

# **3 | CONCEPTUALIZING & STRUCTURING THE YOUNG ADULT PEER ROLE IN YOUR AGENCY**

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## CONCEPTUALIZING AND STRUCTURING THE ROLE

**It is essential that your agency know what you want “peer support” to look like in your context and that you review what peer support looks like as it rolls out at your agency.** In the beginning, a steering committee should meet at least monthly to discuss issues that arise with the integration of YA peers. After a year, this meeting can happen quarterly.

**Consider sustainability early on.** What kinds of funding do you have or need in order to support this role? Some states fund individuals with Certified Peer Support credentialing – will your agency expect young adults to have this when hired – or can they earn credentials while employed as a YA peer?

**Establish key elements of the YA peer role in your context first.** These do not need to be set in stone, but they need to be considered in order for YA peers to be successful:

- How many peers does your agency aim to integrate? (At least two YA peers are important for infusing YA peer perspectives at your agency.)
- Consider the valuable kinds of life experiences (past and present) that YA peers should have in your context in order to fulfill the “peer” role.
- What other commitments, especially work, school, volunteer, caretaking responsibilities, will be of value in the YA peer role? What treatment and life experiences, types of mental health conditions, and system involvement (past and present) are of value for those in the YA peer role?
- How many hours will YA peers work each week? Will this be uniform across YA peers or negotiable on an individual basis?
- Who will supervise the YA peers, administratively and/or clinically? You want to identify a staff member who enjoys working with young adults and is motivated to champion the integration of the YA peer role.
- Develop social media & relationship policies (see chapter 9). Establish if the client YA peer/client relationship can or should last beyond the professional connection established at your agency.

**Consider how your agency will match young adult peer providers to young adult clients.**

Integrate choice and flexibility as much as possible in the client-YA peer matching process. Clients should have the opportunity to choose which YA peer they want to work with. (This is why it is important to have more than one YA peer at your agency.) Consider how YA client - YA-peer relationships can develop more “naturally” through agency group activities or events. Recognize

that not every young person will enjoy and/or benefit from peer support. Develop a clear protocol for how YA clients are referred to and matched to YA peers. If a client is not interested in YA peer services at enrollment, providers should suggest connecting with a YA peer at key times when the client needs multiple perspectives to make a decision or when demonstrating anxiety about the future and their recovery.

**Discuss how much of the time YA peer-client interactions should be spent specifically on client goals that are part of an established treatment plan.** For example, in our project developing YA peer employment specialists, we suggested that between 25-40% of meetings should be spent on vocational topics because the goals of the interaction were to support engagement in work and/or school. It is important to recognize that sometimes less time will be spent on achieving treatment goals during meetings, and that is okay. New YA peers may be frustrated with not being able to keep their YA clients “focused” on the tasks at hand. Remind YA peers that engagement is a journey and that their interactions with clients take place on a continually shifting continuum of disclosure, validation, and understanding. In theory, the bond that forms through the communication process between a YA peer and YA client is important for achieving outcomes. Thus, focusing more on the “bond” or “alliance” than on the outcome may be a helpful approach for YA peers who do not see the change in their clients that they desire/believe is possible.

**Determine where peer support happens.** Will YA peers work on-site and/or off-site? What percentage of the time will be on-site and off-site? Oftentimes, young people do not want to meet in a mental health clinic setting, but rather in the community. Ensure that YA peers are able to travel to meet YA clients and if possible, set aside money in the program budget for peer support to happen over a cup of coffee at a local coffee shop. Community integration is key for young people. It opens up the possibility of risk (e.g., risk of confidentiality loss), but it will increase the likelihood that the YA peer and YA client connect and continue connecting.

**Determine how much peer support mimics other team member activities with the YA client.** Peer support and other team member activities (e.g., therapy and case management) should complement, not undermine each other. Communication among team members is necessary in order to ensure that the YA peer role is differentiated from other non-peer staff roles. Billing codes will often dictate what types of activities each role will have with a YA client. Thus, sometimes YA peers may be responsible for activities that non-peer professionals are not able to bill for. As such, it’s helpful to simply be aware of what each member on the team is responsible for. Clarifying the peer role is a process at each individual agency.

**Minimize YA peer role confusion.** Confusion about the YA peer role within an agency can create on-the-job stigma towards the YA peer. The young adult peer role takes on different forms depending on the agency’s service design and culture, the needs and characteristics of young adult clients, and the experience and approach of the young adult peer. Most often, young adult peers take on the role of supporter, mentor, advocate, service engager, navigator, and service provider. Confusion about the young adult peer role can exist on multiple levels, including (but not limited to):

- YA peers being confused about their role and day-to-day job duties.
- YA peers supervisors being confused about their role as a YA peer supervisor as well as the YA peers role at the agency.
- Other staff, especially non-peer staff, being confused about the YA peer role and what their interactions with YA peers should look like. From an administrative level, the role of the YA peer appears clear: that a young person will provide support to young adult clients to enhance their recovery and personal goal attainment. But how the role is established at your agency is where it can become confusing. In order to avoid YA peer role confusion:
  - Define specific responsibilities of the peer role and refine these responsibilities systematically using a steering committee with varying stakeholders (e.g., including YA peers, their supervisors, human resource specialists, and non-peer staff ).
  - Write a clear YA peer job description (see chapter 5).
  - Have a kickoff where the YA peer role is explained clearly.
  - Incorporate a description of the YA peer role and how the role enhances agency culture and client outcomes in the agency’s new employee orientation.

