# The benefits are mutual

Understanding the opportunities for peer-to-peer support to change lives, ease the demand on Australia's stressed social service systems, and rebuild the fabric of our society.

We'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which this paper was written, and pay respect to Kaurna and Gadigal Elders past, present and future.

We acknowledge that the colonisation of Australia has come at a deep and ongoing cost to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and that all Australians live on unceded land.

We acknowledge that we must do more to learn from First Nations' cultures of mutual support and celebrate and build peer-to-peer models that are inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs, practices and knowledge systems.

In doing so, we will walk together, with compassion, to learn from and build on over 70,000 years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience and wisdom. We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and better futures for all.

# Who we are

We're [The Australian Centre for Social Innovation](#) (TACSI), an independent, not-for-profit organisation working across Australia. Our purpose is to partner with communities and organisations to put people at the heart of shaping their lives and society.

Together, we tackle big social challenges and build the conditions for social innovation.

At the heart of TACSI lies the fundamental belief that people are the experts in their own lives. We believe that the best innovations come from working alongside the people who face the very challenges we're trying to solve.

# Contributors

This paper was written by Chris Vanstone, Jemima Taylor, Carolyn Curtis, Vita Maiorano, Danielle Abbott, Barbara Binns and Anna Langdon.

We would like to acknowledge the organisations and individuals whose work has been so integral to creating this white paper, and those that have provided direct feedback: the trailblazers who have been providing peer-to-peer support over at least the last 100 years; the leaders and practitioners who are making peer-to-peer work in the complexity of the service system; the new wave of innovators who are creating platforms built on technological innovation and their own lived experience; the researchers who are building an evidence base; and the peers who have helped shape and build the platforms, services and enterprises that support them.

# Contents

# Introduction

# Introduction

Imagine you're a parent and your child has just been diagnosed with a chronic illness. While you understand the steps you need to take according to the health system, it's not until you connect with another parent in the same position that you find a way to really live with this life change.

Welcome to the simple yet powerful world of peer-to-peer support, where support comes from someone who has successfully navigated a similar life experience.

Peer-to-peer platforms, services and enterprises present us with an opportunity not only to change lives but to do so in a way that eases demand on Australia's stressed social service systems and strengthens the fabric of our society.

This paper makes the case for mainstreaming peer-to-peer support – it's already common in drug and alcohol services, in HIV support and, to a lesser extent, in mental health services but much rarer outside these settings.

Peer-to-peer support could be harnessed to make progress on persistent challenges such as child protection, homelessness, recidivism, chronic disease and the resettlement of refugees.

Peer-to-peer support could mobilise support in areas of escalating demand such as disability, ageing, caring, mental health and disaster preparedness and recovery.

Peer-to-peer support, if it really became something for everyone, could help Australia become less lonely, more cohesive, healthier and more productive. It could help us find a job, be better parents, get fitter and improve our performance at work.

This white paper has been informed by evidence from the settings where peer-to-peer is mainstream, entrepreneurs providing peer-to-peer support in other areas, and a decade of TACSI's own experience designing, delivering and scaling peer-to-peer platforms.

**The insights from this work shows that:**

- Peer-to-peer support works, creating positive outcomes for both those who give and those who receive help
- Peer-to-peer platforms and services mobilise a 'hidden workforce' of community members who use their own lived-expertise to help others
- Peer-to-peer can engage people who choose not to engage with professional services
- Peer-to-peer can increase social capital and connectedness
- Peer-to-peer can provide trauma-informed and responsive care, and support healing

Peer-to-peer support is a logical choice to fill the widening gap between an overstretched service-system, and declining levels of social capital[1]. This paper outlines the potential of peer-to-peer support and:

- Provides an overview of the most compelling examples of peer-to-peer service models from around the world
- Imagines a future where peer-to-peer support is mainstream
- Describes what it takes to make peer-to-peer support models work
- Provides recommendations for entrepreneurs, practitioners, organisational leaders, commissioners, philanthropic funders and policy makers

Our ambition is to catalyse interest and experimentation with peer-to-peer support and fuel the next generation of mutual support in Australia.

# Bridging the support gap

When times get tough we look to the people around us for support. Mutual support is a key determinant of wellbeing, and fewer of us have it. Social connectedness and social support in Australia has declined over the last decade, with loneliness experienced most intensely amongst people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage[2].

Without mutual support, problems can escalate and become bigger, more life affecting and more costly.

- Recovery from addiction can lengthen, stall or relapse.
- Extreme grief can become long term depression.
- Parental stress can build and lead to toxic stress and contribute to adverse childhood outcomes.
- Feeling isolated can lead to loneliness, can build into depression which can lead to suicidal ideations and can lead to acts of suicide.

But in many situations the right kind of mutual support, for example from someone who has successfully navigated the same life experiences, can turn these things around.

## Mutual support is fundamental to our wellbeing, yet no government in the world has the policy to grow it[3].

In the face of declining levels of mutual support, governments are increasing their investment into professionally delivered social services[4], yet these systems continue to struggle to meet demand and to find the workforce they need.

Could diverting some of this investment into platforms for mutual support, specifically peer-to-peer support, be an astute way to de-escalate demand for professional services?

Could part of the answer to the twin challenges of declining social capital and the social sectors' workforce crisis[5] be mobilising the untapped 'workforce' of people who have gone through tough times, have come out the other side and now stand willing, ready and able to help others?

Could peer-to-peer models be an effective way to harness the goodwill of the millions of Australians turning away from traditional forms of volunteering[6]?
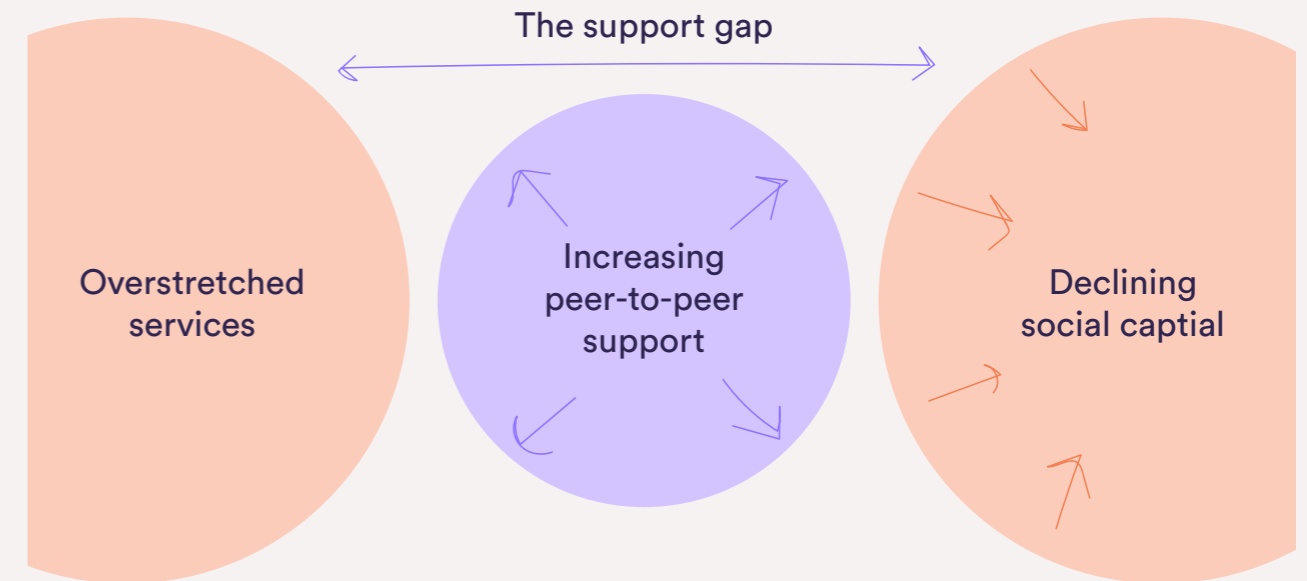


