



School Mental Health Peer Support Tool:

Peer Support Initiatives

Version for System and School Leaders



School
Mental Health
Ontario

Santé mentale
en milieu scolaire
Ontario

**We work together with
Ontario school districts
to support student
mental health**

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A

Setting the Stage

Why talk about peer support?

Peer support is an emerging and increasingly popular practice within mental health. There is also a growing interest in peer support in Ontario schools. Mental health leadership teams and individual schools are being approached about peer support initiatives every day. Many students and school staff are also enthusiastic about helping students support their friends and classmates.

There are some good reasons to consider peer support:

Many students face mental health concerns.

- During the 2021 cycle of the [Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey \(OSDUHS\)](#), 26% of students in grades 7-12 indicated they experienced a serious level of psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression) at some point during the past year.¹

Many students don't know where to go for support.

- On the [OSDUHS](#), 42% of students reported that, in the past year, there was a time they wanted to talk to someone about a mental health problem, but they didn't know where to turn.
- Even when students know the resources available, there can be barriers to accessing them, such as stigma, family belief system of mental illnesses, poor mental health literacy, or costs.²
- There is growing awareness that adolescents are more likely to reach out to peers than adults for support for mental health concerns.
- In a survey of 1200 young people across Canada, 83% said they had supported a friend struggling with their mental health.³
- Studies show that peers are often the first to know about their peers' or friends' mental health challenges or suicidal thoughts.⁴
- Even though students want to help support their peers (and, in fact, are doing so), they aren't always sure what to do.
- Of the 83% of students who had supported a friend struggling with their mental health, only 39% felt they were prepared to offer the support that was needed.³
- Student voice also tells us that helping a friend is one of the things secondary school students in Ontario want to learn most about.⁵

For more information about barriers and facilitators to help-seeking, see the following:

- [Why do children and adolescents seek/not seek and access professional help for their mental health problems? A systematic review of quantitative and qualitative studies](#)
- [What are the barriers, facilitators and interventions targeting help-seeking behaviours for common mental health problems in adolescents? A systematic review](#)
- [Reluctancy towards Help-Seeking for Mental Health Concerns at Secondary School among Students in the COMPASS Study](#)
- [Teacher-student relationships and mental health help seeking behaviors among elementary and secondary students in Ontario Canada](#)

A Setting the Stage

The development and implementation of peer support initiatives within the school setting seems like a great option to help students help each other, but there are some things to consider:

- What is the role of students in supporting other students with mental health and well-being in our Ontario schools?
- What support would students need to engage in this role in a safe and healthy way?
- Which needs are appropriate for peer support and which fall outside this role?

Purpose of this tool

The purpose of this tool is to support the decision-making process related to peer support in Ontario schools (elementary and secondary) to ensure it is a safe and healthy experience for both the students providing support and those receiving it. It may be used for initiatives proposed within school boards, as well as those brought forward by external agencies/providers. This tool also supports the alignment of peer support initiatives with broader board/school mental health strategies and action plans. Please contact your board Mental Health Leader or Superintendent with responsibility for mental health if you have questions about your board's strategy and plan.



B

Creating a Shared Understanding

What is peer support?

Students can and do help their friends, classmates, and others around them in a variety of ways every day. They provide each other with information, encouragement, time, and attention. This type of informal, naturally occurring **peer helping** is something we hope that all students can be part of, and in fact, School Mental Health Ontario actively supports this through resources such as [Be There](#) powered by [Jack.org](#) and [MH LIT: Student Mental Health in Action](#).

However, **peer support** is something slightly different—and it is important to ensure a shared understanding as the term can refer to a wide variety of practices, programs, and activities, including but not limited to:

- peer counselling
- peer leadership
- peer mediation
- peer champions
- peer education
- peer tutoring
- peer coaching
- peer mentoring
- peer advocacy

Note: A culturally informed view of peer support recognizes that it may be called different things in different cultures (e.g., peer healers), and it can also be perceived and used in different ways in different communities.

