Overall aim

To develop comprehensive good practice guidelines and an evaluation toolkit for the development, management and evaluation of youth peer support programs which promote mental wellbeing.

Background and project rationale

Poor mental health is a major issue affecting young people and accounts for 50% of the disease burden in young Australians aged 12-25 years. Youth peer support programs have been used as an early intervention, mental health promotion strategy to promote mental wellbeing in vulnerable youth and to prevent complex mental health problems from developing. Youth peer programs aim to develop social support networks for youth who may lack friends or supportive peers and for marginalised youth who may not otherwise access help at all. Young people may find it easier to confide in trusted peers rather than access more conventional support services where they feel they may be judged or have concerns about the confidentiality of any information they divulge.

Community organisations are under increasing pressure to evaluate and demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs. Good evaluation data leads to more sustainable programs, better quality programs and also new programs being established more effectively. The barrier is that there is currently a lack of recognised and field tested good practice guidelines and evaluation approaches for youth peer programs, particularly those aimed at providing peer support for at risk youth in community settings.

The limited evaluation and evidence that is available in the sector relates to programs with a strong peer education focus (such as knowledge about drug use and safe sex) and within institutional settings such as schools. Traditional evaluation approaches, including pre- and post- intervention testing or questionnaires which require statistical analysis skills, are often inappropriate or unsustainable within community agencies operating with limited resources, reliant on variable volunteer skills and working with hard to reach populations.

The lack of a field tested, practical and theoretically grounded approach to the evaluation and development of youth peer programs has created a gap between theory and practice and threatens the continued funding and sustainability of youth peer programs.
Development and Evaluation Challenges

Evaluation and development is often perceived to be a time consuming activity that detracts limited resources from the core business of providing youth services. While national indicators for children’s health, development and wellbeing are available in many areas, indicators for social and emotional wellbeing still need to be developed. Making evaluation of youth peer programs for mental health promotion problematic. Suitable parameters for defining measurable objectives, outcomes and indicators for community youth peer programs need to be developed.

Another evaluation challenge is that there are mixed views on what constitutes ‘effectiveness’ of programs and to whom service providers should be accountable for the quality of their programs: the funding bodies, the young people who access the services or both? There is now a growing view that evaluations of program effectiveness should consider process indicators as well as performance against targets or impacts/outcomes within target populations. The process of working with and supporting youth may be equally important as the outcomes delivered. For example, the benefits for young people trained as peer leaders or facilitators in peer support programs have been well documented yet are not always reflected in the stated outcomes and objectives for peer programs.

A more participatory approach to service evaluation with active involvement of young people may provide a means of ensuring services remain responsive to the changing social contexts for youth without compromising the trust they have established with service users. This is consistent with the objectives of national initiatives such as headspace which seeks to involve young people in the design of more accessible, youth-friendly and youth-oriented mental health services.

Project Overview

The proposed MY-Peer project is a collaboration of four community agencies and four research centres working together to create a resource for the broader youth sector to develop, manage and evaluate peer support programs. It is anticipated that the final good practice guidelines and evaluation toolkit will include three main content areas:

- A. Guidelines for the design and implementation of peer support programs
- B. Evaluation framework and tools for peer support programs
- C. Sustainability guidelines for peer support programs in community settings

Each of these content areas is described further below:

A. Guidelines for the design and implementation of peer-based interventions for at risk youth

Design and implementation standards that are not context specific but likely to apply to all peer support programs will be developed and are expected to include:
• self care and resiliency for both trained peers and target group;
• facilitation of formal and informal peer group processes;
• supervision protocols for identifying individual support needs and skills development;
• boundary management for trained peers; and
• recruitment and training strategy and curriculum.

The design standards will have a focus on developing positive strengths-based interventions which build on young people’s strengths and identify what young people are doing well and should continue to do in order to promote mental wellbeing.

B. Evaluation framework and tools for peer-based programs

Traditional evaluation methods and tools have in the past often proved ineffective in working with difficult to reach target groups and unsustainable in many community-based organisations. The evaluation framework, guidelines and validated tools developed by the MY-Peer project will be:

• Adaptable - for use within different settings, with different at risk youth populations and with different types of peer-based programs;
• Simplified - data collection tools and protocols which are achievable by trained peers or agency staff and focus on risk and protective indicators, process and impact rather than large scale data collection approaches that are often impractical in outreach settings; and
• Sustainable - practical and realistic evaluation strategies for use by agencies with limited resources and inexperienced staff or volunteers working with difficult to reach groups.

