The power of peer work: An evaluation of ReachOut's PeerChat service

REACHOUT

Contents

We acknowledge the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present. We recognise connection to Country as integral to health and wellbeing.

We also acknowledge people with lived and living experience of mental ill-health and recovery, along with their carers, families and supporters. We value the courage of those who share their unique perspectives for the purpose of learning and growing together to achieve better outcomes for all. We recognise their vital contribution to the sector and to the development of ReachOut's services.

Executive summary

[ReachOut PeerChat](#) is an online, peer-led chat service designed to support young people who are facing mental health concerns and everyday challenges. This report summarises a 2024 developmental evaluation of the service. The evaluation demonstrates that ReachOut PeerChat is achieving significant positive outcomes that are consistent with its intended goals.

The evaluation also highlights the unique and important role of peer work in the mental health sector. It demonstrates that lived experience is a powerful facilitator of validation and motivation that can encourage positive reframing and behaviour change.

ReachOut PeerChat is constantly evolving in response to user feedback, changing user needs and new technologies. The evaluation supports this ongoing service development by highlighting the need to balance the iterative nature of digitally delivered services with the personalised, considered approach that is essential in mental health service delivery.

> 'I feel hopeful and supported. I feel I have a safe place to [open up]. I feel I can come to this [service] before resorting to harmful means. I can use these strategies … and overcome challenges which previously, I wouldn't have had the right tools for.'
>
> **(2024 Annual User Survey)**
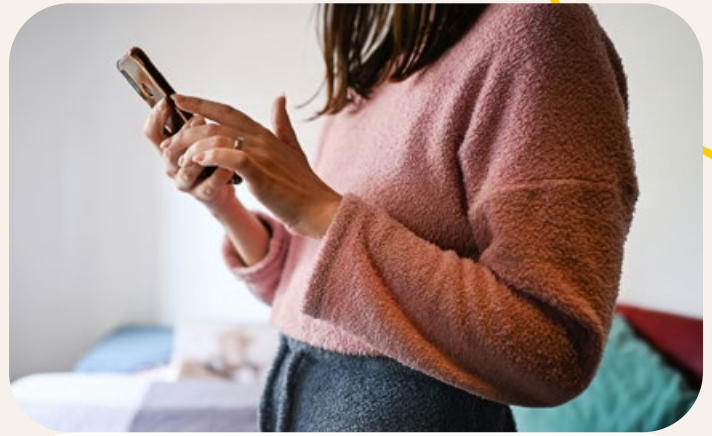
Case study: Rena*

Rena was drawn to PeerChat when she felt she needed support during a stressful time but was reluctant to see a psychologist. She found herself able to open up to the peer worker, whose similar life experiences created understanding and trust. The coping tips the peer worker shared with Rena resonated with her and she continued to use them for three months after her PeerChat session.

Immediate outcomes for Rena **after the chat:**

- She had shared with someone for the first time about an experience that was troubling her.
- She gained relief from negative feelings.
- She felt less alone in her experience.

Intermediate outcomes for Rena **in the following months:**

- She continued to use the positive coping skills she had learnt.
- She had greater self-awareness and self-acceptance.

'Because it was over text, I felt more comfortable that way. The little description about the person I was talking to was great … They mentioned they had [had a similar experience]. I think she [the peer worker] could sense I was a bit hesitant and she helped guide me … By the end of it, I was really opening up. During the chat, she shared some suggestions [for] things she does [in order] to cope when she feels similarly to what I'm feeling. When[ever] I start to feel like that [stressed] again, I [still] use the tips she shared.'

*Name has been changed.
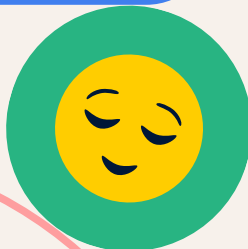
Introduction

Overview of ReachOut PeerChat

ReachOut PeerChat provides real-time support for young people aged 16–25 who are looking for someone to speak to about their mental health challenges or everyday concerns that are causing them distress. The service connects young people to peer workers through a text-based platform, where they can chat anonymously using a made-up name. Peer workers are young people themselves who have undergone training to support users. They are able to offer support by purposefully sharing their own lived experience of mental health challenges and recovery and of navigating early adulthood.

