

Our Voices Too

PEER SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE: THE VALUE

Research findings

BRIEFING PAPER THREE

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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 provided

There were a range of peer support models represented in this study⁶. Respondents from seven of the 12 organisations and initiatives had experience of, and spoke specifically about, peer mentoring. This model typically involved an older individual with lived experience of sexual violence providing one-to-one support to a young person. However, the role of the peer mentor varied considerably. In some organisations mentors were employed full time, in other settings mentors were volunteers. Respondents from the other five organisations and initiatives represented spoke about other forms of peer support including group work, peer-led workshops and support groups, and providing emotional and practical support for young people going through the criminal justice system. Most activities involved face-to-face interactions. This included:

- **Relationship building:** Doing informal activities together – going for coffee, shopping, eating out at restaurants and engaging in creative activities.
- **Practical support:** Accompanying young people to counselling sessions, court, health appointments and other meetings.
- **Listening support:** Providing informal support face-to-face, in drop-in sessions or online.
- **Advocacy:** Supporting young people in their interactions with law enforcement.
- **Signposting:** Helping young people to connect with other services and resources in the community.
- **Facilitation:** Facilitating creative workshops.



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⁵ In discussing mentoring models, respondents used different terms to refer to a mentor with lived experience including ‘peer mentor’ and ‘survivor mentor’. Some respondents preferred the term ‘survivor mentor’ believing that mentors were at a different stage in life compared to the young people they were supporting. In this paper the broad term ‘peer mentor’ is used to refer to an individual with lived experience mentoring a young person affected by sexual violence.

⁶ See Briefing Paper One for more details about the models of peer support captured in the study.

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 traditional, professional services which were sometimes limited to primarily meeting basic needs, organising logistics and providing therapeutic support.

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 if you’re pregnant for instance, and you are going through it, naturally you’d want to ask someone going through that rather than ask someone who didn’t really have a clue or read up on it. It’s having that first-hand experience. It’s like a much deeper understanding and you kind of believe them more. So if a professional sat there and said to me ‘oh yea it’s going to be fine’, I’d probably be like ‘um, but you don’t really know because you haven’t been through it and you’re not my age and you don’t know what school’s like and stuff’. But if it’s another young person who had been through it and said ‘you know what it might be really bad at the time but it does get better’ and you do believe it more because you think, yea you’re not lying, because you’ve been through it.”

(Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

As this respondent noted, young people may be more likely to believe peer supporters because of their experiences giving them a certain level of credibility. In the quote above the respondent raises an important point, noting that a professional may not understand what it’s like being in school and dealing with other issues a young person may be facing. There is therefore an argument that age may be an important factor to consider. Someone at a similar life stage may arguably be more attuned to the experiences a young person is going through. However, age was not identified as a significant factor in discussions with respondents, with shared experience noted to be the most important feature in cementing the relationship. The importance, and the unique positioning, of peers in their ability to build trust and bring credibility aligns to other research on peer support with young people and adults affected by sexual exploitation (Hotaling *et al.*, 2004; Buck *et al.*, 2017).

‘Matching’ as a way of enhancing relatability

In addition to shared experience being central to relatability, respondents from five of the seven organisations and initiatives running mentoring programmes noted how they tried to strengthen the mentoring relationship through ‘matching’. Respondents talked about how they considered different aspects when recruiting peer mentors (and mentors without lived experience) and that diversity was a key consideration. Respondents reflected on how language, cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, geography and experience of sexual violence were all aspects to consider. One respondent, whose organisation employed a number of peer mentors, commented that *“we really pride ourselves on the fact that our staff look like our kids, you know what I mean, that they see themselves”*. The same respondent talked about how they also tried to match mentors with mentees where possible:

“We’ll try and as much as possible make a good geographic match. But then also try to match by story. So we have some staff [peer mentors] for whom gang exploitation is part of their story and when we have kids who have been or are in gangs, we’ll try and make that match because it’s so unique. But we try and match most, but not all, of our mentors are in recovery from addiction, but not all of them, but when we can, when we have a young person who’s struggling with addiction, substance use disorder, we’ll try and give them a mentor who also is in recovery.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Matching by experience may be significant given young people’s experience of sexual violence may be markedly different. For example, research highlights how for those who have experienced online abuse, there may be specific dynamics and impacts that are quite unique to that form of abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis *et al.*, 2017).

It has also been observed in other studies that matching by geography may be important. For example, in a study of peer mentors supporting young people affected by child sexual exploitation in the UK, the fact that mentors and mentees had similar experiences, but were also from the same local area, appeared to be an important aspect (Buck *et al.*, 2017). Mentors had a good understanding of the local context and dynamics within which the different forms of violence and exploitation took place (Buck *et al.*, 2017).

Respondents in the current study also talked specifically about how, due to the population they worked with, there was a need to try to bring in mentors who could connect culturally with the young people accessing the service.

“We did have four Spanish speaking mentors because we have a pretty large Latina or Latino population so we did need, and it wasn’t necessarily the youth who only spoke Spanish, but their parents did.”

