

THE POWER OF PEER SUPPORT

A GUIDE TO PROMOTING PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

VELOS YOUTH, 2024



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Support Networks

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Introduction

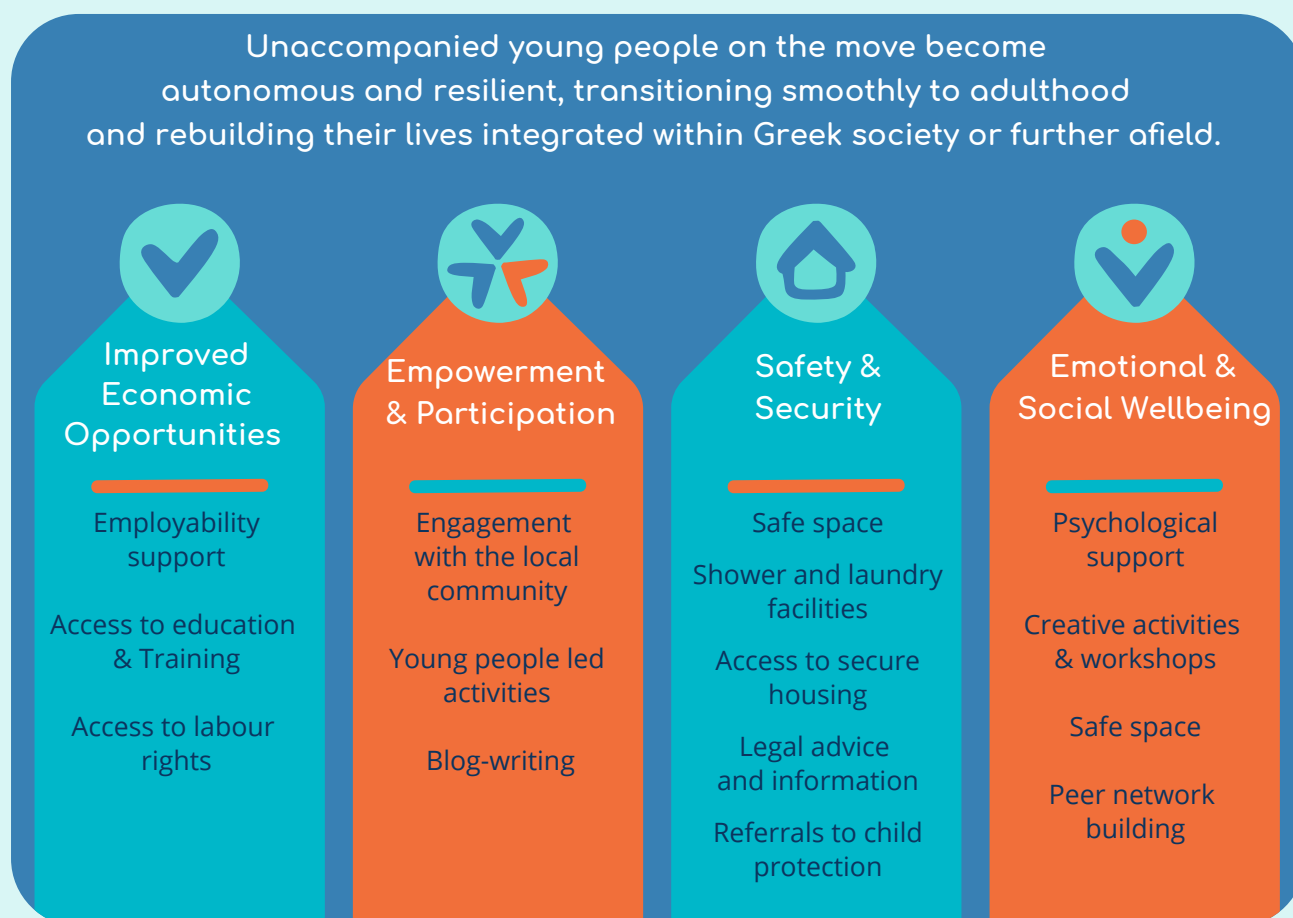
Since 2017, grassroots NGO Velos Youth has provided safe spaces and support services to newly arrived displaced young people in Athens, Greece. Velos Youth's mission is to support these young people to build lives integrated within Greek society, and to transition smoothly to adulthood. These safe spaces include firstly a youth centre, which houses a dining room, social space and classroom, and secondly a semi-autonomous apartment for young people wishing to find work and eventually their own private accommodation.

