

ReachOut

PeerChat

Evidence summary for a youth
digital peer work service



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ReachOut PeerChat: Evidence summary for a youth digital peer work service

ReachOut PeerChat is a safe, anonymous space for young people to be heard. Through online text chat, young people can talk for free for up to 45 minutes with a trained peer worker who has their own experience of mental health or life challenges. Peer workers encourage young people to direct the conversation, actively listen to them and support them to feel understood. The aim of PeerChat is for young people to gain clarity around what they're dealing with and ultimately to feel better about facing it.

ReachOut's extensive user research found that young people wanted one-to-one support that is non-

clinical and available at short notice in an environment where they feel comfortable and safe. ReachOut PeerChat has been co-produced with young people and peer workers to meet these needs. We've tailored the development process to address young people's ongoing feedback about what mental health support they actually want. By co-producing the service with young people and peer workers with lived and living experience of mental health challenges, ReachOut has ensured the service is robust and effective and meets the real-life needs of our intended users.



Support

Young people need additional supports that reflect their needs and preferences

The mental health and wellbeing of young people is a major public health concern. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020–21 data found that almost 40 per cent of participants in the study aged 16–24 years had a mental health disorder in the prior 12 months, with anxiety the most common disorder group ⁽¹⁾. Although young people have higher prevalence rates for mental health issues than the general population, many don't seek help and their needs often go unmet.

Research tells us that over 75 per cent of mental health issues develop before the age of 25 and can have lifelong consequences ⁽²⁾. Early in the pandemic, a 2020 report by Mission Australia and the Black Dog Institute found that more than one in four young people were experiencing psychological distress – an increase of 8 per cent since 2012 ⁽³⁾.

A range of stressors impact the mental health and wellbeing of young people in Australia, from personal concerns to anxiety surrounding current events ⁽⁴⁾. The Mission Australia Youth Survey

Report 2021 identified that the top issues of personal concern for young people were stress, mental health, school or study problems, body image and COVID-19 ⁽⁴⁾. Young people are also experiencing increasing levels of anxiety due to current global and political events such as the pandemic, climate change, and equity and discrimination ⁽⁴⁾.

Despite the high numbers of young people in Australia experiencing psychological distress, there are barriers preventing them from seeking professional support for their mental health. These barriers include lack of awareness and understanding of mental health issues, cost and accessibility issues, concerns about confidentiality, stigma (including being too scared to seek support), anxiety or embarrassment, and a preference for dealing with things themselves ^(5,6). Research by Mission Australia and the Black Dog Institute found that young people in psychological distress were most likely to seek help from friends, parents or guardians, and the internet ⁽³⁾.



Early intervention is essential to help reduce rates of mental health issues and psychological distress among young people ⁽⁷⁾. In this context, ReachOut believes there is an urgent need for innovative, youth-centred services that respond to the increasing – and varying – pressures that young people today experience.

According to Mission Australia’s Youth Survey Report 2021, young people spend a significant amount of time online, with 77 per cent spending more than five hours a day on screens ⁽⁴⁾. A 2021 eSafety commission report found that nine out of ten teens used the internet to research topics of interest, watch videos, chat with friends and listen to music, and that teens used an average of four different social media services ⁽⁸⁾. There is a real opportunity, therefore, to respond to young people’s preferences while also

addressing some of the barriers they face when trying to access relevant help, by increasing the availability of online mental health support.

Online peer support forums have already been shown to enable young people to share their experiences, feel less isolated and alone, and contribute to social connection by creating a sense of belonging and helping to normalise their experiences ⁽⁹⁻¹¹⁾. ReachOut will build on these results with the launch of PeerChat, a one-to-one online service that provides non-judgemental support to reduce stigma and increase help-seeking for mental health issues.

Peer work is a vital component of quality, recovery-focused mental health services

Peer work is an emerging area of workforce development and growth and is considered a vital part of providing quality, recovery-focused mental health services ⁽¹²⁾. Peer work is a reciprocal relationship between a peer worker with lived and living experience of mental health and recovery, and the person they support. The peer worker interacts in a respectful and non-judgemental way with a person who is experiencing mental health issues and other life challenges, including by sharing their own experiences and by being an active listener.

