Vocational Peer Mentors: Perspectives of Early Emerging Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions

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The Transitions RTC aims to improve the supports for youth and young adults, ages 14-30, with serious mental health conditions who are trying to successfully complete their schooling and training and move into rewarding work lives. We are located at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA, Department of Psychiatry, Center for Mental Health Services Research. Visit us at: 

http://labs.umassmed.edu/transitionsRTC/index.htm

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Background

- Estimated 5 million emerging adults with serious mental health conditions (SMHC) in the US
- Unique developmental stage of life
- Struggle to succeed in all aspects of life, especially in employment and educational attainment
- Social capital may be diminished
- Vulnerable subgroups
Promising Practices

1. Individual Placement and Support (IPS)
   - Supported Employment
   - Employment specialists + clinical team
   - Adapted for 1st episode psychosis: Addition of Supported Education
   - Feasibility paper currently under review

2. Use of Peers
   - Evidence of benefits among older adults with SMI and other at-risk youth
   - Peer influence is high
   - Focus group study: need for role models
Current study

• Test feasibility of adapted IPS: supported employment + supported education with the use of near-age vocational peer mentors

• Single group mixed method pre-post feasibility study

Thresholds Young Adult Program (YAP) in Chicago

Today’s goals:
1. Describe vocational peer mentors
2. Explore the relational processes at work
3. Identify valued characteristics of peer mentors
Near-age peer mentoring

Peer qualifications:
• Self-identified as having a SMHC
• Experience in YAP or other service systems
• High school graduate with employment or post-secondary school history

40 hours of training:
• Increase knowledge of IPS model
• Learn how to share story
• Build active-listening skills
Vocational Peer Mentors

- Work closely with education and employment specialists
- Provide emotional support & validation
- Engage young people in vocational services
- Support young people in exploring worlds of work & school
- Teach, role-model, and coach professionalism, maintaining hygiene, and having appropriate boundaries

- 1-6 mentees per mentor
- Weekly meetings in the community
Measures

1. Open ended peer mentor satisfaction survey
   • Satisfaction with peer mentor experience
   • Valued peer mentor characteristics
   • Impact of peer mentors

   Thematic coding led to two cohorts:
   • Positive peer mentor experience
   • Negative, mixed, or no opinion peer mentor experience

2. Working Alliance Inventory-Short Form (WAI-S)
   • 12 item self-report
Study participants

35 study participants, 22 with satisfaction data

• Mean age 17.27 years (range 17-20)
• 14 female, 8 male
• 18 African American, 2 Latino, 2 White
• Only 2 high school graduates/GED
• 13 previously employed

Primary Diagnoses

- Developmental: 2
- Psychotic: 7
- Mood: 13
Overview of Findings

• Peer Mentor Demographics

• Valued Peer Mentor Characteristics

• Valued Peer Mentoring Experiences

• Overall Perceived Benefit

• Working Alliance
Peer Mentor Demographics

- Peer Mentors: 13 total
- Age Range: 20-30 yrs old
- Race/Ethnicity: 9/13 African American
- Supplemental Security Income: 10/13
- HS Diploma or Equivalent: 11/13
- Post-Secondary Education: 9/13
Valued Peer Mentor Characteristics

• “Strong,” “positive,” “honest,” & “trustworthy”

• Have similar life experiences and a capacity to empathize

• Having “overcome” personal struggles
In young people’s own words

“[My peer mentor is]...trustworthy. I could talk to him about everything.”

“she [peer mentor] didn’t look at me differently...she didn’t put on a phony act.”

“someone who was one of us... they can talk about their life, how they get through it and show us how to do it.”
Valued Peer Mentoring Experiences

- Receipt of advice
- Feeling related to & understood
- Opportunity to “talk” & be heard
- Relationship Building
- Trust & Safety
In young people’s own words

“[My peer mentor] understands where I am coming from and I understand where she is coming from.”

“I felt safe and listened to.”

“[we] talked about my job and how important it was that I keep it...but it was also a bond.”
Overall Perceived Benefit

• 16 cited benefits
  – Vocational goal achievement
  – Increased self-awareness and agency
  – Job search and interview support
  – Assistance in connecting with vocational team

• Breakdown of Overall Perceptions (n=21)

- Positive: 13
- Negative: 4
- Mixed: 2
- No comments/limited exposure: 2
Working Alliance

Mann-Whitney U=14.0, p =0.006, sig ≤0, 2-tailed
Vocational Attainment

Positive Experience (n=13)
- Yes: 9 (69%)
- No: 4 (31%)

Negative, Mixed, No opinion (n=8)
- Yes: 7 (88%)
- No: 1 (12%)

Yes
No
Promising practice…

- Value & Benefit
- Vocational specialist relationship
- Delayed vocational development
Relational Processes

- Renee Spencer of BU studies the complexity of mentoring relationships

Defining & Expanding “Peer”

- Peer support theory
- Shared-life experiences
- Stigma & development

...psychiatric residential program grad, not having a SMHC...
Practice Implications – Lessons Learned

- High rates of turnover
- Broadened criteria for hiring
- Near age rather than same age peers (further in recovery)
- Greater clarification of role
Practice Implications

- Training needs
- Connection with vocational team
- Clinical support
- Meetings in the community
- Peers needed cars/computers/phone
- Incentives for mentee meetings
- Funding – Medicaid Peer Specialists
Thank you!

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