Velos Youth is staffed by a multidisciplinary team of professionals that provide holistic support and guidance to young people, however the change fostered in young people's lives is not possible without the aid of their wider support networks. Integral to these networks are the young people's peers. In spaces such as those provided by Velos Youth, peer support networks seem to emerge organically. Instances of young people benefiting from these are frequent, and their impact often profound. The key principle underpinning this impact is that individuals who have gone through similar experiences can offer valuable insights, empathy, and practical assistance to others facing similar challenges. Through a sense of solidarity, peer-to-peer support networks contribute to building resilience, and enhancing overall well-being and outcomes for young displaced people.

The aim of this project was therefore to better understand how these networks develop, and why. What are the conditions necessary for young people's peer-to-peer support networks to develop and thrive? What are the motivations of those involved? And most importantly, what can organisations and community spaces such as Velos Youth do to promote and harness their potential. This document first lays out the theory and assumptions behind why peer-to-peer support networks develop, before presenting the findings of research conducted with seven young people who access Velos Youth's services and are engaged in peer-to-peer support. A number of case studies are then presented, before this guide concludes with a list of concrete recommendations for others looking to promote and stimulate peer-to-peer support within their unique contexts.

This document is not only for those working with young people who are displaced, but can be transferred to any community setting in which a specific population is facing a set of common challenges. The document was produced as part of the *Bridge to the Future* project, funded by the *European Philanthropic Initiative for Migration*. More information about the project can be found [here](#).

The diagram below shows the broad impact that Velos Youth aims to create, the four core pillars through which it is created, and a number of activities and services associated with each. Velos Youth's activities and services typically span more than a single pillar, and work together to create the desired and necessary holistic approach to supporting young people.



Why Peer-to-Peer Support Networks Emerge, at a Glance

Refugees often face unique challenges and traumas that individuals who have gone through similar experiences can best understand and manage. Peers with firsthand knowledge of the refugee journey can offer empathy and guidance to their peers in ways that professionals or outsiders cannot. Peers in refugee communities also have a deeper understanding of each other's cultural norms, traditions, and language, which are important for effective communication and support.

Additionally peer-to-peer support networks in refugee communities feed off of a sense of trust, solidarity, and empowerment. By engaging with individuals with similar experiences and identities, these networks can lead others to safe spaces where they can seek help, share their stories, and access resources without fear of judgement or discrimination. Encouraging peer support networks generates solidarity and reciprocity, strengthens social cohesion, reduces isolation, and helps form a stronger sense of community.

Peer-to-peer Support Settings at Velos Youth

The Velos Youth team tries both in its day centre, which works as a multifaceted safe space, and in its semi-autonomous accommodation (Housing Integration Project) to stimulate and enhance peer-to-peer support. Through the services provided by Velos Youth, the organisation strives to thoroughly inform and empower the young people who visit the day centre and participate in various activities, enabling them to become more independent.

The English classes offered within the day centre, through the "Living the English Language" programme, provide young people with the opportunity to enhance their language skills, boost their self-esteem, and increase their resilience. The English teacher has implemented various strategies to engage her students in the classroom.

One such approach involves assigning a student who is proficient in English to act as a mediator between the teacher and those students who are not fluent in the language. This “assistant-interpreter” experiences a sense of fulfilment and achievement as they share their knowledge with their peers, motivating others to strive for improvement in learning English.

Through the "Living the English Language" programme, students learn the value of collaboration, overcoming language barriers, and supporting one another. The English class transforms into a peer-to-peer environment where students cooperate in their studies, work together to prepare for English exams, and provide mutual support during challenging times.

Regarding Velos Youth's Housing Integration Project, peer-to-peer interaction is the primary method of managing the apartment, which accommodates six young people. New participants are introduced to the housing project and receive guidance from existing residents on the rules and routines within the apartment. They learn how to collaborate and coexist with others in the shared living space. In situations where someone is in need, fellow residents step in to offer assistance. There have been instances where young participants have accompanied others to medical appointments, acted as interpreters, searched for rental and secured accommodations together, assisted with bureaucratic procedures and helped their peers in finding employment.