PeerChat offers free and confidential sessions lasting up to 45 minutes. A young person seeking support is required to book a session with a peer worker in advance[1]. The service has not been designed to offer ongoing support. Each session is one-off. However, users are encouraged to make additional bookings if needed. PeerChat has been designed to be accessible and anonymous, and to promote a judgement-free space where no issue is 'too big or too small'. The service is informed by the ReachOut Model of Care, the PeerChat Duty-of-Care Framework, the National Framework for Recovery-Oriented Mental Health Services and the Trauma-Informed Care Model.

Purpose of the evaluation

This was the first evaluation of PeerChat since it was launched in September 2022. The evaluation sought to assess the effectiveness of the service and to identify areas for improvement. Conducted by ReachOut's internal Research and Social Impact team, the evaluation sought to understand the experiences and outcomes for both service users and peer workers in order to inform future service design, delivery and scaling. The evaluation adopted a developmental and realist approach, focusing on supporting innovation and capturing both immediate and intermediate outcomes.

[1] The service has now transitioned to allow young people either to connect immediately to a peer worker or to join a queue and wait for a peer worker to become available.

The evaluation was guided by five overarching questions covering the following areas of focus:

Experience and outcomes: How do peer workers' experiences and the outcomes for users compare with expectations for the service?

Audience: How successful is the service in engaging the intended audience?

Peer worker experiences: Is the service enabling peer workers to deliver user outcomes?

Model fidelity: How closely do the operations align with the stated service model?

Scaling and development: How far has ReachOut's understanding and implementation of a peer-led service developed and evolved?

Methodology

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collected between June and October 2024. Ethical approval was obtained for conducting the Annual User Survey, as well as for interviews with users and peer workers.

Data sources used in the evaluation include:

Service documents	These included Scope of Service, evidence reviews and procedures.
Service usage data	Session metrics included number of sessions and de-identified user demographics.
ReachOut's 2024 Annual User Survey	Recruited via the ReachOut website, the survey included open and closed questions about the service (n=44–50).
PeerChat post-session survey	Responses to closed and open-ended feedback questions were collected in 2023–24 (n=421–590).
User interviews	Users who opted in to take part in this research following their session were interviewed on a text-based platform, which allowed asynchronous chat in real time (n=10).
Peer worker interviews	The responses of peer workers who opted in to take part were kept private from their managers and team. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom (n=7).
Stakeholder consultations	Representatives from cross-functional aspects of the service were selected to be invited to take part in a semi-structured interview (n=9).
De-identified session transcripts	Quality assurance scanning was carried out for user outcomes (n=74).

[**Limitations:** PeerChat's anonymous, unstructured model has some natural limitations for capturing young people's experiences. Outcomes evidence gathered in the evaluation relied primarily on PeerChat users opting to complete surveys or interviews. This potentially over-represented more engaged or satisfied individuals.]

Findings

Service user outcomes

Young people **described experiencing the following positive outcomes** during their PeerChat sessions:

- **Reduced distress:** Reduced negative feelings were often linked to users having a safe space to share where they felt heard by a peer who understood them.

- **Feeling less alone in their feelings and experiences:** Users described feeling validated and reassured that what they were feeling was okay. They said they found comfort in knowing that others could relate to or understand them.

Validated
Reassured
Safe
Heard
Understood

'The person who had taken her time to help me and understand me was very helpful, as I felt like I was actually being recognised as a person ... Although there wasn't enough time, she still managed to make me feel better than I did before.'

(Post-session survey)

'[The peer worker] was really great at helping me feel like I wasn't alone in what I am feeling and validated the way I am reacting to the situation.'

(Post-session survey)

More than 4 in 5 PeerChat users (86%) reported experiencing at least one positive outcome during their session[2], including:

- **Increased confidence in discussing difficult issues:** Nearly three quarters (70%) of users were able to open up about their worries, as a result of the accessible, anonymous and supportive environment created through the chat, with some users sharing difficult concern(s) for the first time.

- **Building confidence in their own agency:** More than half of users reported learning (53%) or co-developing (55%) self-help strategies, with many saying they intended to try something new or to make a change. Peer workers focus on empowering users to recognise their own expertise and to determine what might work best for them. This often resulted in users leaving the session having identified their own strategies for moving forward.
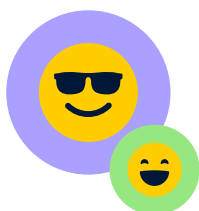
'I've tried therapy in the past and it was hard for me to open up properly. Because it's so expensive it would be a waste if I spent that much money and didn't even say the things I wanted to. PeerChat was great when I needed someone just to talk [to] and [to] feel understood and heard.'

