

12.0 Supporting youth workers

Youth workers need to prioritise the practice of self-care; of looking after the self as a means to assure longevity of career and continued high quality service provision to young people.⁸³

The second most common reason that young people require support from Youth Workers is because of mental health issues, including suicidal behaviours.⁸² Often, Youth Workers are the first point of contact for a suicidal young person and their response can help ensure they receive appropriate support and care.¹⁶ Given the challenging and stressful nature of working with young people who are at risk of suicide as well as the fact the Youth Workers dedicate a significant amount of time to this aspect of care, it is important that Youth Workers are well trained and supported in order to be able to respond appropriately. The youth work sector experience a number of challenges. These include a high staff turnover, a large proportion of workers with less than two years of experience, a shrinking workforce, reduced access to training and education and a shortage of career pathways, and inability to retain qualified and experienced staff.⁸² In addition to this, Youth Workers often feel undervalued and unsupported.⁸²

These challenges are likely to impact on the ability of the sector to respond to suicide, in particular the lack of experience and need for training, and highlight the need for services to have support systems in place that address these issues. A number of studies have described strategies that can be used to better support Youth Workers. These include suicide specific strategies such as organisational policies and procedures outlining how to respond to suicide, access to suicide specific training as well as general support strategies such as opportunities for reflective practice, supervision and self-care.^{16, 61} This section describes the existing literature on ways of supporting Youth Workers who work with suicidal people and reports on the findings from the interviews with Youth Service Providers to describe what is currently happening in the sector.

a) Policy and procedures

Youth Workers operate under a variety of different frameworks. These include legal frameworks including the Privacy Act, structural frameworks such as their own organisation's policy and procedures and the ethical frameworks as outlined in the Youth Work Code of Ethics.⁸³ Youth Workers also draw on their own personal ethics to guide their practice.⁸³ Youth Workers are required to fulfil their obligations under each framework whilst meeting the needs of young people.

Organisational policies and procedures provide guidance for Youth Workers responding to a suicide crisis or emergency situation. There are specific aspects that should be incorporated into organisational policies and procedures that outline how to respond to suicide. These include outlining who is responsible for decision making, what factors will underpin the decisions made, ways to communicate what approaches have been used to provide care for the young person and strategies for follow-up care.¹⁰⁷ Policies and procedures may also address how to respond after a suicide or suicide attempt has occurred. This will help to identify how staff can be best supported, as well as

the young person and anyone else affected. Headspace has developed a Suicide Postvention Toolkit for secondary schools that outlines how to respond after a suicide has occurred. While it was developed for use within a school setting, it has relevance for Youth Service Providers working with homeless young people and is available on request from www.headspace.org.au/what-works/school-support/resources.

Organisational policies and procedures need to be flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of young people, but this should not prevent them from being specific and easily understood.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, organisational policies and procedures should be reflected in practice. If there are barriers to implementation such as lack of time, poor communication or a lack of staff training, then, where possible these will need to be addressed.¹⁰⁷

What is happening in the sector?

Most of the Youth Service Providers interviewed had organisational policies and procedures that described in broad terms how to respond to a suicidal person. The larger Youth Service Providers tended to have more in-depth policies and procedures when compared to the smaller services. Only a few services had procedures that described in detail specific aspects of responding to suicide such as creating a safety plan or how to assess the level of suicide risk. Very few services provided information to staff on how to respond after a suicide or suicide attempt had occurred. Services that did not have policies and procedures often explained that instead they relied on staff to draw on their own skills and training. Another common practice was to contact a senior staff member in a crisis situation who could provide support as well as advice on how to respond. One service cited a lack of resources as a barrier to implementing suicide specific policies and procedures.

b) Access to training

Providing suicide specific training to those who work directly with suicidal people has been shown to reduce suicidal behaviours in certain population groups.⁵⁵ Youth Workers have a duty under the Youth Worker Code of Ethics, to maintain a level of knowledge that ensures they are competent to meet their obligations. This includes keeping informed on current approaches to best practice in youth work.⁸³

What is happening in the sector?