It's our view that peer-to-peer absolutely could do all these things – and that service providers, social entrepreneurs, commissioners, policymakers, foundations and social purpose investors should seriously consider the relevance of peer-to-peer support to their mission, and invest in peer-to-peer responses as part of their portfolio.

Investments should include supporting existing service providers to adopt peer-to-peer approaches and accelerating the work of a new wave of peer-to-peer entrepreneurs. We have seen instances where people with lived experience themselves make smart use of digital and interpersonal platforms to create new hybrid platforms of mutual support.

*Diagram 1:*
*Increasing peer to peer support would address the widening gap between declining social capital and an overstretched service systems*

# What is peer-to-peer support?

Peer-to-peer support takes many different forms but always at its core are relationships of 'trust based on shared lived experience'[7].

In this paper we use 'peer' to describe people seeking support and 'peer mentors' to describe those providing it. In different settings, peer mentors go by different names, including peer worker, peer supporter and peer educator.

## Peer-to-peer support is varied in its form

Some peer mentors work on an entirely voluntary basis, some are paid – but in every sustainable model there is a compelling reason for peer mentors to stay engaged – and that often combines intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

Most peer mentors work one to one with peers, some meet in group settings. **Family by Family**, for example, trains whole families – parents and children – to be peer mentors to other families.

Some peer-to-peer support is entirely face-to-face, some use video calls, or text based messaging to connect peers and peer mentors.

Some peer-to-peer support takes place over a limited number of sessions, for example three or six meetings, while other kinds play out over years, decades, or indefinitely.

Sometimes peer-to-peer support is part of something bigger – such as in mental health settings in Australia where it often sits alongside professional support, or in Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous groups around the world where peer mentor 'sponsors' are complementary to group work and the Twelve Steps program. Sometimes peer-to-peer support stands alone, such as in Mothers to Mothers, where mothers with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa help pregnant mothers-to-be live with HIV.

Some peer-to-peer platforms are run by large not-for-profit providers as one service type, some by government, and many are run by smaller not-for-profits dedicated explicitly to peer-to-peer support. Increasingly, a new wave of peer-to-peer entrepreneurs, often people with lived experience themselves, are creating and running their own platforms.

In some peer-to-peer responses, professionals play a role in organising and coordinating between peers and peer mentors. Some operate in a way that allows peers and peer mentors to mostly self organise, often using a digital platform.

## What kind of help does peer-to-peer support provide?

Despite this variety, our analysis has revealed that peer-to-peer support usually provides a mixture of three kinds of help, albeit in different quantities, according to the need:

- Practical support: Support to implement and to maintain effective strategies to deal with a specific situation e.g. strategies to take your HIV drugs, deal with a mental health condition, stay sober, or connect to culture.

- Growth support: Support to deal with the emotional complexity of the situation you're in and pursue personal growth and development e.g. being there when someone needs to talk, having high expectations and celebrating wins.

- Bridging support: Support to navigate community and services, and practical support to make connections to new people, groups and services.
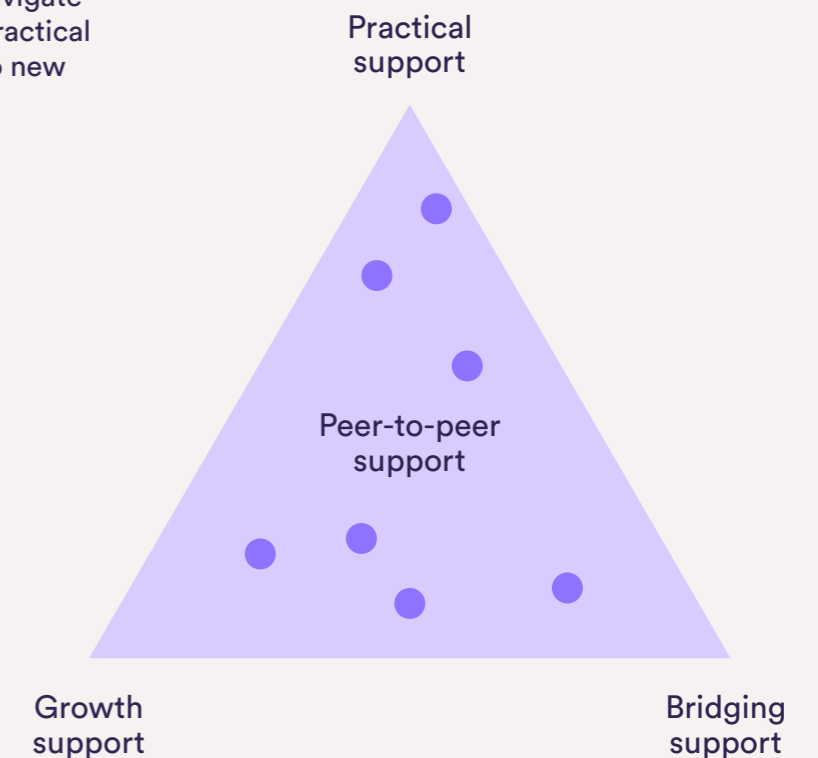
*Diagram 2:*
*Analysis of different responses reveals that peer-to-peer support usually provides a mixture of three kinds of help: practical support, growth support and bridging support.*

Practical support

Peer-to-peer support

Growth support

Bridging support

# Case studies

# How peer-to-peer support can help us progress on persistent challenges

For example,
in child protection,
homelessness,
recidivism,
chronic disease
and the resettlement
of refugees

*Image:*
*Weavers supports people caring for a loved one with support from someone who has lived experience of being a carer.*



# Imagine if...

...all families at risk of child protection responses could choose support from another family who has successfully navigated child protection engagement? What if training for peer mentors further strengthened their own families' life situation and capabilities, preventing them slipping back into the interest of child protection services?

...the increasing number of people at risk of homelessness could access peer mentors to support them develop strategies to avoid homelessness? What if these peer mentors were recognised financially and this enabled them to more easily pay their own rent?