Velos Youth places a strong emphasis on providing all young people with the necessary information to live independently. They are well informed about the available services in Athens, enabling them to access healthcare, meals, clothing, or employment opportunities autonomously. Knowing that the information they receive is trustworthy and accurate, young people feel confident in sharing it with others within their circle or with people they perceive to be in need. Notably, young individuals are inclined to support each other when they feel secure and connected. Initiatives such as the Housing Integration Project, "Living the English Language," and the safe space provided by Velos Youth foster peer-to-peer relationships and create a supportive environment for collaboration.



Research Methodology



During the period February to March 2024, a survey was conducted through questionnaires at the Velos Youth Centre in Greece. The organisation's social worker interviewed seven young people on the topic of peer-to-peer support. The survey aimed to understand the awareness young people have of the influence role models have on our lives, the personal growth they experience through supporting their peers, the atmosphere created at Velos Youth day centre for peer-to-peer interactions, the benefits they derive from peer-to-peer relationships, and the advantages of overcoming challenges through peer-support.

At the beginning of each interview, the social worker informed the participants about anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the interview's subject. The majority of participants willingly attended the interviews, but it is possible that there was a small minority who may have felt obligated to participate. The social worker aimed to intervene minimally to ensure organic interview results. Some participants found the vocabulary in the questions challenging, so additional information was provided, potentially leading to some inaccurate responses. The questionnaire consisted of eighteen questions, with seven being open-ended where participants could freely elaborate on their opinions. The remaining eleven questions were closed, requiring participants to choose from a Likert scale of answers such as yes/no.



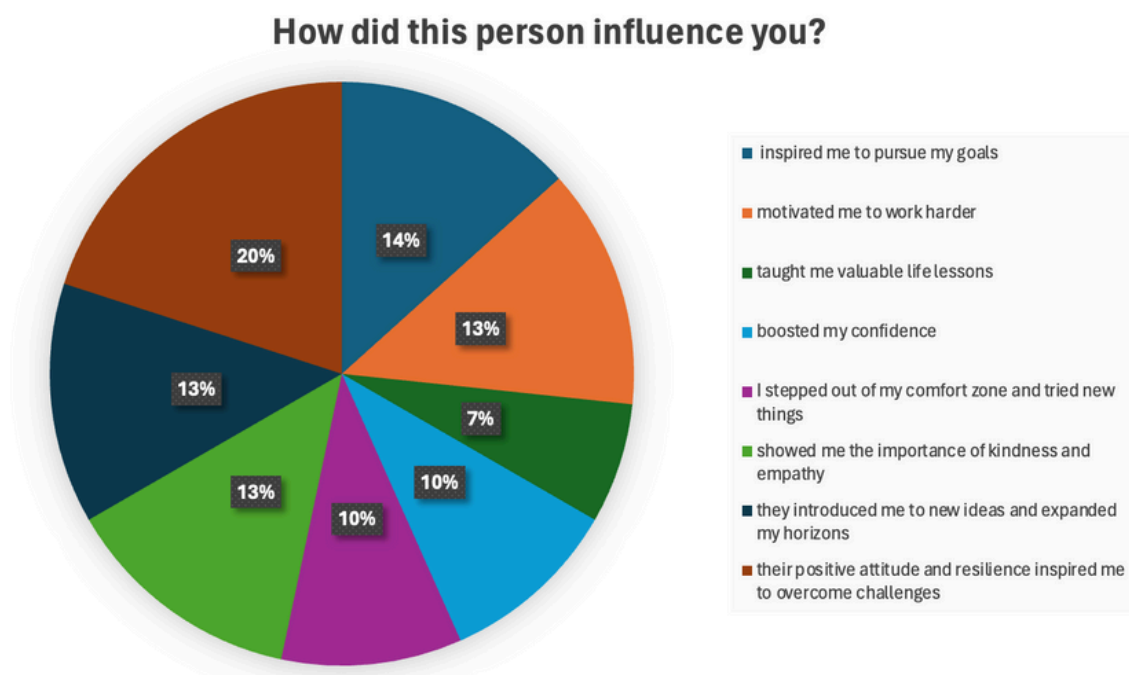
Findings



In the survey seven young people, four males and three females participated. One of them was under eighteen and the rest between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. The first question, following the demographic questions, assesses the participant's familiarity with role models. All participants responded that they have been influenced by positive role models in their lives, such as a close friend, a family member, or a well-known individual who contributes positively to society.

