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Improving Emotional Health and Wellbeing through peer support - A programme in the Western Health and Social Care Trust is helping young people become peer educators

A peer-led programme has been piloted in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, Northern Ireland to equip young people with an understanding of emotional wellbeing and the necessary skills to become peer led educators. The young people are provided with the skills to effectively plan, deliver and evaluate an emotional wellbeing training programme to their peers

Literature Review

According to Harden et al, 1999; Lister-Sharp et al., 1999; Durlak and Wells, 1997, peer-led initiatives are in keeping with the principles of participation and empowerment. There is also supporting evidence from systematic reviews of the effectiveness of peer-led approaches for young people that have been applied to a wide variety of health topics and in many different settings.

Meade (2006) highlights a number of health promotion programmes for young people that have employed peer-led approaches. The rationale for peer-delivered interventions is that potentially, they are able to start with the agenda of young people rather than of adults and therefore, young people are more likely to engage with approaches, which involve them and engender a sense of ownership.

Peer led approaches are seen as a way of harnessing the health education that naturally occurs between peers. Peers are

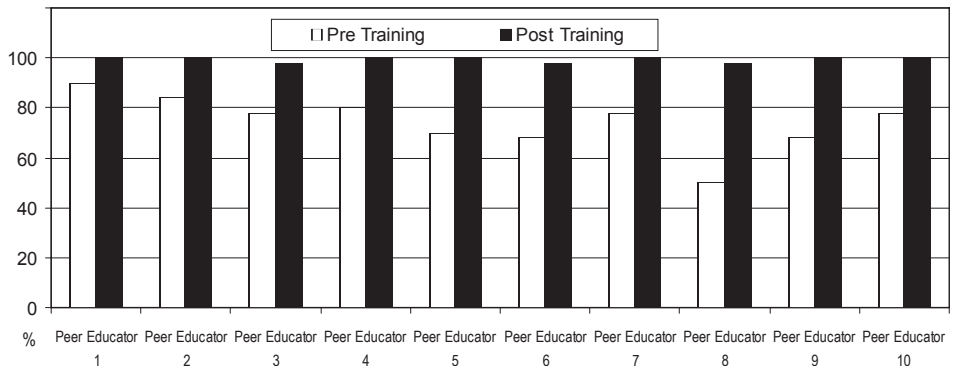
thought to be more credible sources than traditional adult providers of health promotion; interventions presented by peers may be more acceptable and it is argued that peers are able to reinforce learning through ongoing contact. In addition, it is argued that peer led approaches are better placed to reach 'hard to reach' groups. (Hart, 1998; Mathie and Ford, 1998; Turner and Shepherd, 1999; Wilton et al., 1995).

Stage 1 Peer Educators Training

Ten young people (50% male, 50% female) from targeting social needs (TSN) areas in the Western Trust and ranging in age from 16-25 years, were selected to undergo an accredited training programme in peer education skills. The training programme took place over 60 hours and included the following areas:

| | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Peer education theory | Mental Health Issues |
| Group work skills | Teenage Parenting |
| Helping skills | Contraception |
| Dealing with conflict | STIs/HIV/AIDS |
| Problem solving/decision making | Drugs/Alcohol |
| Presentation skills | Relationships |

The young people completed a pre- and post- training questionnaire that demonstrated a significant increase in knowledge and skills after training (see chart on page 19).



Participants concurred that the peer education skills programme provided a platform to "talk about the past", and "challenge my fears" and presented an environment to "feel at ease when talking" and with "people to listen and to be respectful".

Stage 2 - Delivery of an emotional wellbeing programme to peers

Peer educators delivered two pilot emotional health and wellbeing programmes to 80 young people ranging in age from 14-24 years. A post programme evaluation was subsequently completed and comments included:

"It was delivered in a way that made it easy for me to understand!"

"Having young people do the training, made it more easier to understand and more fun"

"A lot of stuff we get to hear about is around drugs and all. But this was good to get a chance to think about the bigger picture!"

"Something I never get the chance to think or talk about" (re: emotional/ mental health areas/issues such as bullying, etc.)

"Some of the exercises we did really made me think about my own life or about others who I know and how I have dealt with things"

Conclusion

This programme begins a process of addressing the needs of hard to reach young people and applies a peer led approach to promoting positive emotional health and wellbeing. It is acknowledged as a model of good practice by the Regional Quality Improvement Authority.

We would like to acknowledge Opportunity Youth, peer educators and the young people for their commitment, delivery and participation in this programme that continues to be delivered across the Western Trust.

References

- Harden, Weston and Oakley, 1999; Lister-Sharp et al., 1999; Durlak and Wells, 1997 in *A review of the effectiveness and appropriateness of peer delivered health promotion interventions for young people*, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London [Last accessed September 2008]
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- Meade K., Barry M., & Rowel D. 2006, Evaluation of the youth led emotional wellbeing project Getting It Together, Department of Health Promotion NUI Galway [Last accessed September 2008]