**MY-PEER** toolkit[1.0] **CASE STUDY**

# EVALUATING THE YOUTH FOCUS
# PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

## Overview

The Peer Support Program (PSP) is a unique early intervention program for 14-18 year olds for the prevention of youth suicide.  The Program offers the experience of a safe, supportive, peer based environment in which young people can address issues impacting their lives and enhance positive life skills.

The PSP provides therapeutic group work for young people 14 - 18 years who are showing early signs associated with suicide, depression and self-harm. The PSP involves pre-camp recreation based groups, a weekend therapeutic camp and post-camp support groups. The PSP combines social, creative and physical activities with an emphasis on a safe, fun and non-judgemental group based experience for young people. The PSP will assist young people to understand the challenges they are currently facing, help individuals to develop practical life skills and identify realistic solutions for issues such as:

- Trust
- Communication
- Family and relationships
- Grief and loss
- Self-esteem
- Coping strategies
- Hurting
- Personal space
- Conflict resolution

## Target Group

Young people in Western Australia aged 14 - 18 years who are showing early signs associated with suicide, depression and self-harm

## Evaluation

Prior to the action research, formal ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the PSP involved:

- Camp debrief – all staff/counselors/volunteers involved in the camp plus the camp coordinator
- Participant Feedback Questionnaire – all campers
- Camp Coordinator's Report – produced by camp coordinator
- Ongoing adjustments to camp procedures based on staff/volunteer/participant feedback.

Counseling staff also use a range of instruments to track the progress made by individuals, for example:

- Adolescent Coping Scale
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
- Becks' Depression Inventory

There was a general feeling that evaluation processes for the PSP could be improved. Some of the issues noted were:

*Data*

- The need to standardize data to assist in analyzing trends over time.
- The lack of a structured, systematic process for data collection (with no clear indicators) can lead to the camp coordinator collecting a lot of data that may not be used, and the data that is required may not be collected. There needs to be a clear directive on what needs to be collected, by who, and what it will be used for. The group agreed it would be beneficial to agree on some standard indicators.
- The need to provide a more consolidated picture at a group level which could inform service improvement decisions for future camps
- Improved access to detailed data including participant comments and the context underlying the statistics
- A more 'professional' evaluation process meaning additional rigour through the use of validated scales, Likert responses and standardized data.

*Data collection methods*

- The camp experience is emotional for both staff and young people – opportunities to provide objective and sometimes sensitive feedback in a neutral setting and without fear of repercussions or causing offence
- Feedback mechanisms need to be confidential and varied e.g. use of creative strategies, so that everyone's voice can be heard
- Counselors can take it personally when they receive feedback about their clients behaving badly, being asked to leave etc. Feel their client assessment may be questioned, feel to blame, feel bad colleagues have had to deal with their difficult client. This can be difficult for the camp coordinator.

*Time and resources*

- Data entry associated with the current evaluation processes was very labour intensive for the camp coordinator.

*Debriefing*

- Transference of issues after camp – brings new things to the counseling relationship, staff need to debrief too
- More action-oriented and learning oriented – formal processes need to be in place to air and address grievances, consolidate lessons learned and consider suggestions for service improvements

In summary, to evaluate what makes the camps successful, there needs to be a balance between collecting enough data to inform decisions, and collecting more than will ever be needed or used. The action research process focused on the feedback mechanisms for the PSP, creating standardized datasets and reducing the overall effort required to implement evaluation strategies.

The following evaluation questions were identified:
1) What changes for young people as a result of participating in the Peer Support Program?
2) Why do young people enjoy the PSP?
3) What service improvements should be considered?
4) Are online questionnaires acceptable to the target group and staff/volunteers?

**Methods**

The My-Peer project team worked with the camp coordinator and a small team of Youth Focus counselors and staff to design and develop four evaluation strategies which could be used to address the evaluation questions for the Youth Focus PSP. Using more than one evaluation strategy helps to increase the reliability of the data collected and allows different questions to be answered. The online Participant Questionnaire replaced the existing paper-based Participant Evaluation Questionnaire. The Observation Tools, the Staff Feedback Tool and the Client Debrief Tool were designed to be used in conjunction with existing evaluation processes.