...young people leaving care could rely on the support of a peer mentor who had successfully transitioned from care themselves? What if this provided peer mentors with an additional income stream?

...people diagnosed with diabetes were connected with a peer mentor who could help them refine their coping and management strategies? What if providing support to others in fact helped peer mentors develop and maintain strategies to manage their diabetes too?

...all refugees arriving in Australia could connect with peer mentor refugees to aid their resettlement?

# How peer-to-peer support can help us progress on persistent challenges

## Case studies

**Alcoholics Anonymous (International)** has been providing mutual support to members since 1930, through meetings, peer support and a Twelve Steps program to guide participants through recovery. The model has been scaled globally and adapted, including Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous.

**Parents are Teachers International & Family Support Network (Australia)** connects parents and has demonstrated positive outcomes relating to child protection system, health service use, out-of-home care, education, mental health and behaviour, wellbeing and parenting[8]. The program has scaled across the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Guam and Australia[9].

The **'Parents in Partnership Program', 'Iowa Parents Partner Program' and 'The Intensive Reunification Program' (Department of Human Services, USA)** recruits parents who have "overcome challenges, achieved reunification success and regained custody of their children" to assist parents going through the same thing[10]. A four year study of 500 families going through the process of reunification demonstrated that families who participated in peer-based mentoring programs were more likely to be reunified, spend less time in external care and are less likely to be removed again post-reunification[11].

**Prisoners as Change Makers (Red Cross, Australia)** has "increased social capital and decreased likelihood of reoffending" amongst incarcerated peers and peer mentors[12]. They have two programs: "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Mental Health Training' and 'Elders for Change'. The model has since been scaled to include Sisters for Change in Townsville[13].

**Multicultural Youth Affairs Network NSW (Australia)** runs 'Welcome to Australia' to help newly arrived overseas students settle into Australian life through peer led workshops and programs[14]. Students learn Aussie slang, First Nations history and culture and life skills like swimming and financial literacy[15]. The program encourages students to become active in their community and future peer mentors[16].

For more detail on these platforms, services and enterprises, and others **download this PDF database** of peer-to-peer examples. If you have more to suggest or would like to connect contact **vita.maiorano@tacsi.org.au**.

"I try never to underestimate the power of example that I have found in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous – which is by attending meetings and putting back that which has been freely given, so that I can maintain my sobriety. No more 'swearing off', no more 'going on the wagon'; just a nice comfortable feeling of having been rescued. My life and attitudes have had to undergo some very radical changes for me to maintain sobriety. I discovered that, quite frequently, I had the 'cart before the horse' and jumped to more conclusions than a kangaroo in full flight."

**Alcoholics Anonymous member**

# How peer-to-peer support can mobilise support in areas of escalating demand

**For example: disability, ageing, caring, mental health and disaster preparedness and recovery.**
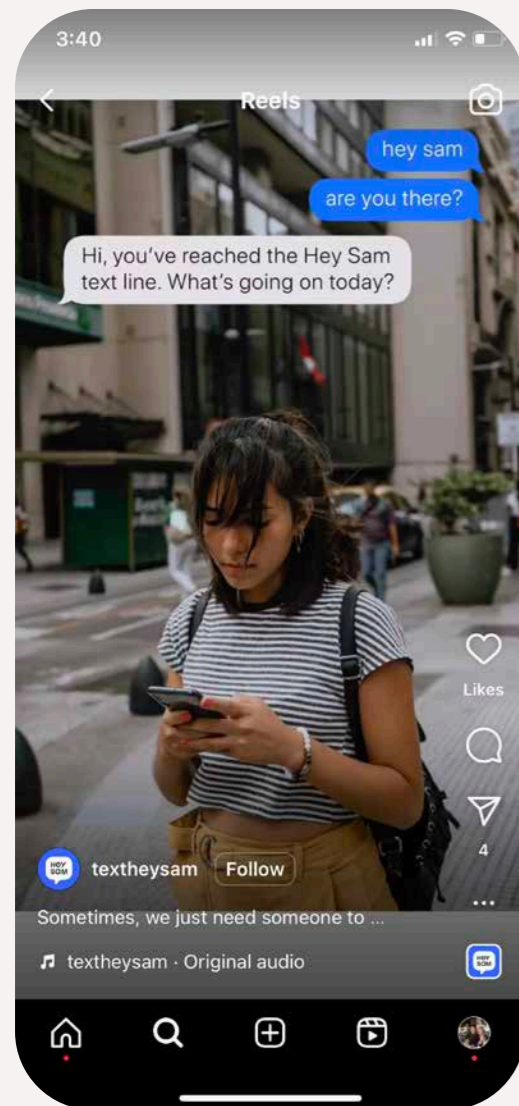


*Images (left to right): Hey Sam (USA) and Kindship (Australia) use mobile platforms so people are able to connect with peer support wherever they are, whenever they need it.*

# Imagine if...

...all people living with a disability could connect with a peer mentor at a similar life-stage to help them navigate their life? And what if being a peer mentor was a role with meaning and purpose to people living with a disability?

...as our population ages, anyone navigating aged and residential care services for a loved one could get practical and emotional support from a peer mentor. Someone who had already done that and wanted to help others avoid the stress and anxiety they experienced?

...as more and more Australians take up caring roles, they could connect with a former carer to help them cope emotionally and practically. What if peer mentor roles helped former carers find meaning in their caring, grief and loss journey?

...as living with storms, droughts, floods and bushfires becomes a reality for more and more Australians, we built a network of mutual support between disaster affected communities so that we could strengthen each others' resilience through pre and post disaster support?

# How peer-to-peer support can mobilise support in areas of escalating demand

## Case studies

**Youth Insearch (Australia)** is a peer-to-peer program that aims to empower and support young people facing various challenges with the aim of preventing youth suicide[17]. The program engages this group through weekend peer-led workshops designed to help young people develop life skills, make connections with peers and foster a supportive community.

**Kindship (Australia)** is an app that connects parents raising children with disability, delays and neurodiversity[18]. Summer Petrosius founded the app based on her experience growing up with undiagnosed Autism and her desire to do something about the isolation and loneliness experienced by families living with disabilities[19]. The app creates a "private and kind space for parents to connect with and learn from each other"[20].

**Mothers2Mothers (International)** connects HIV-positive mothers with each other. The program has supported 15 million women and their families through pregnancy and delivery over 22 years, across ten African countries and has created 12,000 jobs for HIV-positive women as Mentor Mothers[21].

**AgeWell South Africa (International)** connects older people and has enabled less-able elderly people to improve their wellbeing with their WHO-5 Wellbeing score rising from 50% to 79% (an improvement of 58%[22]). The program has recently introduced an app as a health screening tool consisting of 20 questions that can be used during home visits[23].