In the next question the young participants were asked how this person influenced them (table 1). All the participants answered positively when asked if they have ever supported another young person.

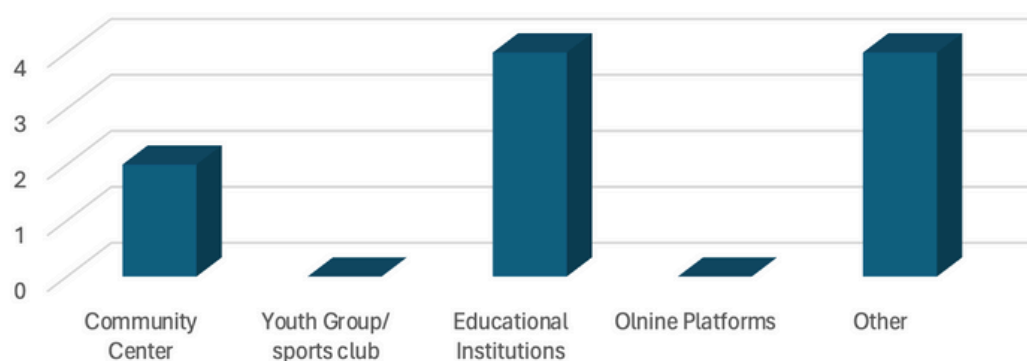
Table 1



Shown in table 2, the young people informed us about the places they met the young person that they had offered support to. Four participants answered “other” on this question and they highlighted housing projects and social interaction in open spaces.

Table 2

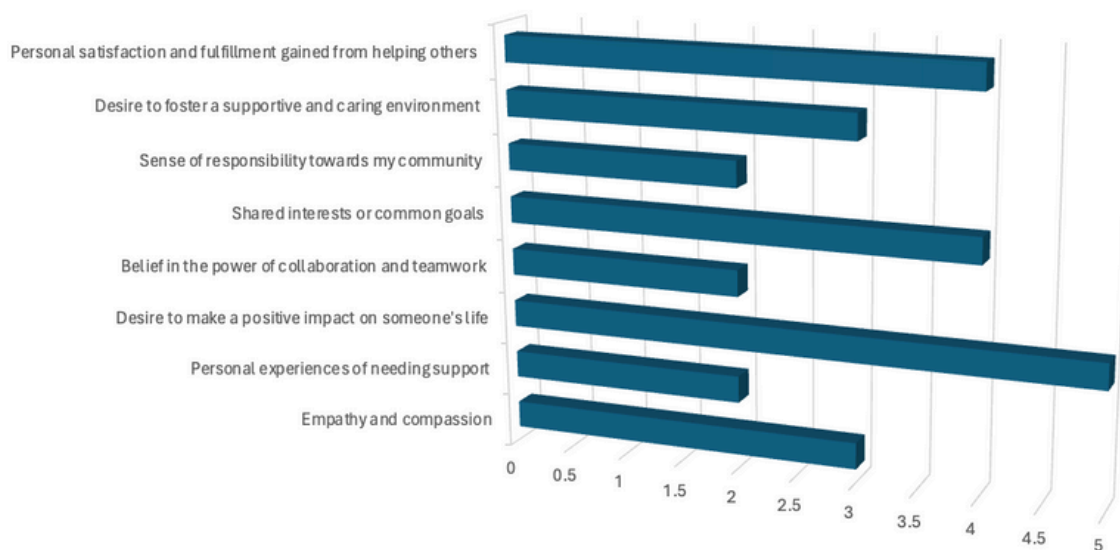
Where did you meet the young person you supported?



The next question was designed to understand what drives young people in supporting another young person (table 3). The participants could give more than one answer to this question.

