

Youth Peer Support

Everyone wants to be seen and heard when they are struggling. Often that means by someone who just “gets it.”

A peer is someone we identify with -- whether that is because of gender, race, culture, age, etc. Peers are important for teens since they often turn to their peers for support before anyone else. Peer support can be especially helpful for youth from historically excluded communities. They may face challenges that others cannot relate to because they have not experienced them. But peers can fill that gap.

When it comes to mental health, peer support gives youth the chance to feel understood by someone who also lives with a mental health condition or substance use disorder. Peer support improves the well-being of the person providing support as well, since they are able to use their challenges to help others.



Peer support can happen in many different ways. Here are some examples of the three levels of youth peer support:

Level 1: Universal

Train all young people to support their peers.

- General-skills support programs educate young people about how to provide emotional support to their friends. Example: [A.S.K. from Active Minds](#).
- Mandatory mental health curricula in schools ensure all young people have the opportunity to learn about mental health. Example: [YAM – Youth Aware of Mental Health](#).

Level 2: Secondary

Offer peer support programs where young people spend their time.

- Call lines led by peers offer free, anonymous, and confidential peer support to youth over the phone. Examples: [YouthLine](#) or [Teen Line](#).
- Text lines led by peers provide anonymous support to youth via text message. Examples: [MHA's Peer Bridger Project](#), [Lean on Me](#), and [The Trill Project](#).
- Support apps leverage technology to help youth who are seeking mental health support. Examples: [AbleTo](#), [Calm Harm](#), or [MindShift](#).
- Interest-based peer support allows youth to connect with others over a shared interest. This can occur during clubs, sports, or other extracurricular activities. Example: [Own Your Roar](#).
- Peer wellness programs let young people teach each other about mental health. Example: [Mind Body Ambassadors](#).
- School-based mental health organizations create safe spaces for youth. They can teach self-care skills and advocate for policy change. Examples: [Project Lets](#) or [The Support Network](#).

Level 3: Tertiary

Embed youth peers into systems.

- Drop-in centers or community centers offer time to connect with other young people and access resources. Example: [Oasis Mental Health](#).
- The foster care system or the juvenile justice system can be difficult to navigate. Peer specialists can help youth better understand these systems and build community. Example: [Credible Messenger Model](#).
- Clinical mental health care can include a peer support specialist on the care team. Peers may support youth in the emergency room, in-patient settings, or during a mobile crisis response. Example: [allcove](#).

To learn more about youth peer support, check out MHA's publication, "[Youth and Young Adult Peer Support: Expanding Community-Driven Mental Health Resources](#)."