C. Sustainability guidelines for community-based youth peer programs

Sustainability guidelines for youth peer programs are expected to include:

• effective referral processes through peer interaction;
• development and maintenance of healthy cultural norms;
• youth participation protocols;
• creating and maintaining a safe space;
• positioning of peer programs in relation to other youth support services; and
• infrastructure and management requirements for agencies hosting programs.

The proposed MY-Peer project is a collaboration of four community agencies and four research centres (see Table 1 and Table 2) committed to developing the guidelines and evaluation toolkit resource.

The project builds on the pilot work which looked at a way of developing reliable, practical and validated evaluation approaches and instruments that are adaptable to a range of contexts and can be used by community agencies who are working with limited resources and hard to reach populations.
Pilot work

Between March 2007-2008, pilot work funded by Healthway was conducted to trial the process of developing evaluation approaches and instruments for peer support programs. The pilot involved two agencies, Freedom Centre and Uniting Care West True Colours, which provide drop-in peer support services for youth of diverse gender and sexuality. Two young people from the target group were employed as peer research assistants and closely involved in the design and development of the evaluation approaches and instruments using a participatory action research process.

Discussions with agencies during the pilot work highlighted several barriers to evaluation:

- the lack of simple, practical and validated evaluation approaches and instruments;
- a focus by funders on service uptake and financial inputs and outputs rather than effectiveness of programs relating to process or outcomes;
- a limited understanding within agencies of what evaluation means beyond traditional evaluation approaches involving labour-intensive pre- and post-testing or lengthy surveys;
- a perception that evaluation can only be done by researchers or individuals with specialist skills and knowledge; and
- agencies being unsure how to use evaluation data for service improvements.

The agencies involved in the pilot work reported that low effort evaluation strategies that were quick to implement as part of normal program activities, for example focus group discussions, may be more sustainable and easier to implement than methods where evaluation is an additional task to do on already stretched resources. There was high engagement by young people in fun, novel and creative evaluation strategies; online surveys; and anonymous evaluation methods. Incentives may also have influenced youth participation. The involvement of peer research assistants was critical in developing youth friendly evaluation strategies. Overall, the pilot work demonstrated that a participatory action research process can be used to develop low effort, practical, youth friendly evaluation strategies and instruments.

The pilot work was conducted on informal drop-in spaces for same sex attracted youth. Both the approach and the tools developed need to be further developed, adapted and trialled within other program and youth contexts.

Selection of Peer Based Programs and Consortium Members for MY-Peer

Preliminary work by Brown et al (2007) developed a framework showing the wide diversity of peer-based approaches in health promotion (Figure 1). The framework also shows there is significant overlap between different peer-based approaches. The focus of this research will be programs run by community agencies which provide formal or informal peer support and informal peer education/influence (shaded areas on the right hand side of the model) rather than formal structured peer education programs run in schools for which adequate evaluation resources already exist.
A purposeful sampling approach has identified four community agencies in Western Australia providing peer support programs for young people aged 12-25 in which data will be collected. The agencies are Youth Focus (community non government organisation or NGO), Uniting Care West (faith-based NGO), WA AIDS Council Freedom Centre (community NGO) and Rockingham City Youth Services (government youth agency).

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to select the agency partners:

**Inclusion criteria.** Peer support programs provided by community agencies for young people aged 12-25 years; peer support programs used an early intervention mental health promotion strategy; informal peer support programs which aim to build supportive peer networks, reduce social isolation, increase resilience and coping skills, improve self confidence and self esteem, or improve help-seeking behaviour; peer support programs established for at least 12 months; programs which target a range of at risk youth or youth whose mental wellbeing may be at risk; programs representing different types of agencies including government, non-government organisations (NGOs) and church-affiliated; and different types of peer support programs which represent examples of the possible diversity of peer-based approaches within health promotion, for example drop-in centres, camps, structured skills-building programs groups and peer support groups.