Table 3

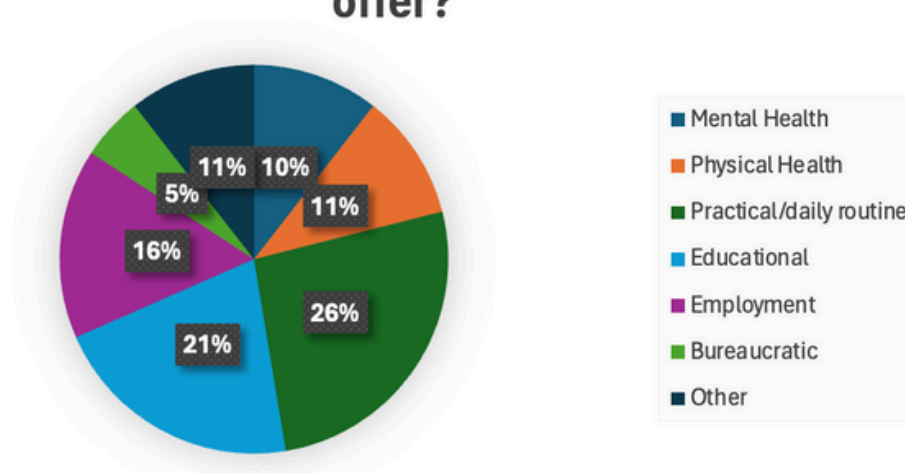
What drove you in supporting and sharing information with them?



The following question asked what kind of support/information the interviewee gave to the person in need (table 4). The choice "other" was chosen by two of the participants and it was described that they offer emotional support to enable the other person overcome the difficulties they were facing, or they brought the person in need to Velos Youth to receive the support they needed.

Table 4

What kind of support/information did you offer?



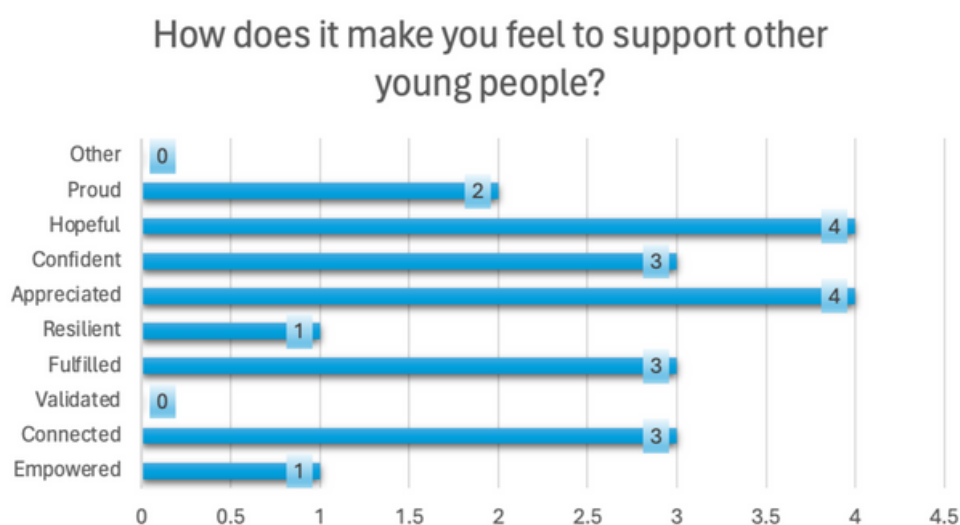
In the 9th question, the participants were asked, "How does the person you try to support receive your advice/support?" All participants stated that the individuals who received their support/advice accepted it happily. One participant described the experience as "waking up" the other person, who was shocked by the information received due to a lack of knowledge on how to access the needed support. However, two young people highlighted that there are cases where individuals may reject support due to negative past experiences with misguided support. One of these participants mentioned one case where suggesting a visit to a psychologist was met with refusal and argument, as the other person perceived the suggestion as implying they were "crazy."

In the next question, young people were asked, "How do you think being a good example affects the people around you?" All participants stated that others are positively affected, and it motivates them to also try to be better themselves. All interviewees were aware that their attitude, behaviour, and lifestyle have a positive impact on those around them. One participant explained that when she passed her English exams and obtained a diploma, many of her friends asked how they could do the same, leading them to enrol in the same English class she attended. They emphasised that being a positive influence, empowers those around them to pursue their own dreams. However, two participants mentioned that being a good example does not always have a positive effect on everyone around them, as some people may envy their progress and not appreciate their success.

Five participants answered positively to the question "Were you supported by any young person in the past?" while two participants answered negatively. Consequently, these two participants did not respond to the following question, "In what way were you supported?" For the remaining participants, the support they received included financial assistance, accommodation support, help from Greek schoolmates in learning the Greek language, assistance from other students in the English class in improving their English proficiency, and support in finding employment opportunities.

On the next question is observed the positive feelings that the participants feel when they offer support to another young person (table 5).

