

Understanding peer support

In this module you will be familiarised with the concept of PS. You will obtain an understanding of the work of the peer supporter and learn how PS can benefit your facility programme. The benefits of PS for health providers, clients and health outcomes are also discussed, as are some of the limitations and challenges of PS programmes.

1. What is peer support?
2. What is a peer supporter?
3. What makes peer support so effective?
4. Benefits of peer support for health providers
5. Benefits of peer support for peer supporters
6. Benefits for clients
7. Limitations of peer support



1. What is peer support?

“Peer support is the practical, social, and emotional support between people in a community of common interest. Peer support is unique, offering the kind of support and practical help that one can only get from others who share similar experiences.”¹

In a PS programme, shared experience forms the basis for building a relationship of trust within which peer supporters can attend to the psychosocial and health concerns of clients. This often results in better engagement with care.

PS programmes are an important strategy in HIV service delivery for AYPLHIV. In many health facilities PS has been integrated with HIV prevention and care initiatives such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education, adherence support and psychosocial support.

The work of a peer supporter can be carried out in different settings ranging from individuals to families, to the health facility and community as well as other locations such as schools. It can take many forms, for instance text messaging to remind clients about appointments, support group facilitation or undertaking home visits.

About peer support

- PS is based on the idea that when people share similar life experiences (for example being diagnosed HIV positive) they relate better to one another
- Shared personal experience allows a connection that helps build relationships and facilitates the provision of practical, emotional and social support
- PS can take place between individuals or in groups and is often carried out by peers of a similar, or of little age difference
- PS leads to better engagement with care and better health outcomes
- PS is relevant across a wide range of topics

2. What is a peer supporter?

Other possible names for peer supporters may include:

- Peer navigator
- Youth connector
- Community Adolescent Treatment Supporters (CATS)
- Peer educator
- Peer mentor

The term “peer” refers to people who are equal in some or other way. This equality can be defined by age, gender, geographic location (people from the same village or area), background or health status.

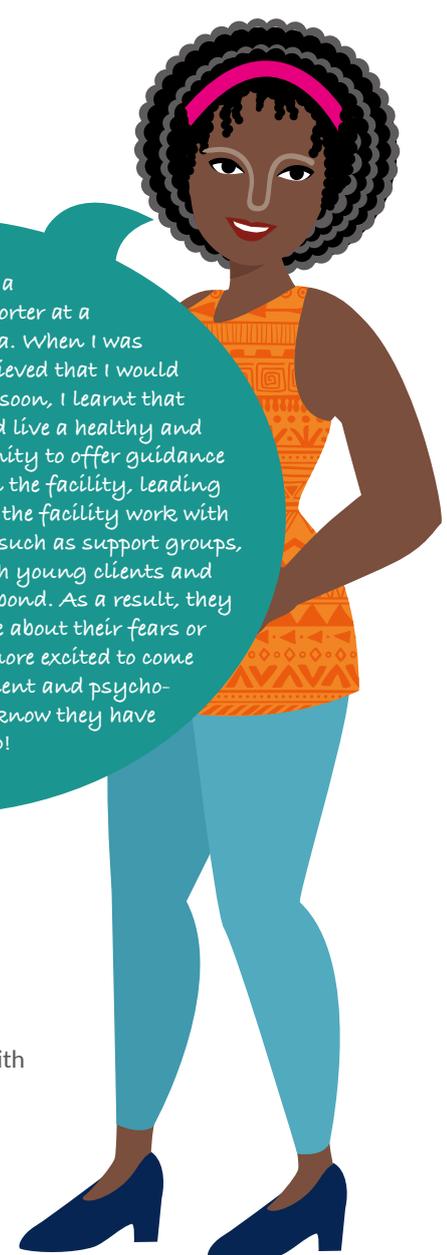
Peer supporters are trained to provide peer-to-peer psychosocial support and usually have a range of skills that enable them to help in different situations and with health-related issues, for example treatment literacy and adherence.

Peer supporters are an important part of the frontline health team and work closely with other health providers. They may not have any professional or paraprofessional certificate or degree.

Most work on a voluntary basis and work specific hours/days in a week. Depending on the setting they may have different titles, but they are still united by some common elements.

For the purposes of this toolkit peer supporters are understood to be young people living with HIV (YPLHIV) who are 18-24 years of age and are engaged in PS and education activities in a health facility.