While there is no single definition of peer support, youth peer support can be described as young people who have received appropriate training using the knowledge, skills, and experience they have to help other young people in a planned and structured way.^{6,7} This understanding of peer support highlights the key elements that differentiate peer support from everyday helping and friendship, which include **planning, structure, and training**. In a literature search examining the core components of peer support programs across a range of health conditions, the following key elements were also identified:

- supervision and monitoring
- providing social connection and support
- creating a safe environment
- ongoing engagement with peers and participants
- recruiting peer workers with specific peer characteristics⁸

Again, many of these elements differentiate peer support from friendship and other types of informal peer helping.

For more information about peer support, see the following resource:

[Pillars of youth peer support - Youth peer support 101 \(cymh.ca\)](#)

B Creating a Shared Understanding

Is peer support evidence-informed?

In a 2016 review of peer support, the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health indicated that the data needed to demonstrate that youth peer support in a mental health context is an evidence-informed practice is not yet available.⁹ There are just so many different versions of it, the data needed to evaluate them all hasn't yet been gathered, and much of what has been collected is based on adults. The benefits of peer support are still not well known, either, especially within peer support in child and youth mental health.⁹ This does not necessarily mean peer support has no value. However, given the limited research available, it does mean it needs to be approached in a careful and thoughtful way, using the best information available and with the best interests of the students involved in mind.

Note: It should be recognized that, with respect to evidence-informed practice, not all communities and cultures have been equally included and represented in the research that has informed this work. It is important to acknowledge who has traditionally led this research and for what purpose, who has been invited to participate, who has reviewed the research, and so on. It is also important to consider ways of knowing that extend beyond formal research and the value they have in informing the understanding of peer support.

What are the potential benefits of peer support?

Evidence suggests that there may be potential benefits for young people receiving peer support, such as:

- improving participation in and engagement and satisfaction with mental health services^{9,10}
- improving outcomes in some areas of functioning (i.e., understanding medication choices and being able to face challenges and make friends)¹⁰
- increasing happiness, well-being, self-esteem, and confidence, and improving social skills or school behaviour⁶
- providing support, encouragement, hope, and belief in oneself to help overcome personal barriers¹¹
- empowering young people, providing opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge and skills, increasing young people's willingness and ability to listen and take in information by presenting it in a different way, and providing a 'bridge' between young people and the professionals working with them¹²
- reducing power differentials
- reducing self-stigma¹³

A Health Canada (2008) best practices publication for youth with substance use problems also suggests that peer support workers may have several advantages in terms of outreach, including:

- addressing barriers associated with mistrust of adults or professional service providers
- having insider knowledge of existing youth networks and social norms
- potentially being more easily accepted by youth who are homeless or otherwise outside of mainstream services
- relaying innovative insights into the design and implementation of outreach activities, operations, and evaluation elements¹⁴

There is some evidence that peer support may also have benefits for the young people who are providing it, such as:

- improvements in skills, self-confidence, and relationships, and the opportunity to show caring^{6,15}
- increased self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, a belief that they are contributing positively to the life of the school community, a sense of belonging to a team¹⁶

B Creating a Shared Understanding

Finally, studies also report that peer support initiatives have the potential to bring positive benefits to the whole-school environment, thereby impacting the wider school community.^{6,15}

Although little is known about which program elements lead to positive outcomes, we can think of youth peer support as a promising practice that may offer some potential benefits if it is done carefully and thoughtfully, with the appropriate supports in place, and according to what is known about best practice at this time. It should be noted that there are indications that without proper supervision, the positive impact of peer support systems is greatly reduced.¹⁷ Schools should also be mindful that students may not limit their contact with each other to school hours, and the availability of supervision may also need to extend outside those hours. If peer support is to occur using online formats, consideration should also be given to the impact of this format (e.g., inability to monitor students as easily) and the adjustments to supervision that may be necessary (e.g., more frequent and intentional check-ins).

Are there any cautions?