Most Perth based services working with homeless young people encourage Youth Workers to complete suicide prevention training. However, suicide specific training was not compulsory at any of the services interviewed and as a result, often not all service staff had undertaken training. The training that was most commonly completed was ASIST, Youth Mental Health First Aid and Gatekeeper Training. A few Youth Service Providers had staff with specialist skills or representatives from YouthLink to provide specific training to address some of the complex issues around suicide.

For more information on suicide specific training available in Western Australia visit the training section of this website www.yacwa.org.au/youthworkertoolkit/suicide-prevention

c) Reflective practice

Reflective practice provides an opportunity for professionals to critically review their approach, identify areas for improvement and ways to achieve this.¹⁰⁸ Reflection enables Youth Workers to continue to refine and develop their practice with each experience. Without reflective practice, professionals may become rigid in their approach, thus limiting their ability to meet the needs of clients.¹⁰⁸ Reflective practice can increase a Youth Workers self-awareness of how they practice and encourage them to seek out opportunities for professional development.

What is happening in the sector?

In Perth, Youth Service Providers generally incorporate reflective practice into supervision or de-briefing sessions. One service provider encouraged Youth Workers to undertake reflective practice through personal journal writing which could then be shared in supervision sessions.

For an easy to use personal reflective practice tool see www.yacwa.org.au/youthworkertoolkit/suicide-prevention

d) Self-care

Working with a suicidal person can be emotionally draining and unsupported workers risk becoming disconnected and experiencing burnout.¹⁰⁹ Effective self-care can protect against these factors.^{16, 109} The Youth Work Code of Ethics encourages Youth Workers to engage in self-care to ensure personal health, career longevity and quality care for young people.⁸³ There are a number of ways that Youth Workers can engage in self-care and include both personal and professional strategies. Personal strategies may include taking time out to relax with friends, catching up on sleep or exercising. Professional strategies may include participating in peer de-briefing or contacting a professional help line. In Western Australia there are number of sources of professional help for Youth Workers. This includes the Suicide Call Back Service which is a free service that can provide information, advice and support to professionals who work with suicidal people. Another option that may be available is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAP is a professional fee-for-service program that provides support to employees in relation to their psychological well-being.¹¹⁰ Organisations must pay for employees to have access to EAP and therefore, it is not available to all Youth Workers. It should be noted that EAP does not provide support for professional development and should not be used as a replacement for supervision.

What is happening in the sector?

The majority of services interviewed provide their employees with access to EAP. Few services knew about the professional support offered by the Suicide Call Back Service, which is useful to Youth Workers following a crisis situation as it can provide emotional support as well as professional guidance on responding to suicide. Peer and team de-briefing was a common strategy and was usually undertaken as part of team meetings or following a crisis situation. Youth Service Providers have an open door policy where management is available for de-briefing and support at any time.

For self-care tips visit www.yacwa.org.au/youthworkertoolkit/suicide-prevention to ten self-care tips document

e) Access to supervision

Within the context of youth work, supervision is a meeting between a Youth Worker and another person or persons who has a higher level of skill, knowledge or experience.¹¹¹ This person takes the role of the supervisor, enabling the Youth Worker to reflect on their professional practice so that they can learn and develop professionally and contribute to advancing the profession.¹¹² External supervision occurs when a person, who operates externally to the Youth Workers place of employment and is generally paid for their time and undertakes supervision in a confidential environment.¹¹¹ External supervision is different from internal supervision, where the supervision session is undertaken by a senior staff member within the Youth Workers place of employment.¹¹¹ In a report undertaken by the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition,⁸² Youth Workers reported that internal supervision often focuses on performance evaluation or administrative support as opposed to professional development and emotional support. Youth Workers interviewed preferred if supervision encompasses support and learning, is free of charge, easy to access and offered outside of their place of employment.^{82, 113}

What is happening in the sector?

The majority of Youth Service Providers that were interviewed offered Youth Workers access to regular internal supervision; only one service provider offered access to regular external supervision. Youth Service Providers acknowledged the importance of external supervision and stated that cost was a barrier. To increase the effectiveness of internal supervision a number of Youth Service Providers stated that they made sure performance evaluation was undertaken separately to supervision.

To learn more read Professional Supervision www.yapa.org.au/youthwork/facts/supervision.pdf