**Exclusion criteria.** Peer education programs focused on transfer of knowledge including adolescent peer education programs for safe sex and drug use since extensive peer education resources already exist; school-based peer programs which have access to a wider range of evaluation opportunities and resources; therapeutic peer-based programs including self-help groups for addiction or group counseling which are not preventative but treatment-focused.
### Table 1: Summary of agency partners collaborating on research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency &amp; Program Description</th>
<th>Type of Peer Support Program</th>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>Program frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Youth Focus (community NGO)</strong></td>
<td>Peer group support weekends</td>
<td>Informal education and peer support</td>
<td>Youth at risk of depression, self harm or suicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uniting Care West (faith-based NGO)</strong></td>
<td>True Colours drop in centre</td>
<td>Informal drop in centre</td>
<td>Youth of diverse gender/sexuality in regional or rural areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Talking Realities</td>
<td>Informal peer support group and peer leader development</td>
<td>Teenage mums in Perth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WA AIDS Council (community NGO)</strong></td>
<td>Freedom Centre</td>
<td>Informal drop in centre</td>
<td>Youth of diverse gender/sexuality in Perth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rockingham City Youth Services (government agency)</strong></td>
<td>Gone Fishing!</td>
<td>Informal skills development and peer network development</td>
<td>Culturally or socially isolated youth, street present youth, youth out of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer Support Program</td>
<td>Young peer leaders recruited and trained to play a health promotion role within their peer group</td>
<td>14 to 15 year olds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YPAVE (Young pregnant and very excited)</td>
<td>Informal drop in peer support group</td>
<td>Pregnant girls and teenage mums in Rockingham</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Research centres involved in MY-Peer project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Centres</th>
<th>MY-Peer Consortium members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WA Centre for Health Promotion Research (WACHPR)</td>
<td>Roanna Lobo, Graham Brown, Bruce Maycock, Sharyn Burns, Alexandra McManus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre for Developmental Health (CDH)</td>
<td>Sven Silburn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Centre in Applied Psychology (ReCAP)</td>
<td>Clare Roberts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Drug Research Institute (NDRI)</td>
<td>Susan Carruthers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The current membership has been sustained for over 3 years and been maintained through staff changes within most agencies. This has demonstrated an organisational level commitment to the project that is not dependent on individual staff.

Other agencies have expressed interest in being part of the project and liaison with these agencies will be sustained in case current agencies need to withdraw from the trial/programs or funding are discontinued. Agencies include Perth Inner City Youth...
Services (Perth), Billy Dower Youth Centre (Mandurah), Arafmi - children of parents with a mental illness programs (Perth) and Headquarters Youth Centre (Leederville).

The continued support, input and involvement of the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) will be very important to advocate on behalf of at risk youth, and the agencies that provide peer programs to support them, for continued funding to build the community capacity (infrastructure, resources, capability) needed to ensure youth peer programs will be sustainable long term.

Preliminary discussions have also taken place with the Department for Communities Office for Youth and the Office of Mental Health. As primary funders of peer support programs, these organisations are key stakeholders for the MY-Peer project outputs.

Project Methodology

The project will adopt a similar but more comprehensive design to the pilot work and will involve three stages:

- **Stage 1 - Systematic review and environmental audit**: Review of evidence base associated with peer support programs, consolidation of current practice, needs analysis and sector engagement
- **Stage 2 - Participatory action research**: To develop, trial and validate good practice guidelines, evaluation approaches and instruments for peer support programs; and
- **Stage 3 - Consolidation of findings**: To develop overall guidelines, toolkit and validated instruments package for organisations conducting peer based programs in the community setting.

**Stage 1**

This stage will involve consolidating current best practice in peer support programs through a literature review and conducting a needs analysis within the partner agencies to determine what guidelines service providers need to develop, manage and evaluate peer support programs effectively. This stage will also include a workshop with the broader youth sector conducting peer support programs to engage with other agencies experiences and needs without them having to take on a full participation role throughout the project. It is proposed to conduct a 1 day workshop the day before the YACWA Annual Conference in October 2008 when there may be best access to the most diverse range of agencies from throughout Western Australia. This will be an opportunity to present the work to date and conduct a facilitated workshop on options, ideas, approaches before the commencement of the phase two trial phase.

**Stage 2**

During Stage 2, a participatory action research (PAR) process will involve MY-Peer agency staff/volunteers and young people to help design and develop the good practice guidelines identified during Stage 1. A PAR process has been selected for its ability to increase ownership of the final evaluation resources, develop evaluation skills and knowledge within community agencies, and to enable the sustainability of different evaluation approaches and instruments to be tested.
Each of the partner agencies will be asked to nominate 1-2 staff or volunteers to have detailed involvement and input in the design and development of the evaluation approaches and instruments. The project will work with nominated program staff/volunteers in the four programs to develop the evaluation framework and instruments.