**Weavers (The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, Australia)** brings the lived experience of caring for a loved one in support of those who are navigating the challenges of providing care. Impact for over 150 carers across 11 organisations has seen reduced social isolation, improved mental and physical health and increased advocacy for quality care[24].

For more detail on these platforms, services and enterprises, and others **download this PDF database** of peer-to-peer examples. If you have more to suggest or would like to connect contact **vita.maiorano@tacsi.org.au**.

Gloria Ncanywa came to the Mothers2Mothers program after she was diagnosed with HIV while pregnant with her son. "Everything just turned black… " she recalls, "my first thought was 'I'm going to die'; people were dying from the stigma."

Gloria was one of the first mothers in the Mothers2Mothers program in South Africa. She feels that as the group of mothers were going through the same experience "it was easier to talk to each other… and mothers knew how to take care of their kids".

Gloria has now taken the opportunity to share her journey as a mother mentor with other mothers. She strongly believes that society's perception has shifted and that Mothers2Mothers helped break down stigma allowing "mothers to be strong"[25].

# How peer-to-peer support can help us all live better at every life stage

*Image:*
*AgeWell (South Africa) - peer mentors training to use the AgeWell app to support them to complete health checks with people they visit in their neighbourhoods.*



## Imagine if...

…young people seeking employment could connect with peer mentors their age who have found employment to provide emotional and practical support? And what if being a peer mentor helped individuals continue to navigate Australia's changing employment market?

…any parent struggling with work-life balance or meeting the needs of a particular child could connect with another peer mentor parent with the experience to help them navigate it?

…all newly arrived migrants in Australia could connect with a migrant from their culture or another to support them with the transition?

…the fitness industry was disrupted by a new national enterprise of peer mentor personal trainers who you could match with based on life stage, culture or other factors?

…leaders of small businesses, large businesses, government, the social purpose sector and community groups could connect with peer mentors from their sector for advice and support to steer their organisations through the fast moving 21st century and the challenges and opportunities that it continues to bring.

…we all could access peer-to-peer support from someone with similar life experience to help us cope with the end of life and death of a loved one?

# How peer-to-peer support can help us all live better at every life stage

## Case studies

**Young Deadly Free Peer Education Program** (**Australia**) was trialled in remote communities across the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia[26]. The program trained young people from remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to use a peer education toolkit to run community peer education sessions on sexual health.

**Hey Sam** (**Samaritans Inc, USA**) is a peer-to-peer texting service designed for and staffed by young people[27]. The program encourages people up to 24 years old to reach out, for whatever reason, and have a conversation with someone who will simply listen rather than give 'advice' or try to 'fix' anything[28]. Since launching in 2022, the program has supported 1694 young people with 75 peer-to-peer text supporters in over 2,300 conversations[29].

**The Pink Elephants Support Network** (**Australia**) was inspired by elephant communities creating a trunk circle of support around mother elephants who have lost a baby[30]. The program draws on volunteer companions to support anyone impacted by pregnancy loss[31]. Pink Elephants work to create the right stories around pregnancy loss by smashing the stigma and creating a new narrative[32].

**Family by Family** (**The Australian Centre for Social Innovation** and **Uniting Communities, Australia, and Shared Lives Plus, UK**) is for any family that wants to change and connects families with shared experience of tough times. The program has reached over 2000 families and 5000 children. The program has a promising evidence base demonstrating family efficacy and change and has shown reductions in participant stress and child protection engagement, along with increasing participants' confidence, wellbeing, parenting capacity, social connections and the leadership skills of children[33].

**Military OneSource** (**American Defence Department, USA**) offers confidential peer-to-peer support for people who have been in the military and their family members[34]. The program provides opportunities for people to talk through challenges like separation and frequent relocation, which are a part of the military lifestyle[35].

**Paediatric Palliative Peer Mentor Project** (**The Australian Centre for Social Innovation** and **Women's and Children's Hospital, South Australia, Australia**) connects bereaved families to families currently caring for their child with a life limiting condition[36]. The program supported 80% of participating families to increase their emotional support, social connectedness and ability to talk openly about their grief[37].

For more detail on these platforms, services and enterprises, and others **download this PDF database** of peer-to-peer examples. If you have more to suggest or would like to connect contact **vita.maiorano@tacsi.org.au**.

Freya is a single mum to three kids and had just left a violent relationship when she found the **Family by Family** program. Freya's family had experienced trauma and were struggling socially as a result when they were paired with their peer mentors, Linda and Paul In 2021, Freya reflected back on this time recalling:

"It all happened in slow motion where my daughter was kind of standing back behind her older brother watching Paul and was really observant of his interaction with Linda and the other children… and it was in that moment when we all kind of had a light bulb moment and we went 'yep'… and slowly all of my children were coming out and building a trusting relationship with other people….".

Now, Freya shares her experience with other families in the program. "I know what it's like to feel unworthy and know what it's like to not have confidence and sometimes all it takes is for someone else to just stand by your side and say you are good enough and I wanted to be able to give that to someone else"[38].

# Does peer-to-peer support work?

## There's a growing body of evidence, particularly from the sectors where peer-to-peer support is mainstream, that peer-to-peer support works:

- A 2018 systematic literature review in mental health settings found that peer-to-peer programs are highly effective in early-intervention and prevention in that they contribute to "significant improvements for service recipients in self-efficacy, empowerment, hope, self esteem, agency, self-management and social inclusion", therefore decreasing the need for engaging in other services down the track[39].

- A study on recovery from substance use determined that immersion in peer support groups and activities and active engagement in the community are the two critical predictors of recovery for more than half the dependent substance users[40].

- A study involving university students in England who frequently engaged in mental health peer-to-peer support, experienced overall better mental health outcomes and were more likely to complete their course[41].

## In peer-to-peer support models, positive outcomes are experienced not only by peers but by peer mentors too.

- A 2019 study found that in mental health settings many peer mentors report positive outcomes as a result of engaging in peer-to-peer models including increased self-esteem, sense of purpose and capability that enable them to enter the workforce after their involvement with the programs[42].

- These outcomes for peer mentors are significant as they will all have experienced tough times in the past and are likely to be experiencing multiple ongoing disadvantages. When it comes to outcomes, peer-to-peer support is double sided.

"I love the fact that we're not professionals but we are professionals because we're families and we've gone through stuff. We can catch up with the families when it's convenient with us, and when it's convenient with them. They know that there's no judgement because we tell them what we've been through and then they tell us what they've been through and then we can help them with that. It's like a cycle; we're giving and they're giving and we're receiving and they're receiving."