Although peer support may offer potential benefits, it is important to be mindful that it also involves **cautions** and even **potential harms**. These include:

Issues related to the positioning of the peer support role:

- stigma and a lack of respect in the peer support role¹⁸
- being seen as cheap labor^{19,20}
- being assigned inappropriate duties⁹
- being subject to youth tokenism⁹
- being excluded by clinical jargon or social cliques²⁰

Cautions to the youth receiving peer support (related to peer supporters who receive inadequate training/support):

- issues with boundaries (e.g., setting boundaries with youth may be difficult for people who are youth themselves)⁹
- issues with breaching confidentiality, giving unhelpful advice, and not following up disclosures²¹

Cautions to the youth providing peer support:

- stress related to drawing on personal past experiences²²
- issues with vicarious trauma, how to self-disclose personal information strategically, and managing the peer support role while also maintaining their own mental health^{9,22,23,24}
- an increase in their own mental illness symptoms
- a sense of burden and responsibility

There is also some suggestion that not all types of peer support are suitable for younger children (e.g., age 9 and below), and recommendations against training peer support workers under the age of 10 years.^{6,21} Developmental considerations in this work should be reviewed carefully.

If peer support initiatives are to be considered, careful steps need to be taken to prioritize the wellness of the students involved and to ensure they have adequate support.

B Creating a Shared Understanding

What type of peer support should schools consider?

In contrast to the challenges and potential harms presented by implementing peer support as an intervention for complex mental health needs (defined as significant, multiple, or persistent mental health challenges that impact functioning in most areas, as well as mental health needs that involve risk to the safety of the person experiencing them or to others), peer support programs are well-positioned to support many areas of mental health and well-being. If students in your school community want to get involved in peer support, here are some places to build opportunities:

- mental health promotion
- upstream approaches to prevention (e.g., enhancing protective factors, promoting life skills and identity affirming social-emotional learning)
- modelling healthy coping attitudes and practices
- building awareness of local resources and supports
- encouraging help-seeking
- stigma reduction

Spotlight example:

Registered Nurses Association of Ontario: [Youth Mental Health & Addiction Champions Initiative Toolkit \(rnao.ca\)](#)

For information on authentic youth engagement, see the following resources:

- [Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation](#)
- [Youth engagement | Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health \(cymh.ca\)](#)
- [What is youth engagement? | Walking the talk \(yetoolkit.ca\)](#)
- [Adult Ally Tip Sheet | Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario \(youthhubs.ca\)](#)
- [Supportive Resources for Adult Allies | School Mental Health Ontario \(smho-smso.ca\)](#)
- [By youth, with youth, for youth \(unesco.org\)](#)
- [UNESCO Project Planner | Top Tips for Youth Action \(unesco.org\)](#)

C

Special Considerations

Culture, community, and identity

Peer support connects with culture, community, and identity in many ways. For example, many of the key features of peer support offer links to equality, a sense of community, reducing isolation, witnessing and validating the experience of others, and non-judgement.^{9,19} In fact, the very way we define who a peer is often involves considerations of culture, community, and identity. For example, in a survey on peer support, 55% of respondents said that peers would be people who shared gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation, age groups, faith, and so on.¹⁹ Shared experiences are important for peer support, and so are shared identities and back grounds. Shared ethnicity and culture may be especially important for equity deserving communities and those with experiences of marginalization, although it is important for peer support to recognize a range of shared and intersecting identities, experiences, and backgrounds.¹⁹

On the same survey:

- 66% of individuals from Black and racialized communities reported valuing peer workers who shared their ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
- Respondents spoke not just about shared backgrounds, but also about shared understanding of the barriers that affect them and their family needs.
- Other respondents also reported valuing peer support workers who shared their unique background and experiences (e.g., those with experience in the justice system and members of the 2S/LGBTQIA+ community).

Note: although shared experiences are important for peer support, it is also important to be mindful that each individual is unique and complex. Not everyone may define a peer in the same way or request peer support from someone with a shared identity and/or background.

When considering peer support initiatives, consider the opportunities they may present to:

- Create a sense of culture and shared belonging within our schools.
- Allow students to experience shared identities and backgrounds, especially for students who have often not seen themselves represented in other ways within our schools (e.g., in the reading materials, posters, and staffing).
- Include students from diverse community groups who can relate to and support young people's personal identities and who have a firsthand understanding of issues.
- Create a supportive environment (a key element of peer support) where students feel welcome, safe, and respected, and where students feel free to assert themselves and express their needs and preferences with respect to mental health and well-being.

