Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu: Peer Support Fact Sheet for Schools

This fact sheet provides an overview of peer support and information about how schools can implement peer support programs or purchase related services, programs, or professionals from the Schools Mental Health Menu (the Menu).

This fact sheet complements the Schools Mental Health Planning Tool, which provides a framework to simplify schools' decision-making process when planning their mental health and wellbeing interventions from the Menu.

Background

For most people, mental health issues emerge when they are young and often a student in education.

Half of all mental disorders emerge by the time people are 14 years old and three quarters by 25 years old.

While the burden of supporting students' mental health should not fall on other students, young people can at times be reluctant to seek professional help and may instead disclose to friends or peers. Students can therefore play an important role in the help-seeking process for other students.

Peer support is an important Tier one category in the Menu.

Tier One Supports

- focus on positive mental health promotion
- assist schools to implement universal interventions, creating a positive, inclusive, and supportive school climate
- build the preconditions for optimal student learning, development, and wellbeing.

Program Choice

Schools may choose from several structured peer support programs on the Menu. These include:

- Live4Life
- Reach School Workshops
- Teen Mental Health First Aid
- The Young Carer Project
- Youth and Teen Mental Health First Aid (Central Highlands).

What is peer support and how is it beneficial?

Peer support refers to the help that people with similar lived experiences can provide to each other.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System delivered several recommendations to the Victorian government as one of the core functions of services and supports for mental health treatment and care.

Peer support may also be called peer mentoring, befriending, or buddying. There are multiple benefits to a well-implemented peer support program, including:

Reduced Stigma

Young people may hesitate to seek professional help due to stigma. Peer support can reduce anxiety, increase help seeking and destigmatise mental ill health.

Increased Connection

Peer support can help students increase social connections, develop a sense of community, reduce feelings of isolation, and improve feelings of group belonging.

Social inclusion and connection are strong protective factors against mental ill health.

Improved Self-Efficacy

Young people, particularly adolescents, seek opportunities to express their identity and drive their own wellbeing. Peer support can empower students as they receive encouragement and hope from friends.

Increased Likelihood of Disclosure

Young people share common experiences, making peers a relatable and trustworthy confidant. This may be more pronounced for young people from diverse backgrounds and underrepresented communities such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and LGBTIQA+ students.

When conditions are safe for disclosure, students are more likely to seek help.

Improved Mental Health Literacy and Emotional Regulation

Supporting a friend can help young people to improve their mental health literacy and ability to access resources for themselves and others.

This leads to an increase in self-awareness and regulation of emotions, which can have a positive impact on behaviour.

Key features of a peer support program

Schools may allocate their Schools Mental Health Fund (Fund) to purchase peer support programs from the Menu. These programs provide a range of services for students and staff to build their capability in supporting student wellbeing and mental health.

Schools may also choose to employ staff to assist with peer support programs. The Schools Mental Health Skills Checklist outlines the key activities, minimum required qualifications and professional registrations that mental health professionals need to be employed. Schools can also use the Fund to release staff to attend training or support implementation of peer support programs.

Schools are encouraged to consider the following features when implementing peer support programs.

At the school level

✓ Develop clear policies and processes to ensure that peer support programs are run safely, considering:

- how the program is structured
- who provides supervision and how
- who participates during sessions (students and staff)
- how peer support leaders are regularly trained, supported, and assessed
- how peer support leaders are regularly monitored for impact of the role on their own mental health
- how participating staff are regularly trained, supported, and assessed
- what to do when students disclose mental ill health
- when and how to refer students to specialised services or professionals
- department mental health and wellbeing programs and interventions for students and staff, such as the Mental Health and Wellbeing Toolkit.

✓ Align programs with existing mental health and wellbeing programs and interventions

✓ Take a community-driven and strengths-based approach to increase mental health literacy, reduce stigma, and develop strong connections

✓ Designate wellbeing staff to embed, monitor and evaluate the program and provide them with time, learning, and resources

✓ Encourage student voice by using department tools Amplify or the Inclusive Student Voice Toolkit

✓ Ensure programs comply with the Child Safe Standards

✓ Promote resources that help school staff to respond to child safety issues

- Identifying and Responding to All Forms of Abuse in Victorian Schools
- Four Critical Actions for Schools.

At the staff level

✓ If you are concerned for a student's mental health or wellbeing, follow your school processes for making a referral to the wellbeing team. The wellbeing team can work with the student and, where appropriate, parents and carers to determine if support is needed

✓ If you become aware of an incident, receive a disclosure or form a reasonable belief that a child has been abused or is at risk of abuse, you must follow all procedures for responding to and reporting abuse, including the Four Critical Actions for Schools. Seek immediate support from a school leader if it is urgent or call 000 if there is immediate risk of harm to the student

✓ Assess student needs and ensure the peer support program builds student capability across topics of need

✓ Engage in professional learning to build knowledge and confidence. Share knowledge with colleagues and peer support leaders

✓ Model positive mental health practices to students.

At the student level

✓ Work with school staff and peers to develop and monitor peer support programs

✓ Participate in programs as a peer or leader, and engage in ongoing training, support, and supervision

✓ If you are worried about a friend's mental health, it is essential that you speak to a trusted adult. It is one of the best ways to look after them, even if you promised not to tell anyone. In serious situations, telling a trusted adult and getting help may be the only way for your friend to get better. Tell an adult if a friend:

- tells you they are self-harming, or if you think they might be
- is unsafe at home, work, or another activity, like sport
- has a plan to complete suicide or has talked about completing suicide.

✓ Visit the Students Mental Health and Wellbeing Toolkit for a range of advice on how to look after your own mental health and wellbeing, how you can support a friend, and where to get help

✓ If you or anyone you know needs immediate help, call emergency services on 000.

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