Table 5



The next question posed in the survey was, "What have you learned from being a support provider?" Six participants shared their positive experiences as support providers, highlighting the valuable life lessons they gained. However, one participant expressed disappointment in their role as a support provider. They emphasised that the person receiving support often learns more than the one offering it, and not everyone necessarily requires assistance. The remaining participants expressed satisfaction in supporting others, noting that they developed resilience through facing disappointments when their efforts were not appreciated. They also mentioned an increase in empathy by empathising with others' experiences and providing assistance to those in need, emphasising the significant impact that small gestures can have on someone's life.

The next question in the questionnaire was, "Have you noticed any positive changes in the confidence or skills of the people you support?" Out of the respondents (5 individuals), the majority observed an increase in the supported individuals' confidence, happiness, and newfound



hope for a better future. However, one participant expressed uncertainty regarding the impact of his support on the confidence levels of those he assisted. Lastly, another participant shared a disappointing experience, noting that despite providing information and assistance to a person in need, the individual ultimately made their own decisions without following the guidance provided.

The interviewees were then asked, "How likely are you to seek support or advice from your peers when facing challenges and problems?" Two participants responded, "very likely" (28%), while another two indicated "likely" (29%), with the remaining three participants stating they were "somewhat likely" (43%). In response to the question, "Do you believe that peer-to-peer support creates a safe and supportive learning environment?" six interviewees affirmed the positive impact of peer support. They highlighted that seeking support from peers of similar age and refugee status fosters friendships, unity, and a sense of solidarity. Participants noted that individuals in need feel less isolated when they have someone who can relate to their experiences and offer support. However, one interviewee expressed scepticism, noting that not all individuals in need may accept assistance.

In the last question of the survey, the focus was on whether places like Velos Youth can provide a conducive environment for peer-to-peer interactions. Six participants contributed their thoughts on this topic, noting that at the Velos Youth Centre individuals come to access services and have the opportunity to connect with others, leading to open discussions and mutual support. They exchange knowledge about their experiences in Athens and the available services, fostering a supportive environment. A student in the English classes at Velos Youth highlighted how peer support within the class enhances language skills for all participants. Additionally, a former participant of the Housing Integration Project (HIP) shared that through the program they formed lasting friendships that continue to provide mutual support.

In conclusion, the survey results show that peer-to-peer support plays a significant role between young refugees in Greece, with young people actively engaging in supporting each other. The participants highlighted the positive impact of role models in their lives and the importance of offering support, especially in emotional and practical ways. They also recognised the positive changes in confidence and skills in the individuals they supported.

Despite some challenges and disappointments, the majority of participants expressed satisfaction in providing assistance and learning valuable life lessons through their experiences. However, those who expressed that the peer-to-peer experience was challenging and disappointing to them, makes us aware of the opportunity to aid the peers in better supporting each other, as this experience without the right guidance might be harmful for the participants. Overall, peer-to-peer support was seen as contributing to a safe and supportive environment, particularly in places like Velos Youth where individuals can connect, exchange knowledge, and form lasting friendships.



Peer-to-Peer Support in Action

In this section we highlight some of the beneficial outputs of peer-to-peer support that took place at Velos Youth from November 2022 to February 2023, amongst three different peer relationships forged at Velos Youth : Mahmud and Umed, Latif and Anas, and Lyzal and Mahdy.



Mahmud-Umed

Umed participated in a training workshop on cultural mediation. Upon successful completion of the workshop and its exam, eligible participants could join the pool staff of an NGO that provides interpretation services. Witnessing Umed's success, Mahmud was inspired and motivated to enrol in the program and study to pass the exams as well, despite currently pursuing a different career in the fast-food industry, with the goal of enhancing his working conditions. Both participants, Mahmud and Umed, were near the end of the program.

Peer-to-Peer Support in Action

As they planned their exit strategy, they decided to search for an apartment to share, thereby increasing the likelihood of securing future accommodation and reducing relocation and living costs. Additionally, these participants provide financial support to each other in times of need. In January 2023, Umed received a notification from his employer stating that the company would be delaying employees' salaries due to a government funding delay, expected to last for three months. In response, Mahmud decided to support Umed during this period to help cover his personal expenses and needs.