Note: it should not be assumed that students from the same identity group will have the same characteristics, experiences, and backgrounds. It is important to recognize all students as individuals with multiple and intersecting identities, and who have experiences distinct to them as individuals, not representative of their community.

C Special Considerations

Peer-based suicide prevention

In June of 2021, the Implementation and Scale Up Lab at the University of Western Ontario completed a rapid review of peer-based suicide prevention programs for adolescents, including school-wide peer-based suicide awareness programs and peer gatekeeper training models.²⁵ This review indicated that there is limited research on the effectiveness and safety of peer-based suicide prevention programs with the adolescent population, and the evidence available shows mixed findings in addressing suicide risk. The research also indicated the following:

- Peer-based suicide prevention can potentially have some positive effects on peer recipients and peer helpers.
- However, it may also have some very serious harmful effects for peer recipients and peer helpers, including increases in psychological distress and emotional and suicide contagion (which can lead to suicidal ideation, suicide behaviour, and even death).
- In terms of what might influence the outcomes of these programs, the mechanisms are currently unclear.
- Given that there are potential harms related to these programs and inconsistent evidence indicating benefits, peer-based suicide prevention programs are not recommended (especially those involving direct emotional support and coaching from peer helpers).
- More promising places to invest in peer-based suicide prevention include universal or peer outreach interventions targeting help-seeking behaviours, healthy relationships, and mental health literacy.

Because of the magnitude of the potential risk for the youth involved, peer led suicide prevention programs are currently not recommended for use in Ontario schools.

Importantly, this does not mean that all conversations about suicide should be avoided with students. Rather, students should not be providing intervention for other students experiencing suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Peer support programs are not appropriate to address suicide or any other complex mental health need. Students can, however, play an important role in helping any peer they become aware of who is at risk to identify and engage with appropriate supports (e.g., connect with an adult who has the appropriate training and background). For more information on the thoughtful selection of suicide awareness activities within schools, see [SMH-ON's Decision Support Tool](#) for considerations.

Students can help other students identify and connect with support for suicide, but they are not expected to, nor should they, provide that support themselves.



D

School Team Reflection Questions

The following questions are provided to assist school mental health teams (including, at minimum, an administrator and school mental health professional) in considering how to implement a peer support initiative in a safe and healthy way.²⁶

Question	Considerations
Why is peer support being considered?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose and rationale? What are the needs? • How will peer support address the needs in a different way from other supports already in place? • What are the objectives and desired outcomes? • How does the proposed initiative align with other mental health priorities and initiatives already in place, the school improvement plan, the board mental health strategy, and other relevant school/board strategies and initiatives (e.g., those related to equity)? • Have an administrator and school mental health professional been involved in the decision-making to implement peer support?
Which aspect of the peer support spectrum are you considering?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is peer support being defined? • What type of support is being considered? • What tier of support does it address: Tier 1 (promotion), Tier 2 (prevention), or Tier 3 (intervention)? • What type of activities will be involved (e.g., informal discussions, activity-based, social support, providing lessons/education/training, helping with service navigation, coordinating events, facilitating groups, encouraging young people to engage in service, sharing lived experience, staffing a drop in...)? • How will you ensure the initiative is inclusive and culturally sensitive? • What is the timeline?
How are you involving students in the creation of the peer support initiative you are considering?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students helped inform the needs and initiative? • Is there the opportunity for student input and decision making in the planning process (being mindful to include the full range of diverse student voices reflected in the school community)? • What is their understanding of peer support? What does it look like to students?