(Respondent 3, Initiative C)

“Sometimes girls might have a better fit with a particular mentor than another due to culture, language, a lot of different reasons, so we have expanded to try to also have more mentors available for cultural reasons, language reasons, would be a better fit for particular girls, because just like anything in life, it’s that personal relationship.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

One peer supporter, who was not involved in mentoring but in setting up a support group within her University, shared that she also felt it was important that peer support initiatives were inclusive and represented individuals from different backgrounds:

“We try and make sure that there’s not just like one particular type of people, we try and make sure that people know and are aware that it’s very inclusive so that if they want to talk and can’t talk to somebody because of how they look or their orientation and stuff like that, then they can talk to someone else in the group as well. Whether it’s like a cultural thing.”

(Peer supporter respondent 20, Initiative L)

Interestingly, there were mixed experiences in regards to matching for gender. Respondents from one initiative talked about how they had found that it was helpful to recruit male mentors when working with males (though noting that these were not mentors with lived experience specifically). The respondent felt that boys had different needs and they recruited male mentors to work with this group. Another respondent shared how their organisation had tried to bring in a male peer mentor to work with boys and young men but that this had proved problematic:

“He was wonderful but what we found was two things. For the kids who are still tethered to parents, their parents felt almost universally like no way am I letting my kid get in a car alone with you, out gay man. Right, their own homophobia and their own fears kicked in. Because so much of mentoring actually happens alone. It’s a one-on-one thing, and they were worried about that. So there was a lot of pushback on that and then we also found that many of the boys whose challenging experiences had been at the hands of men, also felt like not very comfortable in that alone time... We found that the 18 and up kids were really drawn to him, but that’s not, we take referrals for younger and then we’ll serve them past their 18th birthday.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

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 people to see others who, in their words, had “survived” or “triumphed” following experiences of sexual violence.

“When the survivor [peer mentor] goes out and meets them, and they’re able to see that their story is similar to theirs, and that they have been able to triumph in their own ways, it really creates the sense of hope for them.”

(Respondent 1, Organisation A)

“That to me is good for women in terms of peer support, that mixed age approach, they know they can survive, because they know the older women have experienced some of what they’ve had or similar.”

(Respondent 11, Organisation G)

“It’s authentic and she [the peer supporter] sends the message ‘I’ve been where you’ve been and I managed to get out of it and now I’m feeling fine considering all the things that I’ve been through.’”

(Respondent 6, Organisation E)

⁷ See Briefing Paper Two.

Another respondent noted how peer supporters could demonstrate to young people that it was possible to be independent and survive outside of an exploitative relationship or situation. This respondent observed that this required paying peer supporters a living wage:

“Because you want your staff to be able to look a young person in the eye and say you can live without having to be exploited. Like, you can like, ‘I own a car and I rent an apartment on my own and I can eat and I can go out with friends and blah, blah, blah’ and so that if they’re having to work three jobs just to make ends meet, then they can’t actually do that.”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

Therefore this sense of being ‘living proof’ that things can work out and that there is a future after experiencing sexual violence was something that was identified by a number of respondents. This is inextricably linked to the above point about ‘matching’ and the importance of young people being able to ‘see themselves’ in those supporting them. If you have grown up in the same area, or experienced something similar to a peer supporter, the propensity to see that person as a role model may be enhanced. This reflects findings from other studies which note the value of a ‘role model’ for individuals who are in the early stages of exiting sexually exploitative situations (Hotaling, *et al.*, 2004; Dubois and Felner, 2016; Deer and Baumgartner, 2019). Similarly, young people have written about how spending time with peers can help young people to be positive about the future as they observe others moving on with their lives (Hamilton *et al.*, 2019).

Having someone who can ‘translate’ on your behalf to other professionals

One respondent in the research identified an interesting element in regards to the uniqueness of lived experience. This respondent relayed how she had recently asked the young people that the organisation serve about the role of peer mentors. One of the young people described having a mentor as like having a ‘translator’:

“[She said] ‘They can be your translator’. So she was like, it’s not that I’m not willing to work with those backline [professional] people but I need someone to translate what I’m feeling, she’s like, because otherwise, she was explaining that in that situation she just kind of acted out and she’s like then those backline people look at me like ‘oh, you’ve got behaviour problems, you’re a problem.’”

(Respondent 10, Organisation F)

This ability to ‘translate’ comes from a place of shared understanding. An individual who has been impacted by sexual violence may know what it feels like for that young person. Someone who also has experience of working with various professionals, and has negotiated systems, is likely to have a good sense of what is ahead for a young person and may be able to act as a guide and mediator.

The relationship

Respondents also talked about the importance of the relationship created with a young person through these initiatives. It was felt that the relationship could:

- Counter the negative relationship with an exploiter or abuser;
- Create a space for ‘normality’ and;
- Support engagement that is voluntary not mandatory.

Although these elements were identified within discussions surrounding ‘peer relationships’, one could argue that these benefits could also be achieved in other relationships with professionals and/or volunteer mentors without lived experience.