(User interview)

'I was unsure of why I was feeling the way I was feeling until after the chat ... Then it became a bit clearer to me. I kind of came to that conclusion myself, but I feel they [the peer worker] supported me in keeping me on track. [After the chat] I was able to talk about what we had talked about to other people, since I now had a clearer idea of what I wanted.'

(User interview)

[2] ReachOut Annual User Survey (*n*=47–50).

Upon completion of a PeerChat session, **users are immediately asked how they feel.** Of those who responded to the post-session questions:

74% of users reported feeling **a little or a lot better** after their chat. Feeling better was often due to having a **safe space** to get things off their chest, and to share thoughts with someone 'on their level' whom many described as encouraging and kind.
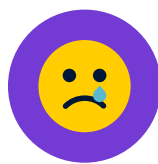
8% of users reported feeling **a little or a lot worse after their chat.** Feeling worse was often due to **misaligned expectations** of what the service offers, constraints on what can be achieved in one session, and (in some instances) challenges in 'connecting' with the peer worker.

'I was feeling so lost [and] afraid, and this helped so much. No judgements. I feel so relieved right now.'

(Post-session survey)

'I felt like the person in the chat didn't fully understand how I felt … [Their] responses were very robotic and didn't help [me].'

(Post-session survey)

Service users reported experiencing a range of outcomes following their chat session. In some cases, the benefits of using PeerChat were found to translate into sustained behavioural changes for weeks or months following the chat. **Intermediate outcomes following the chat included:**

53%

Increased engagement with other mental health services: More than half of users (53%) had tried other sources of mental health support following their session. Peer workers felt that speaking openly about their own lived experience could reduce the stigma around mental health and encourage users of the PeerChat service to access other mental health services. The evaluation found that PeerChat is regularly being used in tandem with other mental health support. Some regular users described using the service to help them process their sessions with a clinician, or to build on their sessions to explore how they might approach a goal they are working on.

Increased confidence to open up to others: Nearly half of users (47%) reported feeling better able to talk to others about their worries. Some users said they were planning to share their thoughts and feelings with their parents or with someone else they trusted at the end of their chat. Some described how peer workers supported them to put their thoughts and feelings into words and to better articulate what was going on for them.

47%

57%

Using self-help strategies and tips on an ongoing basis: More than half of users (57%) said that, since using PeerChat, they had tried the tips a peer worker had shared with them.

Shifting their perspective and reframing experiences: Being helped to learn how to reframe and change the way they thought about their circumstances eased feelings of distress when issues or worries resurfaced for users after their PeerChat session.

'PeerChat gave me an opportunity to express the struggles I faced. They [peer workers] helped me [to] realise that school is not the be-all or end-all. School didn't feel as crippling. It [PeerChat] gives people hope for the future ... that's for sure.'

(User interview)
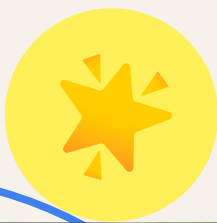
Case study: Nate*

Nate was drawn to PeerChat because he wanted to hear from people with similar experiences to his own. He has used the service multiple times. He identified the following immediate outcomes **after a chat:**

- relief from negative feelings
- feeling less alone in his experiences.

Nate also identified the following intermediate outcomes **in the months following a chat:**

- feeling more confident about sharing his feelings with others
- making use of the positive coping skills he had learnt
- having greater self-awareness and compassion for himself.

'I wanted to share a traumatic experience anonymously; I couldn't talk to my family. I've found it really helpful, especially because the peers were non-judgemental. Since they're peers, they felt more relatable, and, unlike friends, they were unbiased, which made it easier to open up. I still keep them [the resources provided] in a folder and refer back to them when I need to. It gave me a new perspective, which helped me feel more confident to talk to others. Over time, I slowly opened up to friends and learned to reduce my overthinking and ground myself, which has helped me move on.'

*Name has been changed.

Intervention activities embedded in chat sessions

The evaluation included examination of the intervention activities (or processes) occurring in chat sessions, initiated by both peer workers and users. The most commonly occurring intervention activities found were validation of users' feelings and experiences, validation of users' agency, providing encouragement and exploring new perspectives.

The following key service activities were linked to positive outcomes:

Providing validation: Active listening and affirming how users described their feelings about their experiences led many to feel heard and understood. Affirming users' strengths was also used to encourage users to reflect on their individual agency and capabilities in a situation. Validation offered by a peer with shared experience was found to enhance the credibility of the support and to provide a more compelling perspective.