1. Interior Health Authority (2018). Getting Started: A Guide to Develop and Deliver Peer Support Services <https://www.interiorhealth.ca/YourCare/HIVHealthOutreach/Documents/1GettingStarted.pdf>



*Jambo!
I am Achieng, a
20-year-old peer supporter at a
facility in Kisumu, Kenya. When I was
first diagnosed with HIV, I believed that I would
not have a positive future. But soon, I learnt that
by adhering to treatment, I could live a healthy and
happy life. Now, I have the opportunity to offer guidance
and motivation to young people in the facility, leading
by example. The health providers at the facility work with
me and support me to take on tasks such as support groups,
which builds my relationship with young clients and
helps create a strong and trusting bond. As a result, they
feel comfortable confiding in me about their fears or
concerns. They also are much more excited to come
back to the facility for treatment and psycho-
social support because they know they have
peers to talk to!*

About the peer supporter

- Offers emotional support, shares knowledge, teaches skills, gives practical help, connects peers with resources and services
- Has a range of skills
- Provides a link between the community and health services
- Works in different settings
- Volunteers or receives a stipend
- Trained but may have no formal certificate or degree
- Works specific hours/days
- Is assigned to a peer supporter supervisor

3. What makes peer support so effective?

For adolescents and youth, their peer group exerts a strong influence on the way they behave. In no other period of life is peer influence as powerful as during this developmental period. Successful PS is built on the basis that peer supporters have credibility within the client group. Communication can be more effective between peer supporters and clients because of a shared background and interest in youth culture, use of language, having similar experiences at home and in the community and in some instances, familiarity in having a shared HIV-positive status. Youth peer supporters are less likely to be seen as authority figures lecturing from a judgemental position about how others should behave. Instead, the process of PS is perceived as getting advice from a well-informed friend who has similar concerns and an understanding of what it is like to be a young person.

In addition, people living with a disease can be a very powerful source of support to those in a similar situation who may feel alone in managing their own diagnosis. We can say that peer supporters have “been there, done that” and that they are uniquely positioned to help people with current and future health challenges given their own personal experience. They understand the problem as well as being sensitive to cultural factors that influence behaviour, decision-making and health outcomes.

A peer supporter who has coped successfully with a challenge, such as overcoming treatment adherence challenges, may serve as a role model for peer clients who are experiencing similar problems. Young people often see others who have coped with difficulties as a source of hope and inspiration. The relationship that can develop between a peer supporter and his or her client may help to keep a young person in care. Because they often feel safer and more comfortable with a person from a similar background, and age who knows what they are going through, they will be more open to support.