The table below shows the evaluation strategies that were developed in response to the evaluation questions that were identified:

| Evaluation questions | Observation Tools | Camp Evaluation Questionnaire | Camp Feedback Tool | Camp Participants Monitoring Tool |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| What changes for young people as a result of participating in the Peer Support Program? | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Why do young people enjoy the PSP? | Y | Y | | |
| What service improvements should be considered? | Y | Y | Y | |
| Are online questionnaires acceptable to the target group and staff/volunteers? | | Y | Y | |

Each evaluation strategy is described in detail below.

1. **Observation Tools**

   The aim of the observation tools was to collect some feedback on changes in skills, attitudes and behaviours seen at an individual and a group level over the duration of the camp. Two tools were designed to be completed by at least 2 staff/volunteers on each day of the camp – the *Daily Assessment Tool* (5 compulsory observations, 7 additional observations) and the *Peer Support Monitoring Tool* (6 compulsory observations, 14 additional observations). By completing the tool for each participant on each day of the camp, changes over time could be monitored with the expectation that positive changes would be seen by the end of the camp. The *Peer Support Monitoring Tool* could not be trialed since the tight camp schedule permitted limited time for evaluation and only made it possible for one tool – the *Daily Assessment Tool* - to be implemented during the March 2009 camp.

2. **Camp Evaluation Questionnaire**

   The existing paper-based participant camp evaluation questionnaire was replaced with an online evaluation questionnaire for camp participants. The intention was that the questionnaire would be completed during the participant's first counseling session after the

camp. Normally, this session occurs during the first or second week after the camp. Access to a laptop would be needed in the counseling rooms and encouragement/support from the counselor to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained basic demographic details (age, gender, number of camps attended), reasons for attending camp and questions relating to the perceived impacts of attending camp. Some validated scales were incorporated in the questionnaire too.

3. **Camp Feedback Tool**

   Prior to the action research, feedback from staff took place informally during the camp, immediately after the camp and during the camp debrief meeting on the first Wednesday morning following the camp. No *formal* feedback from staff was collected. During the action research, the camp coordinator emailed all staff, volunteers and counselors attending the camp a link to an online *Camp Feedback Tool,* a short evaluation questionnaire that was created using **Survey Monkey**. Staff were asked to complete the short questionnaire prior to the Wednesday morning camp debriefing meeting. The results were automatically collated by the surveymonkey website. During the camp debriefing meeting, individual participants and the results of the *Camp Feedback Tool* were discussed.

4. **Camp Participants Monitoring Tool**

   Prior to the action research, staff, volunteers and counselors discussed individual campers and their perceptions of each individual's camp experience, any incidents or issues that need to be addressed any specific feedback for counselors. This information was shared during the camp debriefing meeting on the Wednesday following camp and was written down by the camp coordinator. The *Camp Participants Monitoring Tool* simply formalized this process to ensure that a standardized set of items would be discussed for every individual attending camp. Collecting standardized information in this way makes it easier to consolidate data at a group level and analyse trends for an individual and the group over time. The tool also facilitates and focuses group discussion on the main objectives of the camp.

## Outcomes

The action research process took place over 9 months between March – December 2009 and involved 3 camps (March, July and December). The benefits and any limitations associated with each of the evaluation strategies that were tested are discussed below.

1. **Observation Tools**

   The *Daily Assessment Tool* proved to be difficult to use and the reliability of the data limited because:
   - It was difficult to assess 15 young people on 5 dimensions in the 15 minutes available each day.
   - Use of the tool may have affected the rapport, trust and relationship between staff/volunteers and participants.
   - Using the tool may have changed the way staff/volunteers interacted with young people with staff/volunteers inadvertently 'looking for changes' or trying to recall examples of behaviour.
   - The tool was completed once each day whilst participants completed their reflective journals. This required staff/volunteers to remember and recall examples of desired behaviour that may have occurred throughout the day. With 15 young people to keep in mind, this process was prone to error.

- Some behaviour could have taken place at a time when it was not observed by staff/volunteers.
- The statements on the tool were considered too broad and ambiguous and therefore may have been assessed in different ways by different observers.
- Even with supporting notes, there was no time to review these when completing the tool.
- There was a lack of familiarity with the tool owing to limited training/practice for staff/volunteers prior to using the tool.
- No information could be collected about the degree of change or the direction of change since a Y/N format was used e.g. a Y on Day 1 and Day 2 could mean a skill had got better, worse or had just stayed at the same level.