Peer work is underpinned by the following values:

- **Mutuality and empathy:** empathising with each other's experiences from having 'walked the journey' themselves.
- **Empowerment:** focusing on strengths, resilience and self-determination.
- **Hope:** sharing stories, experiences, strategies and ideas for getting through tough times.
- **Reciprocity:** both giving and receiving support.
- **Equal power:** valuing all voices and experiences equally in a shared and safe space.
- **Respect:** recognising that everyone is an expert on their own experience. ⁽¹³⁾

Peer work can be beneficial for both the person engaging with the service and the peer worker. Peer workers can feel more empowered in their own recovery journey, develop greater confidence and self-esteem, feel more valued and less stigmatised, have a more positive sense of identity, and build their social and occupational skills ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Across the sector, peer work is delivered in a range of formats, including one-to-one and group settings, both face-to-face and online. It has been used to support personal recovery in the community and to complement existing clinical mental health interventions. An evaluation of an Australian mental health peer support program showed that peer support can promote early intervention, prevent decline in mental health conditions, help to avoid unnecessary hospitalisations and support early discharge ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Evidence

There is strong evidence to support online peer support in youth mental health

Familiar, trusted and accessible early mental health intervention

Evidence shows that providing mental health peer support for young people through digital platforms can increase their access to services and help in prevention and early diagnosis ⁽⁷⁾. Studies have found that the reasons online peer support can be effective are related to young people's help-seeking behaviours and preferences. They identified that young people have higher trust in information and help provided over the internet than from other sources. An online format provides greater privacy, is emotionally safe, respects the person's need for confidentiality, improves their feelings of comfort in communicating and forming relationships, and supports help-seeking and choice of available supports ^(16,17).

Online mental health services can alleviate help-seeking barriers, pressures and gaps in the mental health system, and provide a safe space to connect, decrease isolation and share experiences ^(18,19). Peer support has also been found to have accessibility benefits, especially in promoting help-seeking for rural populations – communities that have historically been underserved by clinical services and for whom significant barriers to service access exist ⁽²⁰⁾.



Increased social connection and enforcement of positive behaviours

Research with young people has shown that counselling and clinical interventions can feel overwhelming ⁽²¹⁾. Qualitative research with young people has seen positive references to peer support ⁽²²⁾. Young people who have experienced a life-changing event have valued the opportunity to connect with and discuss their concerns with peers they can relate to who have had the same experiences (rather than with an adult) and who can provide genuine empathy and practical guidance ⁽²²⁾.



Evidence to support online peer support in youth mental health

A key benefit of peer support is that it uses a strengths-based approach in supporting the mental health of young people. Peer workers share the strength they have gained, and the lessons they have learnt, from their own lived experience to inform, inspire and encourage the young person who is in a similar situation ⁽²³⁾. This sharing of experience alleviates the power imbalance found in the formal client/professional relationship and creates a reciprocal environment that encourages discussion and the changing of perceptions through the process of recovery from adversity ⁽²³⁾.

Evidence also suggests that digital mental health interventions, such as one-to-one online peer support, can directly impact the psychological wellbeing of young people in both the short and long term ⁽²⁴⁾. Immediate impacts include increased social connectedness and feelings of wellbeing, a new sense of hope for life, and positive, healthy behaviours. Later impacts can include decreased incidence of depression, anxiety or an eating disorder; decreased suicide; decreased substance abuse; improvements in general life satisfaction; increased knowledge of mental health issues; and increased social support ⁽²⁴⁾.

New ground

ReachOut PeerChat is breaking new ground in digital youth mental health

ReachOut PeerChat is an innovative new online peer support service for young people aged 18–25 years. Through online text chat, young people can talk with a trained peer worker – someone whose own experience of mental health or life challenges helps them to relate to the difficulties a young person might be facing.

PeerChat peer workers have a lived and living experience of mental health issues or challenges and are trained to safely engage and connect with peers, with a focus on the young person’s individual strengths, hopes and recovery. They actively listen to young people and let them guide the conversation.

Our robust duty-of-care practices, professional team, and engaging, youth-centred approach means we’re trusted to safely support young people as they seek support and guidance from peers online. ReachOut PeerChat is an exciting expansion of the mental health support we provide to young people.

PeerChat provides peer support for issues that impact young people’s mental health and wellbeing, such as study stress, friendship issues, family conflict and a range of other life challenges. It is designed to help young people feel understood and feel better, reduce their feelings of isolation, provide a sense of hope, and increase their knowledge of where to get further support if required.