Good practice guidelines will be trialled within the peer support programs over a 12 month period. It is assumed that at least two consecutive cycles of trial, validation and redevelopment of guidelines will be required within each program. The length of each action research cycle is likely to be between 8-12 weeks long, depending on the peer support program. Feedback at the end of each action research cycle will be used to inform any refinements needed before the next action research cycle. Field notes describing observations, implementation challenges and experiences will be recorded throughout the trial and validation process.

**Stage 3**

At the end of Stage 2, formal feedback from agencies participating in the PAR process will be collected. A nominal group technique will be used to enable agencies to rank approaches and instruments on a range of assessment parameters such as:

- Impact on service users
- Effect on program atmosphere and ambience
- Perceived sustainability of evaluation approaches
- Perceived usefulness of data collected
- Usefulness of process
- What worked well
- Implementation challenges
- Knowledge and skills (training/support) needed by program staff
- Time/resource commitments
- Acceptability to program staff
- Ease of adaptation to specific program contexts

Either another consultation workshop will be conducted at the 2010 YACWA conference and/or additional agencies will be invited to be part of the nominal groups process.

The results of the assessment will be used to identify what approaches worked well and what approaches or instruments proved to be unsuitable or could be improved. The findings will be consolidated and summarised. Further refinements to the approaches and instruments will be made as necessary.

**Sector engagement**

A key aspect of the project is to develop a resource that is not only useful but is seen by the sector as credible and has a sense of ownership within the sector. The MY-Peer consortium has been drawn from different contexts within the youth sector as well as including YACWA, the peak non government organisation for the youth sector in WA.

However to ensure the project has quality input from the sector beyond those agencies who will be more actively involved in the trial, and to build a momentum and interest
for the final products a number of engagement strategies are required throughout the project.

1. During the first phase, in collaboration with YACWA, it is proposed to conduct a 1 day workshop the day before the 2008 YACWA state conference (October) with agencies conducting peer support programs. This will be an opportunity to present the work to date and conduct a facilitated workshop on options, ideas, approaches before the commencement of the phase two trial phase.

2. During the project an online newsletter and website about the project, including updates on what is being trialled and progress to date. This will be linked to YACWA’s membership communications with links to the website, as well as other e-lists and promotional opportunities. The website will provide a vehicle for agencies to submit feedback concerning the project. Agencies will also be able to elect to receive updates directly from the project.

3. During the final phase, there is an opportunity to use a nominal group technique to obtain feedback from other sector representatives. There is also an opportunity to conduct another workshop during the 2010 YACWA Conference.

Table 3 provides a brief overview of the Project Stages and Tasks.

**Youth participation in project**

Throughout the MY-Peer project there will be opportunities for young people accessing or working in youth peer programs to join the project for short term internships as paid peer research assistants. Funding applications will include budget to employ peer research assistants. Peer research assistants will receive appropriate training and support as determined by their current skills, experience and personal goals.

WACHPR experience from other projects indicates that empowering young people to participate in this way has a number of benefits. Young people have an opportunity to develop research skills and work experience for longer term career benefits. The project also benefits from having direct access to a peer perspective for testing the validity and usability of the best practice standards and maintaining the integrity of the data.

**Dissemination**

The best practice standards and resources for community agencies will not require dedicated training before they can be used. The focus of the dissemination strategy will be to raise awareness of the standards and resources available amongst key representatives of community agencies who currently offer or would consider providing youth peer programs. Topics may include how the standards have been developed, who to contact for more information, appropriate usage of resource, help/support available, etc. It is envisaged that agencies will need to adapt aspects of
the resources and guidelines to their own contexts; the MY-Peer resources will be developed with this in mind to facilitate the translation process.

Initial ideas for dissemination of the findings include:

- electronic publications of all project outputs to be maintained on relevant websites accessible interstate and internationally;
- launch of the best practice standards and resources for peer-based interventions at a relevant conference or forum (e.g. YACWA Conference, World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health and the Prevention of Mental and Behavioral Disorders);
- distribution of project findings through local media, conference presentations, reports and refereed journal articles targeting the youth and health promotion sector;
- distribution of the MY-Peer best practice standards and resources to agencies conducting or planning youth peer programs;
- distribution of the MY-Peer best practice standards and resources to relevant funding bodies to assist in their support of peer based program grant applications;
- liaising with headspace™ Centre of Excellence in Education and Training in Melbourne to support the dissemination of the best practice standards and resources to their contacts and networks.