Exploring new perspectives: Peer workers guide users to explore their experiences and circumstances to support them in gaining clarity on what may be contributing to their feelings. While peer workers do not offer advice or direction, they will share their perspectives through validation and supporting users to reflect on and to generate their own approaches to situations they have faced.

Encouraging young people to open up: Building rapport to establish trust and connection was found to put users at ease and to help them feel comfortable to share what is on their mind. Peer workers also reiterate that the chat is free of judgement, and uses supportive prompts and questions to encourage young people to reflect on and share various aspects of their experiences.

Sharing lived experience: Purposefully sharing their lived experience and personal perspectives is a fundamental part of peer work that was found to deliver strong value to users. It did this by helping many users to feel less alone in terms of what they feel and have experienced, by fostering trust, and by enhancing the credibility of suggestions shared by peer workers who relate to and genuinely understand them. Peer workers share their individual experiences selectively, and only when they are relevant and helpful to the user/young person they are supporting. Even when peer workers did not have experience with the challenges raised by users, many users found value in hearing how peer workers managed similar emotions in different scenarios. For example, a peer worker supported a user who was in a toxic relationship by discussing strategies for coping with self-doubt, which the user found helpful.

'If people are expressing hopelessness or saying "nothing is going to work for me" ... I can say "You know, I have felt that way, but for me it was a matter of finding the right service or the right approach or the right type of therapy." So, sometimes lived experience can be useful in [promoting] hope.'
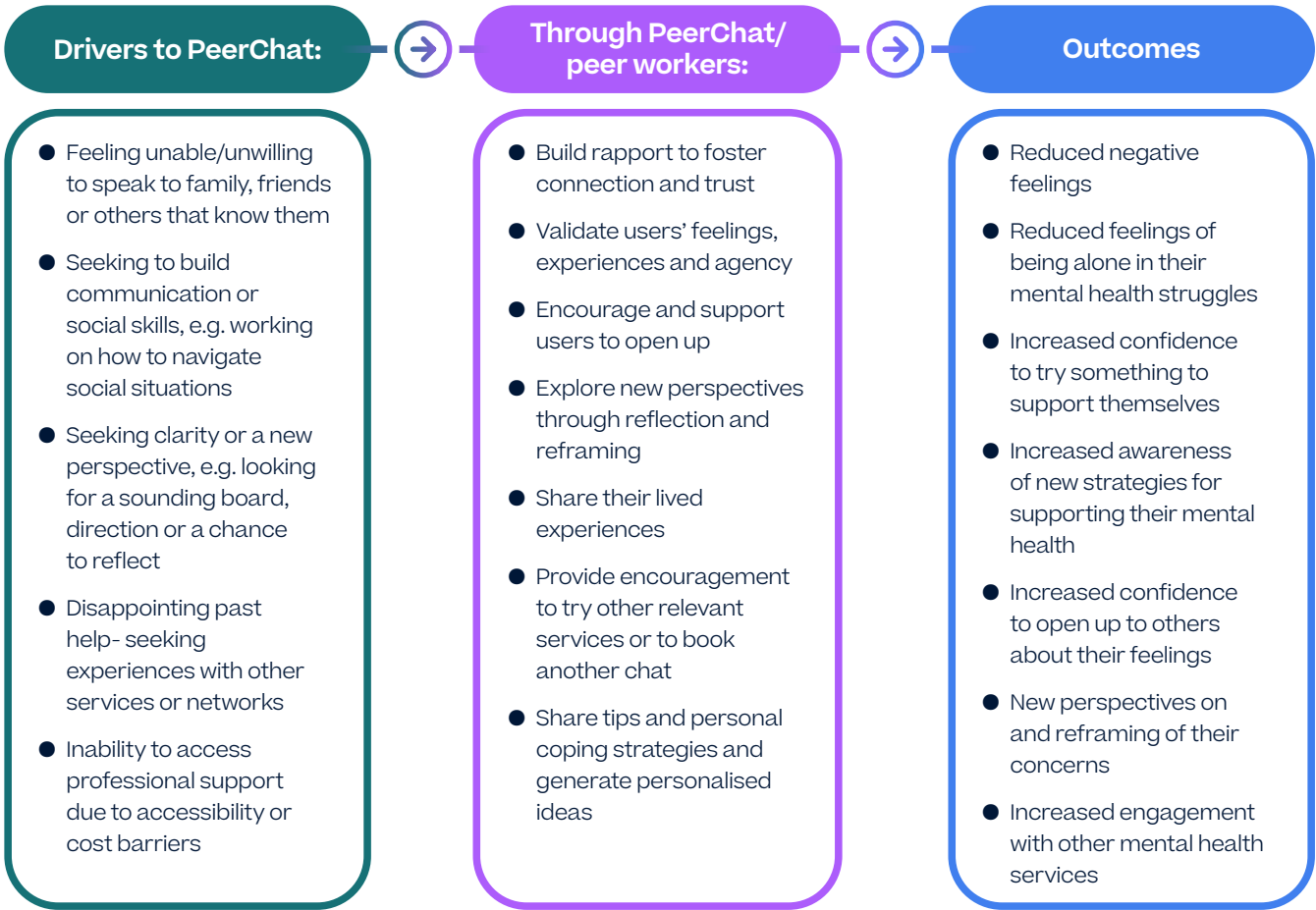
(Peer worker interview)

