, flexible, consistent, respectful, open and equal relationship appears central. This also suggests that a relationship with a 'non-professional', or peer, may add value.

As also noted in this briefing, it is challenging to define what 'peer support' is due to the fluid and evolving nature of this concept. There is a need to further explore the different models and variations that exist, or could be developed, for young people who have experienced sexual violence to understand the potential benefits and challenges associated with different forms. This paper has presented some assumptions about key characteristics of peer support and raised questions as to where boundaries exist between peer support and mainstream services. In sharing key themes from the limited scholarship surrounding peer support for those who have been affected by sexual violence, this paper has attempted to draw attention to some of the perceived unique benefits of peer support which require further exploration. In sharing some key debates in the wider field of peer support this provides areas for thought and reflection for those who are interested in initiating or supporting such initiatives in the future.

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