## CONSIDERATION OF RELATIONAL BOUNDARY ISSUES

*“She understands where I am coming from and I understand where she is coming from.”*  
 (Participant in Vocational Peer Mentor Study at Thresholds<sup>xxi</sup>)

To some extent mutuality must exist for peer support to work. Peer support is based on the idea that if both the client and peer provider are authentic in revealing, discussing, and reacting to each other’s lived experiences, there will be an immense benefit for both parties involved. Based on empirical data, Spencer and colleagues (2006)<sup>xxii</sup> theorize that collaboration, empathy, authenticity, and (perhaps scariest for non-peer providers) “companionship,” are key relational processes in peer support transactions. In this regard, providers must recognize that the “client” role will sometimes shift closer to the “helper” role. It feels good to help. And, part of the healing process in many cultures and treatment philosophies is the act of giving and helping.

When providers are considering employing young adult peers, their greatest concern is the assumed risk of young people’s inability to manage mutual relationships and “relational boundaries.”

Having this fear is not necessarily negative (as it is important to explore fears associated with any new practice that aims to improve the lives of our clients). Rather, it’s asking “why” does it make our toes curl to think about young adults with lived mental health experiences provide support to other young adults? As an agency, acknowledge this fear by creating opportunities for staff to process their perspectives. Teach staff about the unique features of YA peer-client relationships, which include: collaboration, empathy, authenticity, trust, and companionship, <sup>xxiii</sup> as well as mutuality. Even with mutuality in YA peer-client relationships, YA peers can learn to and establish clear relational boundaries.

It is very important to understand that in all peer support, but perhaps more so with young adult

peer support, the extent to which the relational boundaries are clarified. Within your agency, draft policies about the key aspects of healthy relationships for all staff to adhere to. For YA peers, ensure that these policies are introduced during orientation, and that the YA peer supervisor and new YA peers process them together. Ideally, after reviewing these policies, the YA peer should sign a commitment letter acknowledging relationship guidelines. These should be reviewed systematically in supervision – at least quarterly.

### **General Guidelines:**

1. Limits to mutuality must be clearly defined in agency policies and practice. For instance, prohibiting sexual relationships between young adult peers and clients should be established early on. However, it should be recognized that it is not abnormal if a young adult peer has romantic thoughts about or is physically aroused by a client, and it is something a young adult peer should not be ashamed of. Rather, it is an important topic to discuss with one's supervisor in order to put safeguards in place.
2. Managing young adult peer provider-client relational boundaries gets tricky in small towns and neighborhoods as peer provider and client social networks likely will overlap. Young adult peer providers (with the support of their supervisor) must discuss the potential for community encounters and inquire with the client as to how they prefer to describe their relationship. Supervisors should encourage young adult peer providers to tell them when they run into clients in the community during off-hours so that this remains a regular topic during supervision. By doing so, peer providers and supervisors can continually address the somewhat awkward and confusing moments where neither the client nor the peer mentor wanted to be outed as to their affiliation with a mental health organization.
3. Establishing boundaries and rules around the online relationship of young adult peer providers and clients is necessary. Messaging on social media websites like Facebook and Instagram are a primary mode of young adult communication. **Each agency will have a different policy on social media interactions and it is important that these policies are reviewed with young adult peer providers and young adult clients.** If there are no policies for online communication, then, as a team, discuss and document rules for online communication. For young adults, transparency is key.

**Real Life Example. Managing Relational Boundaries.** Tania was a bubbly, new, and very motivated vocational peer mentor who reported that at a family reunion on a Sunday afternoon, she was on the phone with a client for over 2 hours. She reported this proudly, “I really got through to her. She was a mess.” I carefully probed around where she took the call, why she took it, what it demonstrated to her client, and how she as the peer personally felt during and after the call. We brainstormed as a group how to respond to this in the future in order to support healthy communication and preserve personal wellness. However, Tania felt important to get a call on the weekend – that someone needed her immediate help. And, by taking the call, it allowed her family to observe her working, which was personally meaningful to Tania. It is necessary to process and understand why communication is happening at times between clients and peers that might make a traditional mental health practitioner uncomfortable – and then to explore what makes the most sense for supporting a healthy working alliance between peers and their clients.

Texting is a primary communication method for young adults. In our experience, texting is a major engagement tool for young adult peer providers. However, this can be taxing on a young adult peer provider if a best practice for texting is not established early on in the YA peer-client relationship. Texting practices will vary from agency to agency. We suggest developing a simple document to guide conversation about texting etiquette in your setting. Also, if young adult peer providers are texting and calling their clients, their cell phone bills should be in part covered by the agency. Depending on a cell phone plan, it may be difficult to determine how many minutes/data is used for work. In that case, it may make sense for YA peers to have a separate cell phone for work.