D School Team Reflection Questions

Question	Considerations
Which students will provide peer support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will you involve students from a certain class, volunteers, trained peers, peers with professionals...? • What is the selection process (e.g., staff nomination, open application, interview)? • What specific skills are required for the role, as it has been positioned (e.g., good communicator, authentic, motivated, good judgement, compassionate, accepting, dependable, flexible)? How will you gauge whether peer supporters' own mental health is in a good place to participate? • Are you planning an age gap between peer supporters and the students they will support? What is the youngest age group you will consider as peer supporters? • How will you encourage the involvement of a diverse group of students that reflects the school community (being mindful that those who identify as female tend to dominate peer support initiatives)?¹⁶ • Is there the opportunity to include age groups that can contribute over a long time period to aid sustainability? • How are you considering risks for vulnerable students? • Will parents/caregivers be informed? How?
Who will receive peer support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the target group (e.g., universal/all students, targeted/students with specific concerns or needs, at risk groups, certain age groups...)? • If there is going to be "matching," how will it occur (e.g., common interest, life experience, gender...)? How will you ensure student preference, agency, and voice, rather than assuming which students prefer to be matched? • Will there be open access, staff referral, self-referral...? • How will you ensure the level of need is appropriate for peer supporters to manage? Note: peer support is not appropriate to manage considerable and/or complex needs. It is not an alternative to professional support.
Who will set up, coordinate, and support the initiative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What level of training and support is required? • How will you ensure consistent support, staff time, and buy in? • How will you ensure a clear focus, strong leadership by a co-ordinator, and consistent monitoring and support throughout the school, including from senior school administration? • How will you build a staff team so the initiative does not rely on a single adult? Do mental health professionals/support staff need to be involved? • How will you ensure diversity among the staff involved (being mindful that the staff involved in peer support programs also tend to be female)?¹⁶
What resources are available?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What funding is available (e.g., for peer training, publicity, food and drinks; to make dedicated peer support areas in schools comfortable)? • What additional resources are available (e.g., dedicated space, adult support...)? • Are there enough resources to ensure sustainability?