— Peer mentor, **Family by Family**
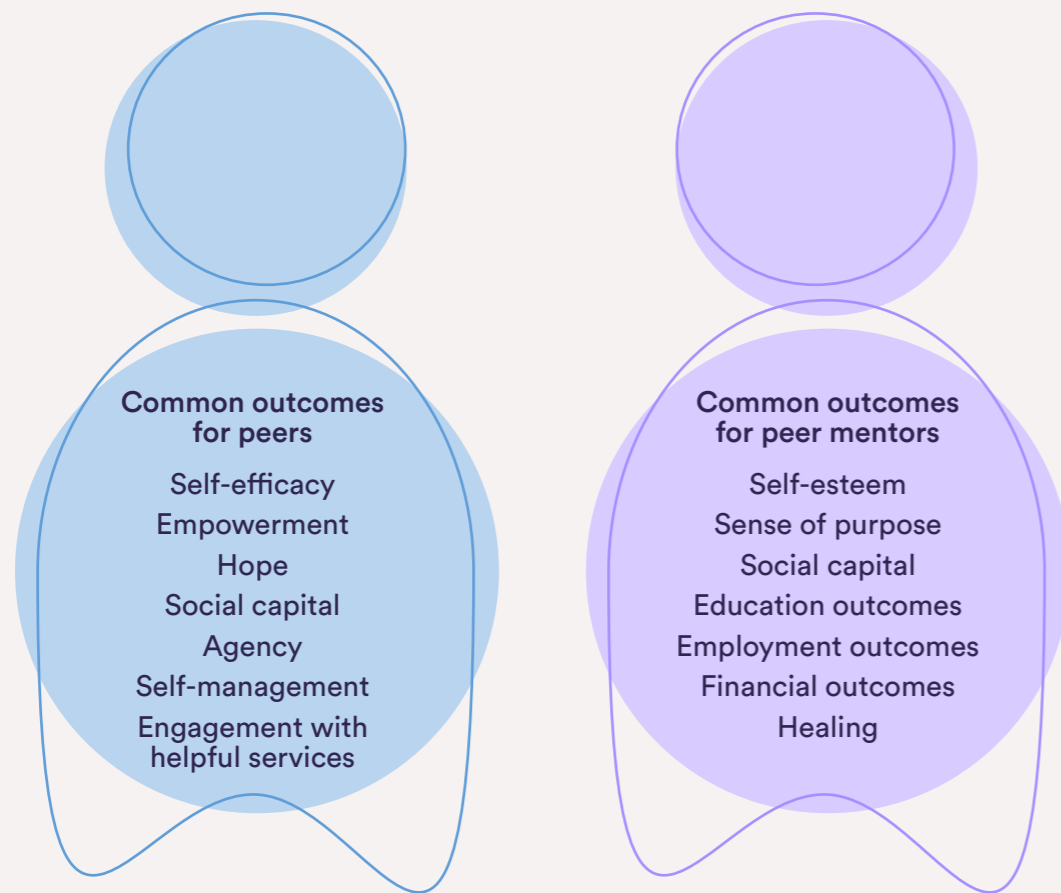
# Does peer-to-peer support work?



**Common outcomes for peers**

Self-efficacy
Empowerment
Hope
Social capital
Agency
Self-management
Engagement with helpful services

**Common outcomes for peer mentors**

Self-esteem
Sense of purpose
Social capital
Education outcomes
Employment outcomes
Financial outcomes
Healing

*Diagram 3:*
*Common outcomes for peers and peer mentors, developed from a synthesis of multiple evaluations and TACSI's own experience.*

## There's also a growing evidence base linking peer-to-peer support with overall cost savings.

### In mental health settings:

- A study conducted on an Australian peer support service, which offers hospital avoidance and early discharge support to consumers of adult mental health services, revealed significant benefits within the first three months of its operation. The employment of peers as supporters during this stage of individuals' recovery resulted in over 300 saved bed days[43].

- A study in Georgia, USA, found that having a certified peer specialist involved in mental health related care led to a reduction of $5,497 per year per person for the state agency[44].

- In Washington, USA, certified peer specialists were able to reduce involuntary mental health related hospitalisations by 32%, saving them an estimated $1.99m per year[45].

- A study in New York, USA, found that peer bridgers in mental health services reduced hospitalisation by 41%[46].

### In relation to substance use:

- A comparative study conducted in the USA examined the effectiveness of a peer support outpatient program in comparison to traditional care. The results showed a 50% reduction in rehospitalizations when compared to the general outpatient population[47].

- A study conducted in Vermont, USA, focusing on peer-delivered recovery support, revealed a significant decrease in the utilisation of expensive services, including emergency rooms and detoxification programs, among individuals who received assistance from peer recovery coaches[48].

### In relation to chronic disease:

- An analysis of a controlled trial in Austria with patients with diabetes found that the peer-to-peer support resulted in substantial annual savings[49].

- A randomised control trial of peer support in diabetes in England found that peer-to-peer support was linked to reduced overall healthcare costs[50].

# What makes peer-to-peer support work?

# What makes peer-to-peer support work?

Relationships are key in peer-to-peer support, 'trust based on shared lived experiences'[51] is the defining feature. Creating trust-based relationships between peers, maintaining them over time, ensuring that they reliably lead to change and doing this at scale requires careful scaffolding.

This is especially true for peer-to-peer models operating within services-systems and professional cultures that value professional experience over lived experience. Support models created and run by people with lived experience don't have this cultural disadvantage.

## What makes peer-to-peer work for peers?

In 2018, Gillard et al, interviewed seventy-one peer supporters from 10 mental health sectors in England to develop a change model for peer work in mental health. The results were published in the peer-reviewed journal Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences.

They found that peers seeking help in mental health commonly experienced improvements in their hope for the future, feelings of empowerment, social functioning, self efficacy, resilience, engagement with services, and strengthening social networks.

Their findings and the change model they developed is coherent with the change we've seen peer-to-peer models create for families engaged with child protection, people experiencing domestic violence and people caring for a loved one. The model

may well be a good general model of how peer-to-peer support works for peers[52].

In 2022, Cody, considering the needs of young people affected by sexual violence, proposed that the relational basis of peer-to-peer support made it particularly well suited to trauma-informed care[53].

Another reason peer-to-peer support works for peers is that many people prefer to seek support from a peer over a professional. Mental health support service Youth Insearch found that a young person is more likely to disclose their distress to a peer as opposed to a health professional or adult. They see support from peers as a key ingredient in assisting the "forgotten middle" group of people to access help before they reach crisis point"[54].

"Having connection to someone makes me feel safer. It's helpful to have a sounding board that is not your family or friends. For me, it's made me feel a part of something again, and not so alone."

