Supports required for Youth Participation

Supports for youth participation

For youth participation to be successful, supports are required. Effective supports ensure that both the young people and the organisation can implement youth participation strategies effectively.

While the transient nature of young people's involvement in youth participation activities is often presented as significant challenge, effective and inclusive engagement and recruitment mechanisms can help achieve sustainability.

Support requirements

There are a variety of factors that may support or challenge youth participation in mental health. These factors can be broadly categorised into factors that:

- Relate directly to young people
- Relate to workers and/ or organisations
- Common factors

Factors relating to young people

Appropriate recognition of young people's involvement is essential to encouraging and maintaining their participation. Monetary payment or a voucher is accepted as good practice, along with appropriate reimbursement of transport and accommodation expenses, preferably in advance so the young person is 'not out of pocket'. Participation may also be influenced by other external factors such as access to effective communication tools, eg. access to computers, email, internet and SMS.

There is a need to provide recognition of involvement or skill development such as some form of certification stating the activities and learning undertaken by the young people. This provides tangible documentation of achievement which is likely to increase the young person's future participation.

Any model of youth participation in mental health needs to consider the developmental stage that participants are at. Every young person will have different skills and experience and a different level of interest in mental health. A good practice model will provide for young people, from a range of developmental stages, to participate and will recognise and support skill development. Creating opportunities for young people to learn new skills provides a motivating factor for recruitment and maintaining engagement.

The importance of effective marketing in engaging young people cannot be underestimated. Therefore, youth-friendly (and preferably youth developed) promotional materials and strategies must be used. Other motivating factors, including skills development and feedback about outcomes, are important in maintaining youth involvement.

Organisations also need to provide a variety of 'youth friendly' materials for consultation activities. For example, interview, questionnaire, survey, photographs and video or DVD, may be utilised to present consultation information to young people with varied learning styles.

The implementation of any model of youth participation initially requires a focus on recruitment strategies for establishment and sustainability. However, all projects need to recognise that sometimes young people are too busy with other activities in their lives to take on a consistent participatory role.

Young people's interest in youth participation activities varies depending on their sense of control and connectedness. Acknowledging that young people have a choice about whether they participate, and acknowledgement that young people have different interests allows a model of participation that is flexible enough for participants to opt in and out as they wish.

Factors relating to workers and organisations

Building relationships between young people and workers takes time. A supportive workplace, or organisational culture, has a considerable impact on the success of youth participation strategies. Allowing time for trusting and respectful relationships to develop will contribute positively to youth participation outcomes. The time available to develop meaningful relationships and high rates of staff turnover in some organisations can prove challenging to this process.

Running group programs face-to-face is often considered the most preferred and effective mechanism to implement youth participation strategies. This method provides a high level of information transfer and encourages engagement. However, it also consumes a large amount of time, cost and energy. Significant coordination regarding these consultation frameworks is needed for effective face-to-face interactions to occur. Identification of group requirements before meetings allows for budgetary planning; nevertheless flexibility is still required because of unexpected issues such as alternative or additional transport needs.

Skills development for workers is another important issue. Workers may indicate an interest in undertaking youth participation activities but may require a range of supports themselves. These supports may include:

- Information about gaining consent and consent guidelines

- Developing frameworks for consultation

- Organisational recognition of the time and resources required for effective youth participation

- A network for sharing ideas, resources, information and experience.

In developing youth participation in mental health, provision of adequate supports to workers needs consideration.

The youth and worker factors discussed above support the conceptualisation of a model of youth participation in mental health which:

- Is flexible

- Recognises that young people and workers or groups have different skill levels, varying levels of time available and experience and so may participate in different ways.

So what do we know?

- Supports are required for young people, workers and organisations.

- Effective marketing of youth participation encourages and supports recruitment and engagement of young people.

- Opportunities for skill development for both workers and youth encourages participation as does providing recognition or reward.

- Young people are more likely to participate in activities where they experience some control, recognise meaning, feel connected and valued.

- Workers and organisations need support in providing skills, youth-friendly materials and opportunities, and recognition.

- Appropriate funding, access to a support network, and guiding resources assist youth participation.

"It is important that youth participation programs do not begin prematurely; that is, without the necessary funding and organisational supports. I have been involved in a youth participation program where these elements were not present and the outcomes were not good".

Katelyn, 25 VIC

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