D School Team Reflection Questions

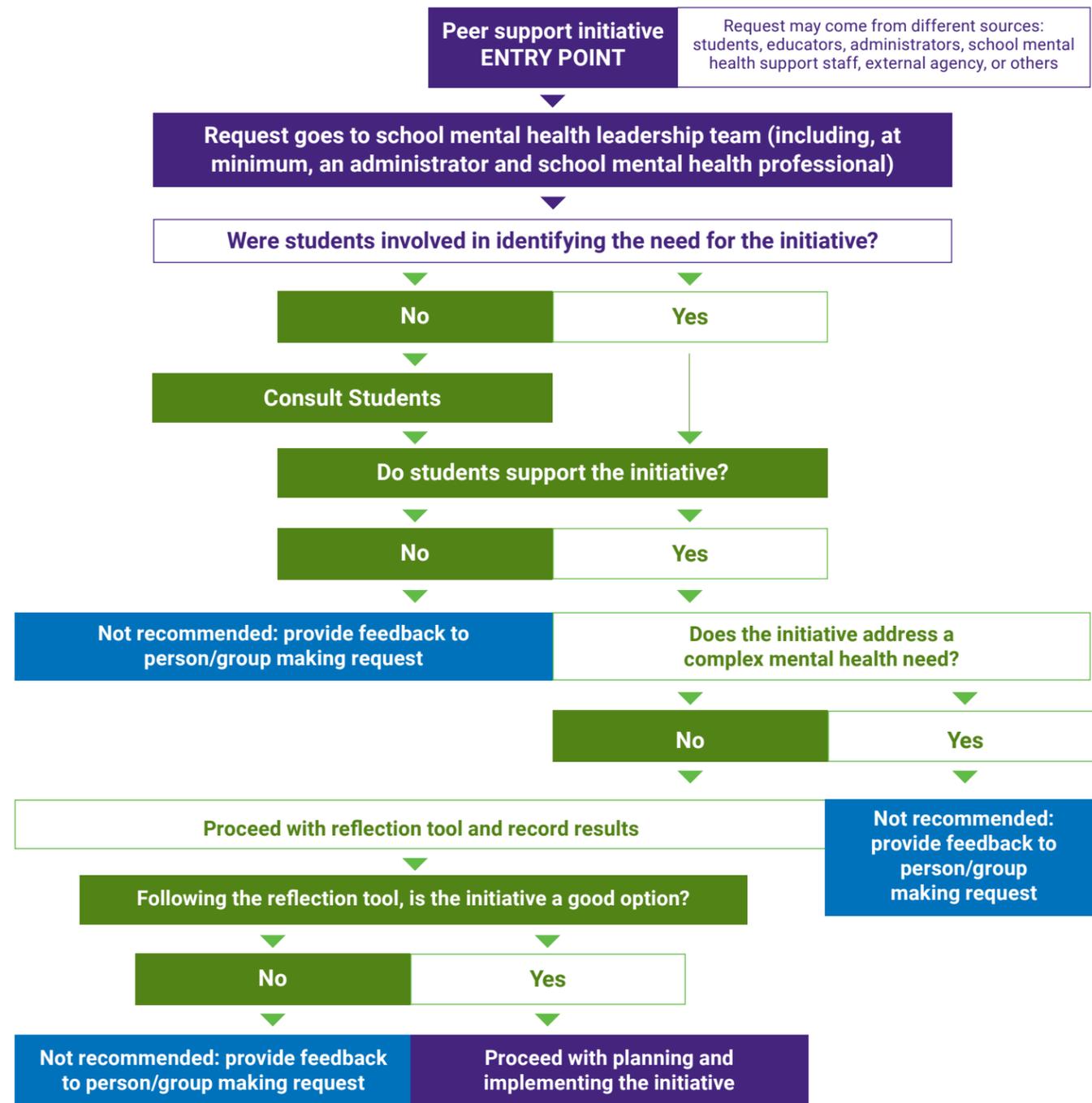
Question	Considerations
How will peer support be provided?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the mode of delivery (e.g., in person, online, one-on-one, larger groups, whole school, by telephone)? • If students are meeting independently, how will you ensure safety? • Will the initiative link with any other ongoing school activities?
Where will peer support be provided?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will it be school-wide, in a designated classroom, in various locations...?
When will peer support be provided?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the duration and frequency (e.g., one hour every week or month, Wednesdays, dedicated time slots, lunch hour, after school)?
How will you promote/market/publicize the initiative and ensure visibility of the peer supporters to aid uptake?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will students understand what peer support is and is not? • How will you promote ongoing engagement with the initiative? • How will you proactively engage a diverse group of students?
How will you prioritize the wellness of peer supporters and ensure they have adequate support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will you... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ clearly define the role ◦ ensure responsibilities and value are clearly articulated across the school/board ◦ provide the time and training (and frequency of that training) needed for the role, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication and active listening • ensuring a non-judgmental attitude • knowing limits of expertise and when to refer • knowing when parents/caregivers will be brought in • confidentiality and ethical issues • child protection issues • boundaries (e.g., should you be a peer supporter for a friend?) and how to safely and strategically disclose personal information • knowing mental health services and pathways to care • inclusivity and cultural sensitivity ◦ end the relationship appropriately ◦ ensure effective training, supervision, and ongoing allyship and monitoring that provides support when needed ◦ ensure peer supporters do not feel overburdened or overwhelmed by responsibility ◦ ensure regular and ongoing communication of peer supporters with each other ◦ show recognition and appreciation of peer supporters (e.g., academic credit, volunteer hours, letters of reference, the opportunity to attend conferences...) • Will training and supervision be one-to-one or group? • What records will you keep and how/where will they be stored?

D School Team Reflection Questions

Question	Considerations
How will you determine that you met your goals and followed your process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will you determine whether you achieved what you intended to achieve (and if not, whether it was because of what you did, how you did it, or both)? • How will you assess what worked well and what the opportunities for improvement are? • How will you ensure students are involved in the process? <p>For ideas about how to monitor and co-evaluate programs and services with youth, see: Monitor and co-evaluate Walking the talk (yetoolkit.ca)</p>

Appendix

Flowchart for Decision Making on School-Based Peer Support Initiatives



Additional Resources

Question	Considerations
For mental health leadership teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision Support Tools – School and System Leaders
For administrators and educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MH LIT Online Course – Educators ONE-CALL Desk Reference ONE-CALL Desk Top Reference for Remote Learners Circle of Support and System Pathways – Flowchart, Planner and Desk Reference 6Rs Guidance Teacher Resource Talking with Parents and Families about Mental Health Supportive Resources for Adult Allies How To Foster and Maintain Supportive Spaces for Black Youth
For parents/caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noticing Mental Health Concerns for Your Child
For students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety Management and Coping Strategies: Social Media Bundles Grounding Techniques Social Media Bundles No Problem Too Big or Too Small – Student Help-Seeking Resource My Circle of Support Pocketbook – Student Help-Seeking Resource

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