Countering negative relationships

In this study one respondent talked specifically about how important she felt the ‘relationship’ established with a mentor was for countering sexually exploitative relationships:

“When you look at individuals who go into just any form of community group that is not the most positive, what they’re seeking is not necessarily ‘I want to be in a gang and I want to harm people’ or ‘I want to be in this cult and I want to harm myself’. What they’re seeking is community. They’re seeking connection, they’re seeking family, they’re seeking people or social life... So while their basic needs are being met, we knew that internally their spiritual needs, their emotional needs would also be met by having authentic relationships with individuals. And that’s our mentorship programme. Realistically, that’s what exploiters do. They do it through a relationship. I’ll provide you that bed, but before they give that youth that bed, before they exploit that youth, they create a relationship, they create some form of partnership, whether that’s engaging in an intimate relationship or friendship and that’s part of the coercion, that’s part of the manipulation, pretending to care.”

(Respondent 12, Organisation H)

This respondent therefore felt that a mentor could provide a positive relationship which acted as a substitute to the negative relationship a young person may have developed with their exploiter. She recognised that a relationship may be able to provide a young person with a sense of belonging. This point aligns with Dubois and Felner’s (2016) reflections that mentoring specifically may be an important strategy in addressing disorganised, negative attachments for those who have been sexually exploited. The importance of this sense of belonging and attachment may be particularly significant in adolescence where young people place a high value on peer relationships (Burton *et al.*, 2011). The significance of ‘the relationship’ between a young person affected by sexual violence and the individual supporting them is consistently identified as being key to the success of any programme of support (Warrington *et al.*, 2017; O’Brien, 2018; Scott *et al.*, 2019).

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 I'm thriving and those things shouldn't have happened to me. So I think the empathy that they can have for themselves because they get to now be removed from the situation and see it from the outside."

(Respondent 12, Organisation H)

This respondent therefore identifies that, for a peer supporter, working with a young person may help them to reflect on what happened to them and think about it differently.

Reframing and healing: turning a negative experience into something positive

In this study a number of respondents talked about how supporting other young people could be valuable as it could help peer supporters give 'meaning' to their own negative experiences. One respondent reflected on how helping others contributed to her own process of recovery and healing:

"And after I had gone through my journey and finished going through the criminal justice system then I said to my [worker] at the time 'is there anything else I could be doing, is there anything more? I really want to use my experience for something good'. So then I started doing peer supporting... For me at the time one of the biggest things and biggest reasons why I wanted to kind of do this and start supporting it was kind of like a healing process for me as well. Being able to turn it into a positive thing. It was like it benefited both people involved. Obviously the young person because they're getting rich detail and everything and multi-versions and a deep level of understanding. But for us it was like –

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 regarding the unique contribution of those with lived experience in service delivery.

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. A smaller number of respondents were peer supporters and the study did not engage with young people who had received these forms of support. In future studies it would be helpful to understand the perspectives and experiences of those receiving peer support.

Secondly, as this study included some respondents who had experience of managing and supporting mentors working with young people affected by sexual violence more generally (e.g. mentors with and without lived experience) some of these respondents’ reflections were linked to what they believed was the overall value of a mentoring model, they did not always talk specifically in terms of the dimension of lived experience. However, we have tried to be explicit where responses were related to the specific value of lived experience.

Finally, given that all respondents were, or had been, involved in providing these forms of support, their responses may be biased towards an assumption that this way of working is beneficial. It is also imperative to be mindful and reflect on the challenges and difficulties that can arise in setting up and supporting peer support initiatives – an issue explored in depth in briefing paper four.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study highlight some potentially unique contributions, or added value, of peer support initiatives. There was an appreciation that although young people could benefit from, and required, different types of support and services, there was something very powerful and distinct about being supported by someone who understood what it meant to experience sexual violence. In addition, having the opportunity to develop a relationship with somebody who had moved on from their experiences could provide hope and encouragement.

Developing a relationship with someone who was not viewed as a ‘professional’ in the same way that a case manager, social worker or counsellor may be viewed, provided a distinctive type of support for a young person. It provided emotional and social support where the young person could navigate conversations and activities and choose what to talk about. This approach appears inherently strengths-based, giving young people the power and control to shape the nature of that support. This way of working also allowed for less pathologising forms of support – a greater sense of ‘normality’ and time and space to think about and engage in things that had nothing to do with their experiences of sexual violence; which may for some young people be a welcome change. In addition, the relationship enabled the development of a positive relationship, something that may counter exploitative and disorganised attachments. The findings therefore support other studies that indicate that peer support initiatives, including peer mentoring, have a unique contribution within a support package for young people after an experience of sexual violence (O’Brien, 2018; Rothman *et al.*, 2019).

For those providing the support, there was also value in having the opportunity to reflect and contextualise one’s own experiences and give meaning to those. Respondents talked about the healing, or therapeutic value that could come with helping others and using one’s own negative experiences for good. Respondents also identified how engaging in peer support could build skills and confidence, equipping individuals with knowledge and experience for future career development.

For organisations, there were also advantages, working together with individuals with lived experience could help services to engage with young people and maintain their interest in different programmes of support.

As interest in peer support for young people affected by sexual violence grows, there is a need for more research into how these modes of support are experienced by the young people accessing them. As highlighted in briefing paper four, there is also a need to better understand the challenges and tensions that may arise in developing these forms of support.

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