– Peer participant in **Virtual Village** program[55]

"Understanding each other's situation and especially the pain I went through, she was not like a doctor who could prescribe something. But what was helpful was that she could understand my pain."
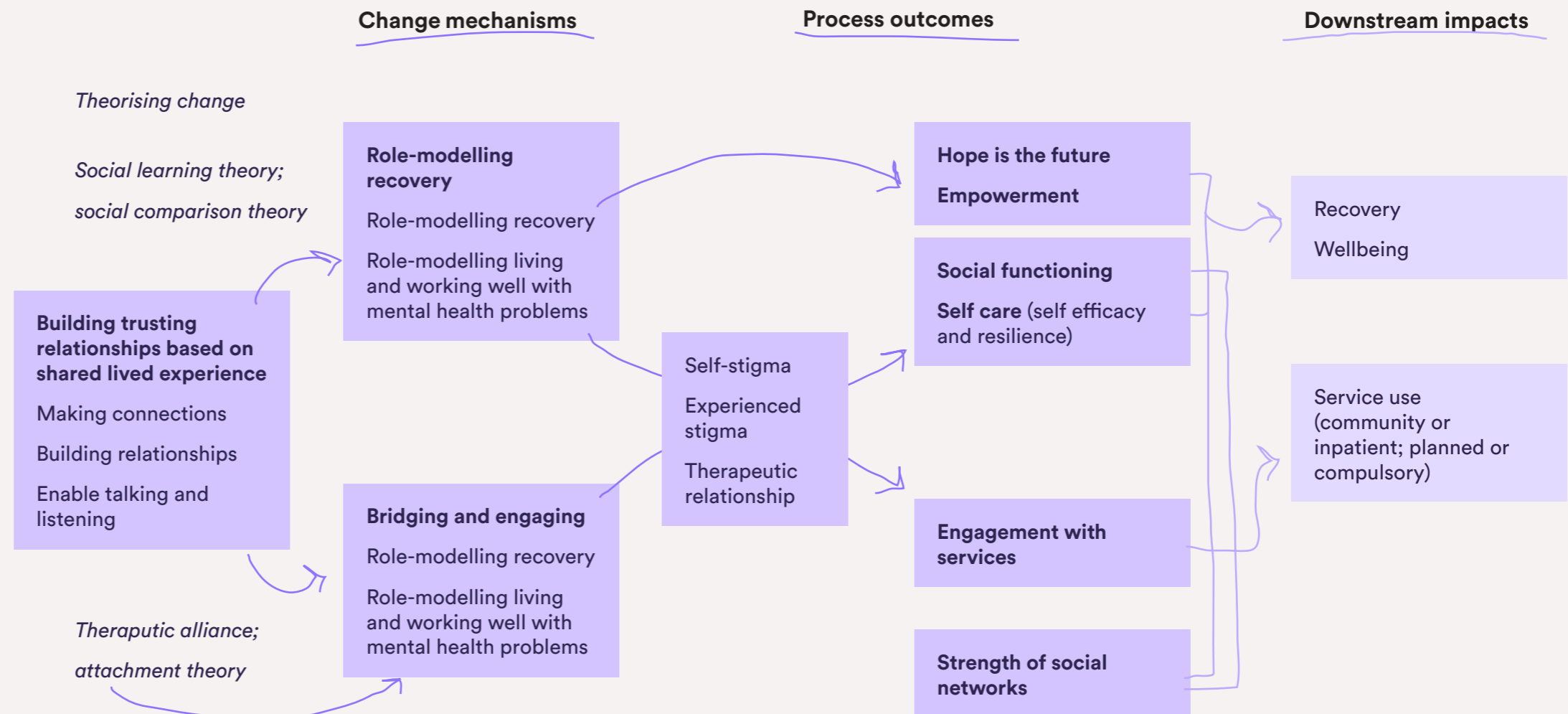
– Peer participant in **Virtual Village** program

# What makes peer-to-peer support work?



*Diagram 4:
S Gillard etal's articulated change model underpinning peer work interventions in mental health, (pg 441 of reference 56 below) can help us understand the key theories, practices and outcomes seen across 10 peer responses that Gillard etal researched. This provides an invaluable basis from which to build upon and adapt into diverse social policy portfolios[56]*

**Change mechanisms**

**Process outcomes**

**Downstream impacts**

*Theorising change*

*Social learning theory;*

*social comparison theory*

**Role-modelling recovery**

Role-modelling recovery

Role-modelling living and working well with mental health problems

**Building trusting relationships based on shared lived experience**

Making connections

Building relationships

Enable talking and listening

Self-stigma

Experienced stigma

Therapeutic relationship

**Bridging and engaging**

Role-modelling recovery

Role-modelling living and working well with mental health problems

*Theraputic alliance;*

*attachment theory*

**Hope is the future**

**Empowerment**

**Social functioning**

**Self care** (self efficacy and resilience)

**Engagement with services**

**Strength of social networks**

Recovery

Wellbeing

Service use (community or inpatient; planned or compulsory)

# What makes peer-to-peer support work?
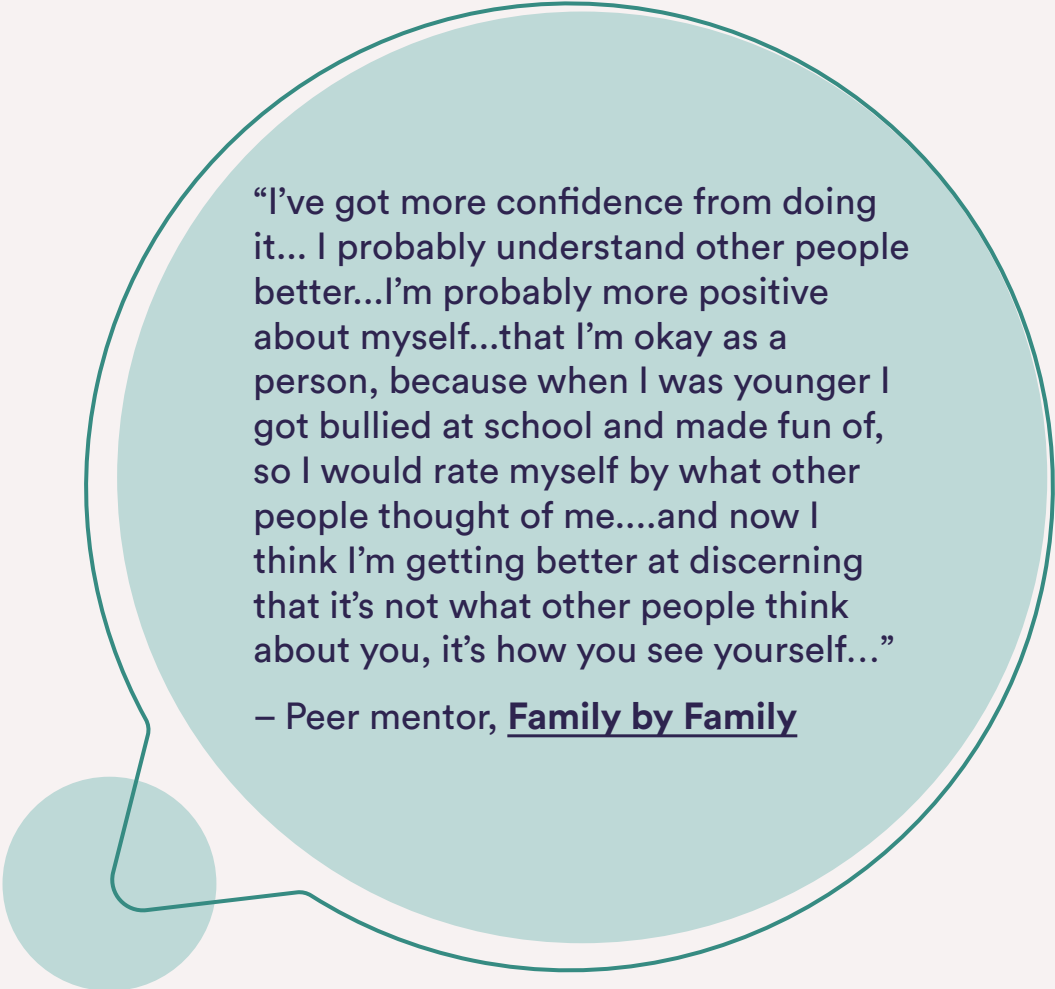
## What makes peer-to-peer work for peer mentors?