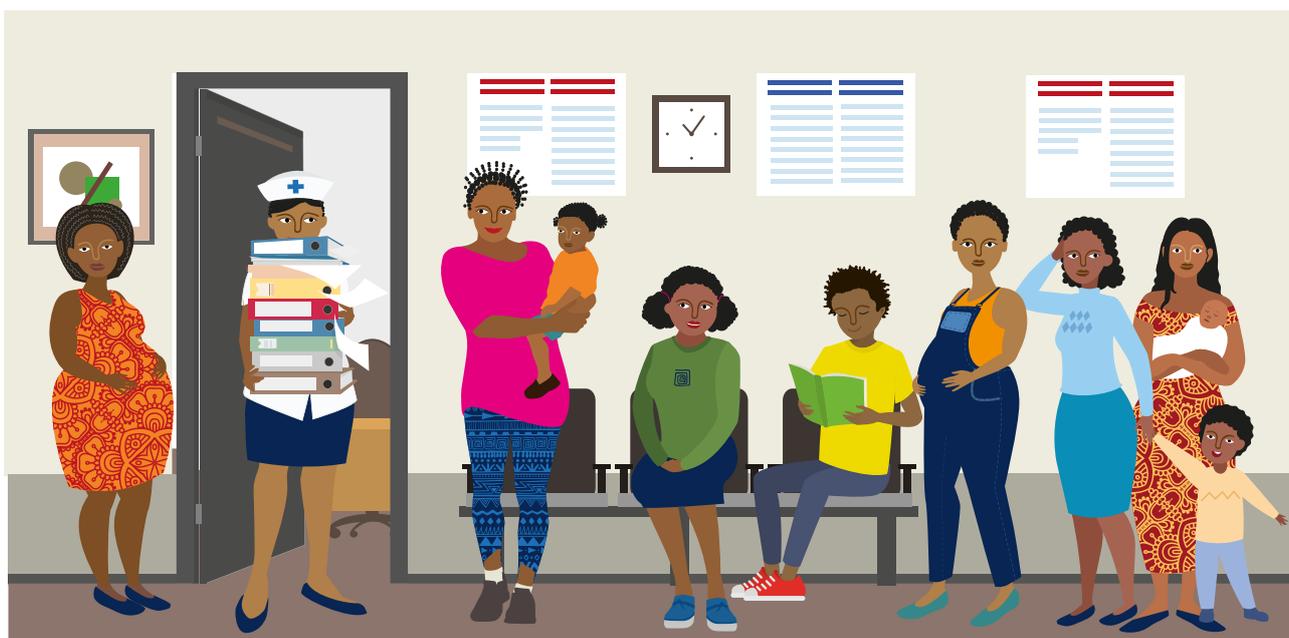
Role of the peer supporter

- Creates a space for educating, sharing knowledge and experience for individuals and communities
- Provides psychosocial support and psychosocial wellbeing
- Helps young people cope with the stressors related to health and age-related concerns
- Helps young people to access and link to facility care as well as community-based resources and navigate the healthcare system
- Builds understanding of health problems at individual and community levels and promotes ways in which these can be addressed to meet the needs of young people
- Builds relationships that are based on trust rather than expertise
- Promotes testing and treatment initiation
- Encourages long-term treatment adherence, virologic suppression as well as retention in care
- Contributes to combating stigma and discrimination in the health facility or community
- Improves health and treatment literacy
- Increases levels of status disclosure
- Provides feedback on service barriers and challenges with the aim to improve these and make them friendlier and more accessible

4. Benefits of peer support for health providers

Peer supporters play an important role in the health facility and can be engaged at different points or across the treatment cascade.

Faced with severe staff shortages, overburdened health teams are often unable to offer the support and services that are needed to ensure the provision of holistic, integrated and comprehensive care to YPLHIV. Depending on your facility, specific roles and tasks that could be performed by people with less skill and training than health providers can be fulfilled by peer supporters, freeing up health providers to attend to other tasks that require their facility/technical expertise. A PS programme can complement existing services and fill a gap or unmet need in service provision that ultimately streamlines workflow and increases service efficiency. With more time, health providers may also be able to provide additional needed services or make improvements to their current service provision, improving quality.



Benefits to the health provider

Peer support:

- Complements and supports the work of health providers
- Lessens the burden by task-shifting to allow more time to focus on quality of care
- Reduces facility waiting times
- Strengthens age-appropriate service delivery for adolescent, young people and key populations
- Makes a difference where there are staff shortages
- Gives health providers feedback on service provision allowing them to make improvements
- Enables health providers to improve relationships and understanding of adolescent issues
- Provides an effective platform to engage with young people
- Offers a cost-effective way of providing support where funding is limited
- Opens a line of communication with, and insight into the local community and enables sharing of information about services with peer supporters' communities
- Provides an effective strategy to reach young people of similar age who may not feel confident in the health system or may be uncomfortable to talk about SRH and HIV to a health provider or elder

5. Benefits of peer support for peer supporters

The act of supporting and helping another as an equal has been found to boost the self-esteem and self-confidence of peer supporters. In addition, because peer supporters have a good understanding of a variety of health topics, they very often encourage others to adopt healthier lifestyles as well as changing their own healthcare practices.

Because peer supporters are trained, mentored and supervised in their work, they may be able to train peer supporters who are new to the field. Career pathways may be created for them within the health facility or other career opportunities might become available given new skills and work experience.

Peer supporters are also well-placed to drive change in the youth HIV/AIDS response at every level. As advocates for programme change and policy improvement, they can play an important leadership role helping to change lives and change communities.

Benefits for peer supporter

Peer support:

- Boosts self-esteem, resilience and self-confidence
- Increases knowledge and creates awareness of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and can improve uptake of healthier behaviours through setting an example for others
- Increases skills, competencies and experience
- Provides work experience and creates job opportunities
- Develops important leadership, communication and advocacy skills for driving programme change and policy improvement for youth
- Provides access to training and opportunities for income generation, whilst offering a modest source of income



Molo,
I am Sister Buuya, a health provider at a facility in Kitwe, Zambia. When I first heard about the peer supporters, I was worried they might add to our workload, if we needed to manage them or that they would take our jobs away from us, but the peer supporters at the facility have been the best thing for the younger clients. They run support groups and help us with tasks such as following up with clients who have not returned for treatment and support adherence. They also talk to the younger clients about things like safe sex, which makes the clients feel much less embarrassed than when I talk to them!

Hello!
I am Lindo, a peer supporter in South Africa. I will be sharing more about my experience throughout this toolkit, with the help of one of the peers that I support, Thuli.



6. Benefits for clients

Peer supporters can play a key role in helping their peers living with HIV along the care continuum. They may encourage young people to test, link them to care once they have tested, provide support on treatment adherence and improve retention and re-engagement if they are lost-to-follow-up.

They may also play an important role in helping to make services more accessible and friendlier for adolescents and young people, as they themselves are familiar with the healthcare system. They can assist in linking young people to services while also assisting the facility to provide greater flexibility and convenience. Since peer supporters live and work within the communities they serve, they have first-hand experience of environmental and socio-economic risk factors within the community. By sharing this knowledge, they can sensitise their peers to issues that might influence health outcomes.