The overall aim of the MY-Peer project is very much aligned with headspace™ which aims to change the way mental health services for youth are delivered nationally by providing youth-friendly environments and improved accessibility. A particular focus is early identification and intervention for young people, aged 12-25 years, at risk of developing mental health problems, and those already showing early signs of mental health problems or associated drug and alcohol problems. The MY-Peer program has had preliminary discussions with the headspace™ Centre of Excellence in Education and Training in Melbourne to support the dissemination of the best practice standards and resources to their contacts and networks.

Ethics

The sampling methods, data management and consent procedures for the MY-peer project are consistent with NHMRC guidelines and have received ethics approval from Curtin University (SPH-0003-2008).
Table 3: Overview of Project Stages and Tasks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROJECT STAGES AND TASKS</th>
<th>A. Development of guidelines for the design and implementation of peer support programs</th>
<th>B. Trial and validate evaluation framework and tools for peer-based programs <em>Note: this stream will be substantially conducted within the Healthway PhD Scholarship, which has significantly reduced the required budget for the project</em></th>
<th>C. Development of sustainability guidelines for community-based youth peer programs</th>
<th>Sector engagement, input and dissemination strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Stage 1 Systematic review and environmental audit (Oct – Dec 2009) | - Literature review of approaches  
- Field observation/document review  
- Workshop with program coordinators | - Review pilot work findings  
- Analysis of behavioural theories  
- Field observation/document review  
- Evaluation workshops/barriers to evaluation | - Field observation/document review  
- Literature review of approaches  
- Workshop with program coordinators | - Newsletter regarding project  
- Consultation workshop at Youth Affairs Council of WA (October 2008) |
| Stage 2 Participatory action research (Jan – Jun 2009) | - Develop and trial strengths-based approach for promoting mental well-being in at risk youth; training, development, supervision and support strategies for peer program staff | - Design and development of evaluation approaches and instruments informed by existing scales, literature review and pilot work  
- Reliability and validity testing  
- Trial and validation of a range of qualitative and quantitative instruments  
- Two consecutive action research cycles | - Document infrastructure and relationship to other support services;  
- trial youth participation protocols;  
- review and evaluate approaches to creating and maintaining a safe space | - Produce online newsletter updates for sector  
- Maintain a high level of liaison and collaboration with participating agencies |
## Project Stages and Tasks

### A. Development of guidelines for the design and implementation of peer support programs

- Nominal group technique to assess guidelines etc

### B. Trial and validate evaluation framework and tools for peer-based programs

- Consolidate the measurable outcomes and indicators; evaluation strategies; validated tools and instruments
- Nominal group technique to assess evaluation framework and instruments

### C. Development of sustainability guidelines for community-based youth peer programs

- Nominal group technique to assess guidelines

### Sector Engagement, Input and Dissemination Strategy

- Conduct workshop and/or other consultation and feedback processes including nominal technique
- Identification of similarities and differences across agencies and

### Stage 3: Consolidation of Findings (Jul – Sept 2009)

- Nominal group technique to assess guidelines etc

### Post Lotteries and PhD Funding to be Undertaken by WACHPR and YACWA

- Media for dissemination; sector bodies for dissemination; conference presentations; journal articles; sector training pilot
**Estimated budget**

Table 3: Estimated budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget item</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 x Project Coordinator ALA06</td>
<td>$83,808 (1FTE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 x Peer Researchers G01(3)</td>
<td>$29,244 (2 x 0.3FTE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary costs include all personnel and staff on-costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel and project running costs including:</td>
<td>$3,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YACWA 2008 workshop – room hire, catering, contribution for some participants accommodation for extra night.</td>
<td>$1000 – room hire and catering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$500 – accommodation (4 delegates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project website</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total funding sought for Stages 1-3 of MY-Peer project</strong></td>
<td><strong>$118,812</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional items to consider</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YACWA 2010 workshop (as part of Stage 3) – same costs as 2008 workshop.</td>
<td>$1000 – room hire and catering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$500 – accommodation (4 delegates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional travel costs</td>
<td>$300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total additional budgetary items</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,800</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For further information on the MY-Peer project proposal, please contact Roanna Lobo or Graham Brown at the WA Centre for Health Promotion Research (WACHPR), School of Public Health, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845.

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References