Lyzal-Mahdy

Lyzal joined the program in January 2023 upon turning 18 and having to leave the shelter where he resided. Initially, Lyzal exhibited shyness and hesitancy in taking initiative at his new placement. The most challenging aspect of his transition to adulthood was grocery shopping and cooking. Mahdy provided support to Lyzal during his initial supermarket visits, collaborated on budgeting for their weekly shopping, and initially prepared an extra portion of food for Lyzal each day. Over the following few weeks Mahdy instructed Lyzal on preparing basic dishes involving rice and pasta, until eventually he felt comfortable and able to cook for himself.



Peer-to-Peer Support in Action

Latif-Anas

Latif assisted in shopping for the group of participants and regularly cooked for himself. Additionally, Latif sought guidance from Anas to learn how to prepare traditional chicken dishes, given their shared cultural background. They occasionally cooked together. During a period when Anas was experiencing sleep difficulties due to past traumas, Latif proactively contacted the project coordinator to request additional support for Anas.

Below are also given several examples of powerful peer-to-peer support creating positive outcomes for young people who met via the “Living the English Language” programme.

On October 14th, 2023, three candidates (2 male, 1 female) taking the BCCE Michigan U.S.A (B1) international certificate exam coordinated to meet outside Velos Youth on a Saturday to travel together to the examination centre. This arrangement provided them with mutual support in case they encountered difficulties finding the address. Following the exams, the two male candidates escorted the female candidate back to Omonia square to ensure she returned safely to her shelter.

In another instance, a female student in the English class has been aiding the educator by translating from English to Farsi during lessons for the past four months, helping students at a zero English level comprehend the material. This collaborative effort has fostered a sense of teamwork and comfort among students at different proficiency levels.



Peer-to-Peer Support in Action

Additionally, a male student reached out to the educator to express concern about his best friend's deteriorating mental health. He requested the educator's intervention to help his friend overcome stress and regain motivation. The friend had disengaged from school, English classes, social activities, and physical exercise, spending excessive time sleeping due to anxiety over unresolved identification and passport issues.

Moreover, students residing in the same shelter demonstrate solidarity by informing the educator when a peer is unable to attend lessons, ensuring that their homework is collected and returned to prevent falling behind in their studies. This collaborative effort underscores the supportive environment and fellowship among students at Velos Youth. Similarly, students share information with their peers, who have dropped out of the English language programme, about the programme's ongoing monthly outings, seminars, and activities, enabling them to re-engage if they wish.



Summary

Velos Youth, through its day centre and Housing Integration Project, empowers young refugees by providing information and opportunities for independence. The "Living the English Language" project within Velos Youth facilitates language skill development, self-esteem enhancement, and resilience building through peer-to-peer collaboration in English classes. Similarly, the Housing Integration Project emphasises peer-to-peer interaction, where existing residents guide newcomers in shared living spaces, fostering collaboration and mutual support.

The research conducted by Velos Youth aimed to review the drivers and perceived benefits of peer-to-peer networks, and the survey findings underscored the significant role of peer-to-peer support among young refugees in Greece. Overall, peer-to-peer support at Velos Youth and similar environments creates a safe and supportive learning where individuals can connect, share knowledge, and build lasting friendships, promoting resilience and well-being within refugee communities. Participants recognised the positive impact of role models and the importance of emotional and practical support. While most participants reported satisfaction and positive outcomes from providing assistance, challenges highlighted the opportunity to enhance peer-to-peer support through supervision and input from support workers.

The specific case-study observations presented, suggest that people naturally support each other when given the opportunity to interact and build relationships. This can be achieved through shared living spaces, collaborative power dynamics, and engaging in activities that create collective memories. These factors foster a sense of care among participants, leading to the establishment of peer-to-peer support mechanisms. Facilitators can play a role in creating conditions that encourage the formation of these collective memories, and the supportive networks that follow.



Recommendations for Promoting Peer-to-Peer Support



From the research conducted, and with the insights garnered from the Velos Youth team, the following recommendations are proposed to other organisations and communities wishing to promote peer-to-peer support amongst their participants. The recommendations are intended to be transferable to other contexts and other populations.

1. Create Safe Spaces

Establish safe and welcoming environments, within spaces such as day centres, classrooms and supported accommodation. These are the spaces within which individuals are able demonstrate mutual support by sharing living spaces, engaging in collaborative activities, and building shared memories. This sense of community not only enhances interpersonal relationships but also promotes a sense of belonging and unity among individuals. By encouraging interaction and cooperation, these environments can cultivate a sense of camaraderie and support among residents or participants.