In 2022, Moore et al, published a paper in the peer-reviewed journal Frontiers in Psychology exploring how peer-to-peer support works for bereaved military families in the USA.

Based on 32 studies, the paper concluded that peer mentors experience post-traumatic growth (PTG) as a result of supporting peers – specifically because of 'positive self-disclosure', role modelling and the development of mutual understanding, empathy and trust[57]. PTG repairs and restructures a person's' understanding of the world after a traumatic experience[58] and includes growth in relation to others, in seeing new possibilities, in personal strength, spiritual change and a deeper appreciation of life[59].

Whilst this study is specific to bereavements experienced by military families, the findings echo the kinds of changes we've seen for peer mentors working in other domains, including with families, caring and domestic violence.

In our work at TACSI, we've seen how the growth in confidence, self efficacy and agency experienced by peer mentors can contribute to some peer mentors pursuing new pathways to education and employment outcomes.

However, enabling peer mentors to maintain their roles over time takes relationships with professionals and organisational cultures that are supportive of peer mentors' needs, which may well include their own ongoing recovery from trauma.

"I've got more confidence from doing it... I probably understand other people better...I'm probably more positive about myself...that I'm okay as a person, because when I was younger I got bullied at school and made fun of, so I would rate myself by what other people thought of me....and now I think I'm getting better at discerning that it's not what other people think about you, it's how you see yourself…"

– Peer mentor, **Family by Family**

"...Validation of my caring experience enables me to help others at times in their caring journey. I never knew that what I had to offer was of value."

– Peer mentor, **Weavers**[60]

# What makes peer-to-peer support work?

## How do professionals support peer-to-peer work?

Supportive, trauma-informed professionals are critical in scaffolding effective peer-to-peer responses. Peers may stand at the front line of change, however the right kind of professional expertise is needed to support and sustain these relationships.

It's often the combination of a peer mentor and professional expertise that can help peers navigate the most complex of situations. In models where professionals are involved in delivery, they often play a role in recruiting peers and peer mentors, training peer mentors, supporting connections between peers and peer mentors so that they create change, providing supervisory support to peer mentors, managing risk across the program and reporting on progress.

However, the literature on the successful implementation of peer-to-peer models frequently cites professional perceptions as a significant barrier to success. A 2019 study found that peer work in justice settings requires a fundamental mindset shift by professionals about who can hold power and expertise[61]. This finding echoes many of our experiences of implementing peer-to-peer models in other settings.

We have found that professionals are better able to support peer-to-peer models when personal experience, training, management, organisational culture and sector cultures support professionals to:

- Value lived expertise as a strength and see it as complementary to their own expertise, rather than a threat.

- Recognise and celebrate the achievements of peers and peer mentors, including in their lives before joining the program.

- Learn from peers and peer mentors whilst also helpfully sharing professional expertise with them.

- Be ambitious about what peers and peer mentors can achieve.

- Build empathy and understanding with peers and peer mentors.

- Respond creatively to challenges and be prepared for the unexpected situations created by peer-to-peer responses.

- Draw on knowledge from multiple disciplines to support the holistic nature of peer-to-peer support.

- Understand that risks are different in peer-to-peer models though not necessarily greater and can be managed effectively.

- Use everyday language, rather than professional language.

In peer-to-peer platforms, services and enterprises where professionals play less of a day-to-day role, they still play a major role in architecting the platform or service model, which is often digitally enabled.

## How do platforms and service models support peer-to-peer work?

The platforms and service models that support peer-to-peer work often differ considerably from their professionally delivered equivalents because they have to work for peers and peer mentors who operate outside of professional norms. For example, recruitment may need to happen in public settings (online or in real life); promotional materials may need to use colloquial language; training sessions may need to happen at night or with children present; and measures of success will need to reflect what peers deem important.

Peer-to-peer support platforms and services of all kinds, including digitally delivered, are usually designed in ways that enable them to:

- Recruit, train and support professionals to embrace the approach to practise previously outlined. This may include the inclusion of peers and/or peer mentors in those recruitment, training and support processes.

- Recruit peers seeking support in ways that don't stigmatise. This requires consideration of where to recruit people and the messaging and value proposition that will attract them to opt into the program. Whilst some peer-to-peer responses recruit via services, some recruit via word of mouth or in public places in context relevant to the target demographic, like supermarkets for recruiting families.

- Recruit and train peer mentors, these are people willing to help others, who have the experience, interpersonal skills and capacity to do so. A common consideration is if would-be peer mentors are yet far enough from their own trauma to have the emotional resilience to help others.

- Incentivise ongoing participation for peers and peer mentors. Participation may be voluntary, highlight the value proposition of learning from someone who has been through a similar challenge as the peer, financially rewarded or use other incentives such as qualifications or training.

- Facilitate routines for engagement and reflection between peers, peer mentors and supporting professionals. The format, nature and frequency of these routines vary to fit context and target cohort/s.

- Track and report on what's working and what needs to improve. We've found that common approaches to monitoring and evaluation can easily disrupt the delicate relationships between peers, whereas more participatory evaluation approaches gather evidence in more meaningful and reflective ways.

- Develop and improve the service model through processes and cycles of planning, design and evaluation. Given the degree to which peer-to-peer service models deviate from service-system norms, participatory design and evaluation processes, which meaningfully engage peers and peer mentors in decision making, are invaluable.

# What makes peer-to-peer support work?

## How do organisations support peer-to-peer work?

Supporting peer-to-peer work requires recognising it requires a different set of enabling conditions to professionally delivered services. In 2021 the National Mental Health Commission did just that, stating that: "Lived Experience work or practice is recognised as a unique and separate discipline that offers a valuable contribution to the mental health sector. As its own discipline, Lived Experience work has distinct values, principles, and theories that define Lived Experience work and the way it is practised.[62]"

One particularly important consideration is the support provided to peer mentors. Employing peer mentors into roles that ask them to constantly share what may well have been the hardest experiences of their life is a significant request. Where organisational policies, practices and cultures are not supportive and trauma aware, peer mentors can and do experience re-traumatisation and other harms.

