



A Qualitative Study Exploring Ways Peer Support Workers Enhance Youth Substance Use Services

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Key takeaways

Peer support workers support youth throughout the care continuum

There is a need for better integration of peer support across health care settings

Peer support helps de-stigmatize substance use at the individual, organization and community levels

Introduction

Peer support workers help individuals who share similar lived experiences by providing them with emotional and practical support (1). They have been found to reduce substance use stigma among clincal colleagues and can increase service engagment with underserved populations (2). However, their role is often not well defined and varies widely across organizations (3). While peer support has been associated with positive substance use recovery outcomes in adults (3-5), few studies have examined its role to support youth specifically.

Objectives

This study aimed to explore and understand the role peer support workers play in providing substance use services to youth in British Columbia (BC) and how best to support them in their role. This was part of a larger project to inform the development of substance use training for peer supporters.

Methods

We partnered with 14 youth from across BC with lived/living experience of substance use to inform the research protocol and materials. An initial focus group (n=3) and subsequent interviews (n=15) were held over Zoom with 18 peer support workers who support youth (ages 12-24) based on their own lived experience with mental health and/or substance use concerns. Each session was facilitated by two trained research team members, including a youth research assistant with lived/living experience. The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step method (6,7).

Results

Three overarching themes were identified describing peer support workers' experiences supporting youth with substance use concerns (Fig. 1). These experiences centred around supporting youth throughout the whole process (Theme 1) by meeting youth where they are at, providing youth with individualized care and bridging the gap between other services and supports. However, participants described how numerous organizational barriers hindered their ability to succeed in their role and the importance of having an employer who understands the work they are doing (Theme 2). This included empowering peers to set boundaries and define their own role, providing them with adequate training and mentorship, and advocating for the peer support role to promote collaboration with other services providers. Peer support workers also shared the larger impact they played in destigmatizing substance use at an individual, organizational, and community level and how their lived experience helped bridge a connection with the youth they support (Theme 3).

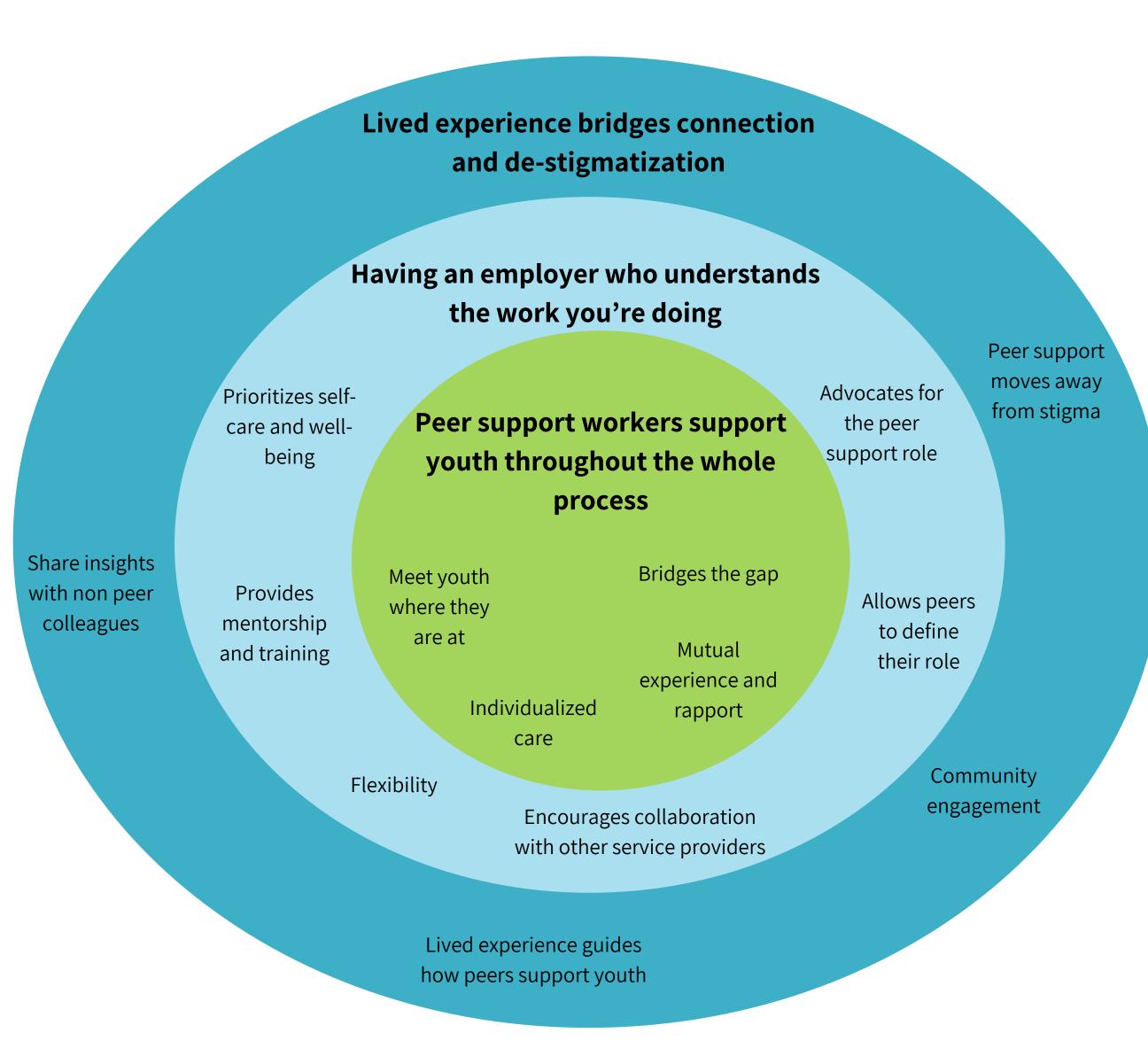


Figure 1. Overarching themes describing peer support workers' experiences supporting youth who use substances

Conclusion

Peer support workers play a unique role in youths' substance use journeys. Their own lived experience and flexibility within their role enables them to provide patient-centred care and truly meet youth where they are at. However, their position is often misunderstood by employers and other service providers, leaving peer support workers with inadequate support, training and mentorship. The findings from this study emphasize a need for better integration of peer support into existing models of care and standardized peer support training that is in-depth and continuous.

"I think for me, like what [participant 2] said in terms of making the gap smaller, like focusing on relationships I guess, like kind of bringing a more human element to accessing care...it's pretty common for a doctor or a counsellor to say, 'Wow that youth is usually really, really difficult to communicate with, how did you connect with them' or 'How did you get that information?' It's like, we just talk to them like they were people." (P01)

"Because of our experience, that brings so much to the table, but it also means that you have someone on your team, like for a lack of a better term, that isn't like everybody else. So I think it's really important to recognize that and kind of work with them to understand what their boundaries are and what they want their role to look like, and what they bring to the table...Like in my experience, it's been clear – good in the way that, I know that if I'm uncomfortable in a situation, I can have a counsellor or something come into a conversation and help me work through it. But I don't always think that they really understand what it's like from our perspective in terms of our own experience and how that can affect how we support youth." (P15)

"For me, peer support was really a gamechanger in the sense that I didn't have to hide from who I was. When it became an asset, when my journey was something that was appreciated and was useful to other people, that was a big turning point in my journey...When I gave myself permission to be open and vulnerable, and start using that in my peer support practice, I noticed that it gave other people permission to do the same. And that really is what opens up this very direct and honest communication between me and the peers I see." (P16)