Peer supporters can positively influence behaviour. Adolescents and young people may make changes in their behaviour not because they have been told to do so, but because they experience a connection with a close and trusted person who has adopted these changes themselves.

Health benefits

Evidence from peer supporter programme evaluations have found the following health-related benefits (see evaluation sections of models presented in Appendix 1)

- Improve linkage of clients to testing, care and other important support services
- Improve health literacy and access to health promoting behaviour
- Increase knowledge of and more positive attitudes towards HIV and SRH
- Decrease risk behaviour including reduce number of sexual partners and increase condom use
- Improve treatment adherence
- Improve retention in care
- Increase uptake of services including HIV testing, ART and PMTCT
- Decreased number of AYPLHIV who are lost-to-follow-up
- Increase disclosure of HIV status

Although a limited number of evaluations have looked at impact of peer support programmes on biomedical health outcomes, preliminary research has been able to demonstrate increased viral suppression in those exposed to peer support programmes.

Peer supporters can help young people who feel socially isolated to develop a sense of belonging, for example, by helping them to connect with their peers in support groups. The strong links that can develop between a peer supporter and his or her client can be very important in helping to create supportive and safe spaces that can lead to positive health outcomes and greater well-being. Because peer support happens in various contexts and in different ways, clients can benefit from initiatives that can include community or facility-based peer support groups, buddy programmes, one-on-one counselling and home visits.

Peer support is not a one-way street. When a young person talks to a peer supporter there is a sharing of experience. Young people can grow in confidence and esteem when the relationship with a respected peer supporter is not one of dependence but is mutually supportive and engaging.

Psycho social health benefits of peer support

- Decreases feelings of isolation
- Helps to combat stigma and discrimination
- Promotes self-confidence
- Improves self-esteem
- Improves quality of life
- Creates a safe adolescent friendly environment
- Builds motivation and demonstrates the potential of living positively with HIV
- Broadens access to a network of YPLHIV
- Supports clients with disclosure and helps them to live openly with HIV
- Improves community norms and decreases stigma around adolescent sexual behaviour and HIV

7. Limitations of peer support: a word of caution

While PS programmes can be enormously beneficial in numerous ways, it is important to remember that they are not a solution to all adolescent and youth service challenges. They form one piece of a complex puzzle required to improve adolescent and youth outcomes. PS programmes must be well co-ordinated and integrated within a comprehensive system including other health facility services, healthcare infrastructure and systems, interventions and the policy environment. Therefore, it is important to consider your own context and its challenges and to be realistic about what can be achieved with your PS programme.

In addition, there are also some disadvantages or challenges in establishing and maintaining PS programmes.

1. Although in the long run, PS programmes can be very cost-effective, it can be **expensive and time-consuming** to train and supervise young people. Peer supporters may need considerable supervision in order to move beyond simply sharing information to helping build skills for behaviour change.
2. Staff must adjust to **sharing decision-making** and other responsibilities with young people, a situation that may be new or counterintuitive in many cultures and professions. Yet meaningful youth involvement is critical for motivating and retaining peer supporters, so managing staff-peer supporter relationships is essential but can be challenging.
3. **Turnover is relatively high** in PS programmes, both because young people are at a point where much is changing in their lives but also because they eventually age out of PS programmes. This means new peer supporters must be trained frequently.

While these challenges must be acknowledged, the following modules will ensure that you are prepared for these, and that you have strategies in place to overcome these, so that your PS programme can optimise the many benefits outlined in this



LEARNING SPOT



There are several successful peer support models implemented in the region. You can learn from these models - please see Appendix 1



Oli Otya,
I am Ochieng, a 16-year-old living in Lira, Uganda. I found out that I was living with HIV a few years ago, which made me feel fearful and worried. But I attended a youth care club at the facility, where I met a peer supporter who was only a few years older than me. Seeing how healthy and successful he was, inspired me. I am now doing very well at school, adhere to my treatment and want to study to become a doctor. Just like my peer supporter, I want to help other young people to know that HIV is not the end of the world. We have so much to look forward to if we take our ARVs and work to support people around us.

KEY MESSAGES



1. PS is the practical, social and emotional support between people in a community where there is a common interest or experience
2. PS programmes are an important strategy in HIV service delivery for AYPLHIV
3. Peer supporters offer emotional support, share knowledge, teach skills, give practical help and connect peers with resources and services
4. PS programmes benefit health providers, peer supporters and clients
5. PS programmes work best as part of a comprehensive system of care and support

References

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