Organisational leaders attracted to developing peer-to-peer services need to stop and think whether they are doing this for purposes of market differentiation, or whether they are committed to the idea of peer-to-peer and recognising lived and living expertise to change organisational policies, practices and governance to scaffold a new way of working alongside peer mentors.

The Lived Experience Development, Governance & Education Project by LELAN is looking at these issues. For them, having peer delivered services complemented by a governance and professional workforce

that is inclusive of people in lived-experience roles is critical.

"Mental health and social sector organisations having decision making processes that include people with lived experience is a social justice issue. People deserve to have a seat at the table when there are decisions being made that affect them"[63].

"You need to have people who are open to accepting their limitations and receiving feedback on getting something wrong. What we've found over the years is that we need to have a really good balance between people with their own lived experience and people with good clinical and other experience and if that balance gets out of whack, we aren't doing our work as well as we've seen ourselves do in the past."

– Dr. Stefan Gruenert,
  CEO, Odyssey House Victoria[65]

## How can policy and funding support peer-to-peer work?

There are many ways that policy and funding can encourage peer-to-peer work.

Recognition of peer-to-peer models as a genuine and desirable service option and funding to deliver them would be a significant driver of change. The Government of South Australia has recently done this in the child and family support system; so has the French government in areas including housing, homelessness, health and disability[64].

However, given how peer-to-peer models challenge the norms of professional services, delivery funding alone is unlikely to achieve the best possible outcomes in the long term. Consideration needs to be given to the time and care required to develop effective peer-to-peer models, the capability building and cultural change needed to deliver them successfully.

In fact, in addition to funding existing providers commissioners should consider the potential to accelerate and amplify the work of the new wave of peer-to-peer innovators, often people with lived experience themselves, who are creating platforms and enterprises with cultures that already value lived experience.

Commissioning also needs to take into account what's considered a good outcome for peer-to-peer support in any given sector. Because peer-to-peer models provide the holistic support that peers want, peer-to-peer work often creates a broader range of outcomes than professionally delivered services. For example, a service supporting families may create child protection outcomes, mental health outcomes and education outcomes – but not enough of each to be considered a 'child protection service' or a 'mental health' service or an 'education' service. The fact that peer-to-peer support often contributes to the diversity of outcomes people want and need should be seen as a strength – not a weakness. Commissioning should reflect this.

# Recommendations

# Recommendations

## We believe peer-to-peer support platforms are particularly relevant in settings where:

- In-community responses are preferable.
- Responses are preventative, rehabilitative or support ongoing management (e.g. of chronic conditions).
- Upstream professional responses are expensive and/or not able to meet demand.
- There are large numbers of people experiencing a particular challenge and relatively large numbers of people who have got through it who are open to sharing their lived expertise with others.

## Particular areas in Australia that would benefit from an explicit peer-to-peer strategy (and where there is evidence it works), include:

**Child protection:** Where peer-to-peer support platforms between families could:

- Prevent the escalation of family stress into the need for more costly responses.
- Support the successful reunification of children with birth parents, avoiding the long-term costs of out-of-home care.
- Support foster carers in their roles.

**Caring:** Where peer-to-peer support between carers and former carers could reduce the poor levels of physical and mental health experienced by the majority of carers[66], and the subsequent need for professional support. This is relevant to carers of all kinds, including people caring for older loved ones, children with life limiting illnesses, and people living with disability.

**Mental wellness:** Where the growth of peer-to-peer support platforms in communities could prevent the escalation of mental distress into mental illness that requires a professional response.

## If you already run a peer-to-peer support platform:

- Keep going! And document and share the story of development, delivery and your results, good and bad, so others can learn from you.
- **Download this PDF database** of peer-to-peer examples and contact **vita.maiorano@tacsi.org.au** to add the details of your platform.
- Add the details of your platform to the **open database of peer-to-peer models**.
- Excite those around you about the potential of peer-to-peer support. This will help to encourage experimentation and improve the conditions for the peer-to-peer support platforms, services and enterprises.
- Pass on this paper to educate others about the potential of peer-to-peer support and the kinds of future it could lead to.

## If you are an organisational leader interested in furthering the potential of peer-to-peer support:

Host conversations introducing the idea of peer-to-peer support and explore its potential in your organisation.

Build your understanding of platforms for peer-to-peer support. You can start with the examples and research cited in this paper.

Ask yourself if you are genuinely ready, willing and able to create the conditions in your organisation to support peer mentors in their work, acknowledging that creating the best conditions for people with lived experience is likely to mean changes to organisational policies and governance.

Identify where in your organisation you could amplify peer-to-peer support that is already happening, or introduce aspects of peer-to-peer support by adopting or adapting existing models, or developing your own.

Advocate for system wide integration of peer-to-peer support, through your peak body, feedback opportunities with funders, and reform opportunities.

Self-fund small experiments with peer-to-peer support to create a fledgling evidence base that could leverage further funding.

# Recommendations

## If you are a policy maker, commissioner, funder, investor or seeking to influence system wide reforms:

- Map the extent to which peer-to-peer support models are part of existing practice in your system of focus, including the innovations outside of mainstream service delivery.
- Identify peer-to-peer support models from other contexts that could be adapted and adopted into your space.
- Create an investment case for furthering peer-to-peer support platforms in your context.
- Develop a sectoral strategy that includes elements of:
  - Spotlighting existing practice
  - Building understanding of peer-to-peer support models.
  - Adopting and adapting models from other contexts to create outcomes locally.
  - Generating an evidence base, where evidence can be connected to further investment.
  - Supporting the development of new models where there are gaps and opportunities.
  - Supporting existing providers and bolstering new market entrants.

## If you are interested in the growth of peer-to-peer support on a national level:

- Fund the creation of a national learning network for peer-to-peer service and enterprise leaders, across sectors, to connect and share know-how.
- Fund the creation of a national lab to accelerate Social R&D[67] for peer-to-peer support. The lab would:
  - Bring together best-in-world evidence for peer-to-peer support models
  - Coordinate a program of national experiments in key high-potential issues areas
  - Support local experimentation
  - Raise the profile and understanding of peer-to-peer support models
  - Create the policy argument and investment cases for further growth of peer-to-peer support
- What if we built a national system for Social R&D in peer-to-peer responses that encouraged experimentation, developed new models and infrastructure and shared those nationally on an open source basis?

*Image:*
*TACSI's Family by Family program connects families going through tough times with families who have been through tough times themselves and come out the other side.*

# Endnotes

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# Connect with us

At TACSI, we see the potential of peer-to-peer work. This is because over the last ten years and together with a brilliant set of partners, peers and peer mentors, we've designed peer-to-peer programs, built the capability of professionals to run them, and the conditions in organisations to support them.

If you're interested in exploring any of the ideas in this paper further, get in touch with us:

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