'If they just want to talk about rocks for 45 minutes, I'm so down for that. Those chances are just as important as ones where you're talking someone down [off] the ledge, because that's preventative.'

(Peer worker interview)

Table 1 summarises the key drivers, processes and outcomes of ReachOut PeerChat.

Table 1 Key drivers, processes and outcomes of ReachOut PeerChat

Drivers to PeerChat:	Through PeerChat/ peer workers:	Outcomes
• Feeling unable/unwilling to speak to family, friends or others that know them	• Build rapport to foster connection and trust	• Reduced negative feelings
• Seeking to build communication or social skills, e.g. working on how to navigate social situations	• Validate users' feelings, experiences and agency	• Reduced feelings of being alone in their mental health struggles
• Seeking clarity or a new perspective, e.g. looking for a sounding board, direction or a chance to reflect	• Encourage and support users to open up	• Increased confidence to try something to support themselves
• Disappointing past help-seeking experiences with other services or networks	• Explore new perspectives through reflection and reframing	• Increased awareness of new strategies for supporting their mental health
• Inability to access professional support due to accessibility or cost barriers	• Share their lived experiences	• Increased confidence to open up to others about their feelings
	• Provide encouragement to try other relevant services or to book another chat	• New perspectives on and reframing of their concerns
	• Share tips and personal coping strategies and generate personalised ideas	• Increased engagement with other mental health services

Key factors supporting positive user outcomes

The following key factors were identified as integral to supporting positive outcomes for users of the service.

Peer workers' lived experience

Peer workers are central to the success of the service, as their lived experience is to a large extent the bedrock of the intervention. Where clinical services use therapies to support their patients, peer workers draw on their lived experience of mental health challenges and life experiences to support others, fostering connection, understanding and empowerment. Young people find reassurance in chatting with a peer worker who has faced similar challenges. This both deepens the interaction and enhances the credibility of the perspective and resources shared.

'I could vibe with that person, they're not going to judge you. They've experienced mental health issues. [T]heir stories are helpful because you get their insight.'

(User interview)

ReachOut's organisational support for its lived experience workforce

When establishing the service, ReachOut used a codesign approach to establish processes and ways of working for a lived-experience workforce. This approach included commissioning literature reviews of peer work, modelling best-practice approaches and engaging external experts to guide the process.

Peer workers cite that their cohesive team culture alongside an organisational emphasis on individual self-care contributes to their high morale and satisfaction in their role. The Peer Work Team Leader role, created in May 2023, is pivotal to PeerChat's effectiveness and the day-to-day management of the user-facing service. Being managed by peers with lived experience is core to supporting the lived experience workforce.

'Very few organisations will start by asking "What do we need to do [before recruiting] a lived experience team?"'

(Lived experience workforce consultant)

Factors limiting user outcomes

Four main factors were identified as limiting positive outcomes for users of the service.

1. Inability to be matched to a peer worker

The service currently lacks capability to match users with peer workers based on lived experience or other characteristics. In some cases, this limitation may hinder relatability. Matching may be particularly important to users from minority backgrounds, including First Nations users. When peer workers are unable to offer relevant personal perspectives, **some users describe the responses they receive as being too generic or 'scripted'.** As the service evolves, the option to match with a peer worker may enhance the value some young people gain from the service.

'I think having more context around what they're coming to talk to us about would be great, because then we can pair them up better with a peer worker … [I]f they have a specific experience, we can connect them with someone that also has a similar experience. I think that would be really beneficial for getting better outcomes.'

(Peer worker interview)

2. Restrictions imposed by the session model

While some users' concerns could be addressed within a single session, others with more challenging or complex issues **often found the 45-minute session limiting**. Users regularly sought the ability to rebook with the same peer worker to build on their session. These limitations could be addressed by exploring flexible session lengths and adding rebooking capability.