2. Sensitise Team Members towards the Promotion of Peer-to-Peer Support

Ensure that all team members see the value in peer-to-peer support networks for both the giver and the receiver of peer-support. The giver is evidently empowered through the process, whilst the receiver benefits from the extra insight that can only be offered by someone with similar lived experiences. Directing a person's request for support towards one of their peers is not shirking the team member's responsibilities but, as long as overseen by them, can offer different or even greater value than the team member. This can be seen as 'nudging' them towards their peers, whilst being ready to accept that they may not wish to receive support in this way.



Recommendations for Promoting Peer-to-Peer Support



3. Identify Specific Needs

It is imperative to conduct comprehensive assessments of people's specific needs in order to effectively facilitate and promote peer-to-peer support networks. This must include a deep understanding of the emotional and practical support requirements of the individuals accessing services, and involves not only identifying their immediate needs but also considering the broader socio-cultural context in which they find themselves. Without this understanding, the efforts of those entrusted with stimulating peer support networks will be less effectively targeted; staff or team members must first understand young people's specific or unique challenges, before they can connect them with other young people who have already overcome them.

4. Deliver Structured Activities

A variety of activities must be offered to enable people to find their common interests. These should be as broad as possible to attract as many participants as possible, and should include a mixture of recreational and educational elements. Activities that provide space to discuss common or shared challenges are essential, as they highlight participants' commonalities (or 'common thirds') which can become a symbol of their relationship. Therefore, through these activities young people learn which other young people are experienced in overcoming certain hurdles or barriers, and therefore know who they can approach for information or support, besides support workers.

5. Allow Plenty of 'Free-time' within Programmes

Enough 'free-time' must be offered within an open social space to give people the opportunity to develop their personal bonds and connections. This is just as important as the structured activities that ensure they spend time together. The provision of equipment and materials for activities, games and sports, that people can use freely, help to facilitate interaction.



Recommendations for Promoting Peer-to-Peer Support



6. Promote Cultural Awareness and Respect

Foster an environment of cultural sensitivity and appreciation for diversity among both staff and peers. One effective strategy for achieving this is through programmatic initiatives that provide insights into different cultures, traditions, and perspectives, and brings people from different cultural backgrounds together. These activities should allow for open discussions, the sharing personal experiences, and active listening to diverse viewpoints. Through this, people can learn to navigate cultural differences effectively.

Without cultural awareness and respect, peer support networks have a tendency to develop only amongst peers of the same nationality or ethnicity. In a context where people accessing services are from a multitude of nationalities and ethnicities this creates significant missed opportunities between people facing the same challenges and obstacles regardless of where they are from or how they identify.

7. Directly and Overtly Create Peer-to-Peer Support Networks

Whilst the previous recommendations have focused on creating the spaces to enable peer-to-peer support networks to organically grow and flourish, the final recommendation considers a more direct approach to stimulating peer-to-peer support. The following elements are by no means essential, but are for those organisations and community groups that wish to go a step further, and have greater time and resources to invest.

In this more direct approach staff members play a more integral role in the peer support process, providing direct intervention, guidance and oversight.



Recommendations for Promoting Peer-to-Peer Support



This can involve setting clear objectives, informing peers of best practices and proven approaches for supporting each other, and creating spaces for the peer to evaluate the progress they have made.

» Directly Promote Peer-to-Peer Support Opportunities

Encourage support workers to directly and overtly promote peer-to-peer support opportunities amongst specific individuals; pairing or grouping people at differing stages of their journeys who can offer guidance and support to one another. This requires staff to have the time, capacity and skills necessary to effectively explain to the peers what 'peer support' is, as well as its benefits and outcomes. Ideally the support worker will periodically arrange for the peers to come together to discuss their common challenges and advise each other accordingly.

» Provide Training for Peers

Equip peers with essential skills through training sessions conducted by support workers. These should cover areas such as active listening, principles of confidentiality, effective communication, and basic emotional support techniques.

» Encourage Feedback and Evaluation

To enable peer-support to be as effective as possible, it can be beneficial to facilitate regular feedback sessions for peers to express their thoughts and experiences. At first, this must be well structured and guided by the support workers to ensure the participants follow an agreed set of rules that ensure feedback towards each other is constructive. The objective however should be that eventually the peers run their own feedback sessions, with or without the presence of the support worker.



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