Peer work is a growing discipline in Australia. Following its initial launch, ReachOut will scale PeerChat over the next two years as demand grows. We're proud of the extensive work we have done in building one of Australia's first digital youth mental health peer workforces.

ReachOut PeerChat is underpinned by the existing evidence for online peer support and is co-produced with young people and peer workers to ensure it meets their needs. Our approach to introducing a dedicated peer work team is aligned to the 2021 National Mental Health Commission's National Lived Experience (Peer) Workforce Development Guidelines and will contribute to government and mental health sector priorities to train and scale a professional, remunerated mental health peer workforce ⁽¹²⁾.

PeerChat sessions are initially available five days a week: Monday to Thursday, 1–9 pm and Friday, 10 am – 6 pm. We plan to extend operating hours as the service develops. Each chat session lasts up to 45 minutes. And it's free.

PeerChat is safe, as one-to-one conversations take place via a secure online chat platform, guided by a duty-of-care framework developed with ReachOut's Clinical Advisory Group. ReachOut has over ten years' experience in online peer-to-peer support via its moderated, peer community forums.

We look forward to continuing to learn and evolve as the service grows, and to sharing our knowledge and insights with the sector.

ReachOut PeerChat's early success

ReachOut initiated a soft launch of PeerChat in May 2022 to conduct testing and improvements with peer workers and service users.

During the soft launch through to the end of August, 131 young people have completed sessions, including 13 who completed multiple sessions. The top three issues raised during the PeerChat sessions were relationships (friendships, family and romantic), mental health (anxiety, depression and other issues), and work and study stress. The average session duration was 45 minutes, and 61 per cent of sessions took place with young people using their mobile phones.

During these sessions, young people responded in a variety of ways that highlighted the positive benefits of the service for them. For example, they expressed gratitude that the session gave them a voice and that they were being listened to as they described the challenges they have been facing. Peer workers have seen evidence of change in young people around:

- feeling better
- feeling less alone
- having increased knowledge of supports/services that can help them
- having increased knowledge of self-care strategies they can apply
- feeling a sense of immediate relief from distress.



If someone [had] asked me a year ago what service do you want to see or use to navigate the world of mental health, an anonymous and digital service like PeerChat is what I would have described. I'm happy to know it exists ...

(PeerChat Service User, July 2022)



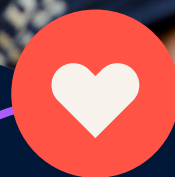
Given the mutual, reciprocal nature of peer work, it is also important to consider and evaluate the peer worker experience, which has also been positive. Peer workers have reported that they found it rewarding to share their lived experiences of mental health and enjoyed supporting help-seekers on their own journey and linking them with resources and extra support. At times, peer workers found sessions to be emotionally taxing, so additional supports have been built in, including debriefs after sessions, external group supervision, and breaks for self-care practice.

ReachOut is committed to undertaking quantitative and qualitative evaluation of PeerChat, reporting the findings in order to build the evidence base for one-to-one online peer support for young people, and making ongoing service improvements.

ReachOut PeerChat has been developed with support from the Australian Government Department of Health and philanthropic funders.

ReachOut thanks and acknowledges Heather Nowak, Co-Founder of Mental Health Peer Work Solutions, who consulted with ReachOut on the development of this service and the establishment of our Peer Work practice.

ReachOut thanks and acknowledges Lived Experience Australia who provided an overview of peer work literature and evidence to inform development of this report.



About ReachOut

At ReachOut, we are guided by a clear, simple ambition: Helping young people feel better.

Helping them feel:

- better in the moments when they most need help
- better about who they are and their place in the world.

and be:

- better able to cope with the challenges they're facing today
- better set up and equipped to manage when life doesn't go as planned.

Anonymous and confidential, ReachOut is a safe place where young people can openly express themselves, get a deeper understanding of and perspective on what's happening in

their lives, connect with people who will provide judgement-free support, and build the resilience to manage their challenges now and in the future.

One hundred per cent online and designed specifically for – and with – young people, ReachOut lets young people connect on their terms at any time from anywhere. From one-to-one support from experienced peer workers, to online communities as well as tips, stories and resources, ReachOut offers a wide range of support options that allow young people to engage in the ways they want to, when they want to.

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WHEN LIFE DOESN'T GO AS PLANNED

REACH**OUT**