## 3. Gap between user expectations and peer worker experience

In some cases, **users' expectations of the service were at odds with the level of support peer workers can provide** (such as when users are looking for direct advice or quick answers), potentially resulting in frustration or less productive chat sessions. Peer workers identified instances when users were not ready to engage with the support that peer work offers, such as exploring possible next steps or adopting a new perspective on an issue. This could lead to repetitive sessions without clear outcomes.

4. Limited support available for users with complex needs or who are at risk of harm

Young people with complex needs or who are in a highly distressed mental state are consistent users of PeerChat. Typically, **between one quarter and one third of PeerChat users are recorded as being 'at risk'**, where a peer worker identifies that the user or someone else is at risk of harm. In some cases, these users can be supported within the scope of the service offered without additional support. Where safety support was needed, peer workers often collaborated on a safety plan with the young person. In more urgent cases, they encouraged or engaged external crisis or emergency support. The need to ascertain a young user's safety during a chat can shift the tone of the conversation, making it more formal. In turn, this can affect the rapport between a peer worker and a young person. The evaluation found that a tension existed between supporting users in high distress and continuing to build rapport with them, which is critical to peer work.

Service reach
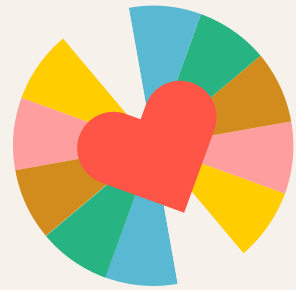
The majority of users align with the intended demographic of 18–25-year-olds in Australia, **with strongest engagement among the 18–19-year-old age group (37%).** As of September 2024, the service age range has been extended to serve 16–18-year-olds.

37%
of users were 18-19-year-olds

The service appears to be reaching individuals who face barriers to or are hesitant about using traditional mental health services and are reluctant to seek support within their social and family networks. **Barriers overcome by PeerChat include cost, accessibility, concerns about burdening people in their lives, fear of being judged, and the belief that their problems are not 'helpworthy' enough to see a clinician.** Some users are engaging with PeerChat in between clinical mental health sessions to help them put their mental health goals into practice or to get support during wait times.
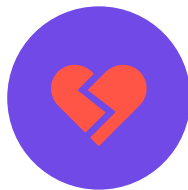
The most common topics discussed in PeerChat sessions are **relationship and mental health concerns**, followed by **work**, **study stress** and **seeking support.** Variability in key topics from month to month underlines the need for peer workers to be well supported and to continually add to their skills.

relationship concerns

work   mental health concerns

study stress   seeking support

The majority of users (87%) live in metropolitan areas in Australia. Despite the service being well positioned to meet the preferences of and to minimise the barriers faced by regional and remote young people, the service reach is less than expected. This is acknowledged as an important area to focus on in future.

87%

approximately

1 in 3
users classified as 'higher risk'

Engagement with users in high distress is in alignment with the stated model, **with approximately 1 in 3 users classified as 'higher risk'** and covering a range of needs from non-acute to those requiring immediate assistance. However, the current service model has limitations in providing meaningful support to all such users.

The majority of users (87%) took part in a single session. Five per cent of users reported completing three or more sessions, with the number of sessions completed per user ranging from 1 to 47 (excluding outliers). Alternative models to support return users who require multiple sessions surfaced as a key user need that merits further exploration.

87%
of users completed one session

Key learnings

The evaluation of ReachOut PeerChat confirms the important role of digital peer work in supporting young people's mental wellbeing, particularly by increasing accessibility, reducing stigma, and fostering feelings of being heard and understood. The evaluation presents strong evidence of user benefits, including reduced distress and increased confidence in talking about their feelings and experiences. The findings also highlight the positive impacts of lived experience as a powerful facilitator of connection and validation.

The evaluation generated recommendations that aim to strengthen the PeerChat service by addressing key areas such as better serving diverse user needs, matching users to peer workers with shared lived experience, diversifying service reach and exploring alternative models for higher-risk users.

The evaluation findings and recommendations will support ReachOut to refine and enhance PeerChat to better meet the diverse needs of young people in Australia. The evaluation contributes to the evidence base underpinning peer work, which is a growing area of the mental health service landscape.

For more information on this PeerChat Evaluation, please contact: research@reachout.com

- Important role of digital peer work
- Strong evidence of user benefits
- Positive impact of lived experience
- Recommendations to strengthen PeerChat service