

Youth Homelessness Support and Relationship-Based Practice in a Time of Social Distancing

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Covid-19 social distancing restrictions have brought about a whole new world of service delivery for Brisbane Youth Service (BYS), as the youth service has transitioned the majority of its youth housing and homelessness support workers to work from home arrangements.

Relationship-based practice is a key corner-stone of good practice principles for working with young people who are experiencing risks associated with homelessness and other intersecting disadvantages and vulnerabilities. As such, it is also central to the BYS practice framework.

Historically, relationship-based practice has arguably been assumed to operate best within face-to-face, in-person interaction between support workers and young people. Previous BYS research into how young people would and could engage with wellbeing support through technology highlighted young people's willingness to engage online with support workers only when there is a pre-established personal trust relationship.¹

What we have learned however, as we have navigated pandemic driven social contact restrictions, is that there can be both challenges and strengths in transitioning support to online and phone-based arenas of support. While using creativity and adaptiveness in engaging with young people in this new landscape, workers have not only developed new ways of working and focussing their engagement with the young people they support; they have witnessed the resilience of young people through this crisis time. They have observed both challenges and celebrations and observed how young people have responded differently, and at times in gendered ways, to the

COVID restrictions. This article shares some BYS stories from the frontline of youth homelessness support during COVID19.

Relationship Based Practice from a Distance

Positive relationship experiences can be transformational for high-risk young people and given the poverty of relationships that is typically their experience, homelessness support services such as BYS prioritise offering young people the opportunity to risk making connections as they navigate the ongoing impacts of trauma and disadvantage.

A collaborative partnership ordinarily is founded in workers finding ways to meet young people in their worlds, to cooperate and collaborate with young people in the context of their lives. In incorporating harm reduction approaches and strength-based practice, relationship-based work relies on reducing the inherent power in our role and being guided by young people in a meaningful way.²

COVID19 social restrictions have placed boundaries upon our relationships with the young people we support that are beyond our control, and which are not led by young people's needs and preferred ways of engaging. BYS workers have had to adapt to imposing limitations and restrictions on young people, which are necessarily in their best interests, and the interests of the health of broader community, but which are not what young people would have chosen for themselves.

'At first young people believed the restrictions about being asked not to visit family and friends were harsh. Our restrictions were put in place early, during the first

stage of less severe government restrictions, so they were stricter than what was being asked of the general population (although this is in line now). So, our approach needed to be strongly based around the necessity to protect young people and workers in a congregate living environment.'

Youth workers in residential housing services have used relationship-based engagement skills to work hard to help young people to contextualise and reframe social distancing restrictions that may otherwise have triggered past family trauma, rebellion and fear-driven anger.

'Amy used to go visit her family during the weekend. When the Covid-19 restrictions came into place, she was crying, yelling, swearing, punching things and complaining. For a couple of days, she was in a mental fight with herself trying to accept the reality of not being allowed to go visit family. Sitting with her while she was crying in her room one day, I explained that "you're staying here because you love and care about them so much that you cannot give them any risk of getting sick. You are being strong". She calmed down quite a bit and stopped crying. In the next few days, Amy developed a great way to adapt to the situation, which was to transcribe information about Covid-19 in her notebook and turn it into rapping lyrics. She got to learn more about Covid-19 from the Internet; and creating lyrics has given her a way to let out emotions and feelings. With each passing day Amy has been showing so much resilience and so much capacity to distract herself from negative feelings.'

COVID19 social distancing restrictions have thus become opportunities for young people to develop resilience and demonstrate both strength and caring for others as one of our housing workers described:

Jake used to go visit his mum and little sister regularly. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, it was very hard at the beginning as his mum was worried and Jake was thinking the isolation was "ridiculous" and "just going to mum's and back should be fine". Within a week, the Covid-19 situation worsened, and house restrictions tightened. During this period, Jake's attitude has changed so much as he started to show much more understanding about the seriousness of Covid-19 and of the importance of social distancing. Jake had a chat with his mum and told her "I'm gonna stay in the house". He explained to her his own understanding of the restrictions. His actions showed accountability to his family, himself, his housemates and the youth workers. Another time when one of the residents was having a breakdown about not being able to go out, Jake said "Hey dude, if everyone out there can stay at home, this virus thing can finish sooner. It's not about us anymore, it's to protect the community. It's just the right thing to do at the moment". His words and action really demonstrated the BYS values of resilience and accountability, adapting to a difficult situation in a positive way.'

