

## **Peer Intervention**

Social support and connectedness have been identified as important protective factors against a range of physical and psychological conditions. Research suggests that people are more likely to hear and personalize messages, and thus to change their attitudes and behaviors, if they believe the messenger is similar to them and faces the same concerns and pressures (Dillon & Swinbourne, 2007).

From a variety of studies conducted across Canada, the United States and Australia, researchers have found that most young people rely on their friends for help and that very few go to counselors or other sources in the first instance (Dillon & Swinbourne, 2007). It is recommended, therefore, that prevention programs targeting young people need to be directed at peers to strengthen (or immunize) students against harmful influences.

The research consistently reports that peers in the school environment are the most likely source of help for young people in crisis, and that having supportive friends is a strong protection against diminished mental health and other problems (Dillon & Swinbourne, 2007). It also indicates the issues that underlie the health and wellbeing of young people that need to be addressed: forming connections with others, developing problem solving skills, assisting friends to access professional services, and identifying warning signs (Dillon & Swinbourne, 2007).

Peer education draws on the credibility that young people have with their peers, leverages the power of role modeling, and provides flexibility in meeting the diverse needs of today's youth. Numerous studies have demonstrated that peers influence youth health behaviors with regard to sexuality, violence and substance abuse (FOCUS on Young Adults, 1997). Peer education can support young people in developing positive group norms and in making healthy decisions.

### **Benefits of Peer Programs**

- Young people relate well to people similar to them in age, background, and interests.
- The cultural similarity of peer promoters helps ensure that the language and messages used are relevant and appropriate.
- Peer-led programs can change social and community norms to support risk-reducing behavior.
- Peer programs allow for the direct involvement of young people in their own programs.
- Peer programs can be implemented economically.

Source: FOCUS on Young Adults. Using peer promoters in reproductive health programs for youth. *In Focus* December, 1997;

<http://www.pathfind.org/pf/pubs/focus/IN%20FOCUS/peerpromoters.html>

- Results of Dillon & Swinbourne's (2007) study of the *Helping Friends* peer intervention program provides evidence to suggest that identifying respected friends and reinforcing their existing skills can reinforcing their existing skills can fulfill an important role in the improvement and/or maintenance of well-being among students.
- Studies have shown that adolescents who are counseled by peers are more likely to engage in interactive discussion following the education curriculum than those counseled by adult health care providers.
- Research has shown that youth programs with a focus on helping others improve academic and social outcomes and enhance self-concept and community values.
- Trained peer educators are a more credible source of information for some youth than are adult educators because they communicate in readily understandable ways while serving as positive role models.
- There is evidence that through drawing on their own experiences to help others, young people are better able to deal with, resolve, and gain some perspective on their own issues.
- Helping others can increase self-esteem, decrease dependency, and provide a sense of control and a feeling of social usefulness.
- Peer support enables young people to develop effective coping skills and to receive social support from peers and adults.
- Providing opportunities for young people to develop positive relationships...and strengthening relationships with other people including their peers, is considered an important goal of youth development. Consequently, providing opportunities for young people to make and strengthen positive relationships can contribute to social and environmental protective factors (Oliver, Collin, Burns & Nicholas, 2006).
- Research on peer-led interventions implemented in classroom settings generally find that effective programs convey positive regard for peer educators, are well-organized, and have adult advisors that adolescents perceive as empathetic and similar to themselves in terms of characteristics such as race/ethnicity. The incorporation of incentives to retain adolescents in leadership roles as peer educators has also been shown to increase effectiveness.
- Peer educators need to be selectively recruited, adequately trained, supervised, and supported.

- Peer mentoring effectively promotes favorable academic and social behavior in early intervention programs and social skills in children with behavior disorders, but is less reliable for general competencies and skill maintenance (Browne et al., 2004).
- With regard to substance abuse, research has shown that peer support is positively related to some variables that are inversely related to substance use and to some variables that are positively related to substance use. In other words, in some instances, peers may be responsible for encouraging (or at least not discouraging), impulsive behavior and risk taking actions (Wills, Resko, AINETTE, & MENDOZA, 2004).

### **Peer Intervention-Focused Evidence-Based Practices**

**Reconnecting Youth (RY)** is an indicated school-based program for youth in grades 9 to 12 (14 to 18 years of age) at risk for school dropout and exhibit multiple behavior problems. It uses a partnership model involving peers, school personnel, and parents to deliver interventions that address decreased drug involvement, increased school performance, and decreased emotional distress.

**Helping Friends** builds on the existing peer helping networks in schools to improve the availability, accessibility and appropriateness of social and personal support. It increases young people's knowledge of and access to referral options (in and out of school) and assists in the development of a safe and supportive school environment. The *Helping Friends* program is an adaptation of the *Natural Helpers* program (Comprehensive Health Education Foundation, 1997). It includes a program overview (describing the rationale and instructions for planning and implementing the program), a facilitator's manual (containing the program content and guidelines for presentation), participant workbooks (activity sheets and handouts used in the workshop) and CD ROM (PowerPoint presentation and templates for program documentation).

**The Suicide Intervention Project (SIP)** is a peer-based mental health promotion program, designed as a partnership between the University of Canberra, Australia and the YWCA of Canberra. It is based on a multi-layered peer education strategy that aims to use prevention and early intervention methods as a means of improving capacity to respond to suicide within the university community. Participants in the SIP are trained to recognise mental health problems in others, feel comfortable talking to other students about mental health issues, and have knowledge of mental health support services available to students. The SIP encourages students to talk more openly about feelings, particularly around suicide, and works to demystify mental health problems

## **References**

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