After the March 2009 camp it was decided that even with refinements to address some of the above issues, observation tools were not very realistic in the camp environment and highly prone to error. In addition the analysis of the data collected involved comparisons of the observer data which proved to be very time consuming and of limited perceived value. A focus on group level changes may be preferable since changes at an individual level may not be seen immediately, e.g. coping skills may not be apparent until the next 'crisis' faced by a young person. It was decided that other evaluation strategies could be used to assess the impact of the camp on young people and therefore to discontinue trialing the two observation tools.

2. **Camp Evaluation Questionnaire**
   The online *Camp Evaluation Questionnaire* was first implemented in July 2009 and perceived to have many advantages:
   - Simple and easy to use
   - Easy to integrate into usual program activities
   - Very useful data
   - Responses could be automatically collated and reports generated by the surveymonkey software
   - More time efficient – camp coordinator did not have to enter data from participant evaluations and generate reports
   - Ability to compare datasets over time and identify trends, service improvement areas etc
   - Perception of increased confidentiality of data e.g. no-one could recognize handwriting
   - Anonymity allowed
   - Different types of feedback given than if young people had been asked to write down feedback on paper
   - Easier for some young people to tick boxes and easier to write more comments using a keyboard
   - Preference of some young people to respond online than on paper.

The only negative feedback associated with the tool was that some participants felt it was a bit too long. The data collected would be used by the camp coordinator for management reports, funding proposals and preparation of the annual Board reports.

3. **Camp Feedback Tool**
   The online *Camp Feedback Tool* was first implemented in July 2009 and perceived to have many advantages, including:
   - Simple and easy to use
   - Easy to integrate into usual program activities

- Responses could be automatically collated and reports generated by the surveymonkey software
- Responses could be entered at a time to suit staff/volunteers
- Staff/volunteers unable to attend the camp debrief meeting could still have their say – very useful for volunteers whose time was limited
- Sensitive feedback could be written more easily which may have led to feedback being given that may not have been communicated orally in a group environment
- Anonymity could be preserved if desired
- Feedback immediately after the camp can be influenced by fatigue, stress and emotion. Having time to reflect on the camp before providing feedback may help ensure feedback is not emotionally-driven
- A formal report provided a way of formalizing staff feedback which could then be used to influence decision-making processes for future camps
- Standardised staff feedback could also be compared with participant feedback – i.e. does the participants' *reported* camp experience tally with what staff/volunteers observe and report?
- The online nature of the report was more time efficient than a paper-based equivalent.

The data collected would be used by the camp coordinator to provide feedback to management and to make adjustments to procedures where necessary.

4. **Camp Participants Monitoring Tool**
   The *Camp Participants Monitoring Tool* was first implemented in July 2009 and was received very positively by the camp coordinator and staff/volunteers. The main benefits noted were:
   - Simple and easy to use
   - Easy to integrate into usual program activities
   - Standardized information for each individual which can be compared with the group and over time
   - Focused discussion – more time efficient – ensures each of the 15 participants have the same level and breadth of discussion
   - Discussion is broad – not focused on problems or incidents for example
   - Discussion is action-oriented – includes a Recommendations For Future section

   The data collected using the *Camp Participants Monitoring Tool* would be used by the camp coordinator to provide feedback to management and to make recommendations for future camps where appropriate.

**Overall**
Overall, the action research process was considered to be very beneficial to the camp coordinator and staff involved and some improvements were made to the existing evaluation processes. In particular:
1. Online survey tools had many benefits for both staff/volunteers and participants especially ease of use, perceived increased confidentiality, standardization of data, collection of additional types of data e.g. sensitive issues, inputs to management reports
2. Automating current paper-based processes through surveymonkey to collate responses and generate reports and graphs significantly reduces effort associated with data entry and preparation of the camp coordinators report
3. Increased opportunities to air grievances, make suggestions, provide constructive feedback and a formal process for ensuring all suggestions and issues are considered and addressed
4. Formalising staff debrief processes and collection of staff feedback

5. Standardising client debrief procedures
6. Limited training needed to use the tools but a management directive to ensure everyone uses the tools consistently and as they are intended is important
7. Production of standardised datasets for analysis of trends and identification of issues.

The process of action research was considered to be very beneficial in gaining staff agreement and focusing staff on the changes they wanted to see for participants on camp.