Developing resilience in overcoming challenges while navigating the COVID19 crisis has been a dominant theme across BYS work with young people so far. Opportunities to develop resilience are known to be associated with increased self-esteem, and both of these are protective factors for young people experiencing homelessness.³ It may be that the longer-term impact of COVID19 restrictions are positive for some young people, promoting positive self-development and future strength. It seems also that BYS's willingness to find creative ways to continue to support young people despite the restrictions on face-to-face contact has, for some, positively

built trust as a key aspect of relationship-based practice — even when the relationship is not being experienced in preferred ways.

'I am supporting a young man who experiences anxiety and paranoia, he doesn't enjoy talking over the phone or video call as well as texting as he believes people in the community are listening/hacking his phone and there is a lack of confidentiality doing this, so he has attempted to visit the BYS Hub many times. We have created a plan that he calls me when he is in a safe place and he emails me confidential files or conversations when needed. Despite Covid-19, this young person has ticked off all his goals for the entire year of 2020, about 10 things, including being accepted to University of Queensland College, having a wrongly diagnosed mental health diagnosis removed after engaging with a psychologist for the first time and searching in the private rental market after years of being in social housing. This would normally be very challenging for him but the limited number of people using public transport has helped with his anxiety and allowed him to focus. Fewer people accessing services has allowed him to have the extra time he needs to engage with workers and "BYS not giving up on me when I needed them most" has helped him a lot he said. Within weeks he said his life has changed after years of disasters and he is making a positive future for himself'

While it has not been easy for all young people and workers to adapt to remote communication support relationships, for many the success of the transition depends on the strength of the established relationship pre-COVID19 restrictions.

'I have noticed that if you have had an ongoing relationship for a few months before Covid-19 that it is easier to connect and talk about what is going on for them, rather than someone you might just have started supporting. New referrals have been even more difficult than usual to engage.'

'With longer-term clients I have found we have a secure

relationship established so they are able to speak and have their appointment over the phone. For my newer clients what I have found to work is to use confirmation texts before-hand to set up some predictability for them, outlining what we might chat about. This reduces some of the vulnerability and overwhelming feelings associated with talking over the phone. I feel that this has helped with relationship-based practice.'

Additional challenges are experienced by workers who engage with families, as multi-person engagement is limited by phone or online connections. Families workers cannot use their usual methods of integrating support and learning into daily life activities, and the use of zoom has been found to create a formal atmosphere in the interaction that hampers capacity to assess and respond to young parents and their children's support needs.

'A key aspect of our relationship-based practice is developed through observations and body language — especially about what is happening with the children. The phone /zoom engagement (which tends to be formal) doesn't enable observations and we can only work through verbal communication. I have to talk to the parent about what might be happening for a child if I can hear them crying in the background, rather than being able to see what is happening.'

Adapting Ways of Working

While young people continue to engage relatively effectively in working towards stabilising their living situations and achieving life goals, workers have found that phone and online based engagement have had an impact in altering their ways of working towards those goals. When engaging with young people on the phone, rather than in person, youth workers have found that the work has become more 'in the moment' and more focussed on identifying and taking smaller steps towards larger goals.

'I have had to focus much more on their needs right now, which can be different to before Covid-19 lock down.'

'I find more emphasis on strength-based approaches, lots of encouragement and identifying other areas of strength and be more creative in thinking about solutions/thinking outside the box more, because a lot of things are less straight forward at the moment and are changing rapidly and frequently.'

'I am providing a lot of emotional support, and a lot of grounding and regulation approaches to implementing self-care techniques'

Workers have found themselves inspired to be more innovative and creative in their approaches, as well as more structured in their focus on steps towards young people's goals.

'My goals with young people have been stripped back completely, sometimes these goals are to identify a positive factor for the day or to think of positive affirmations for the day where we would normally have larger goals of completing housing applications (this is now a massive goal which has been broken down into small goals like finding application approval numbers, finding their income statements etc.)'

'I created new case plans and new goals so we could work out together what support was going to look during COVID. I have been making my appointments quite structured, outlining what we're working on today and setting tasks for them to complete in order to achieve their goals. I find that this has helped.'

The closure of other services and reduced referral options has increased creativity in the way that people are working.

'Obviously the amount of closures and changes to service delivery had an impact, but again I think this is a way where we can be creative and I have found that young people are open to more collaboration with their other support services so that their goals can be met.'

'Reaching out to different organisations for appropriate referrals has been challenging and has "delayed" some of

the desired outcomes and is a barrier to accessing additional support for young people.'

Workers have also noted that the reduced capacity to offer practical support has promoted greater focus on supporting young people to develop independent skills.

'We could normally support the young person in a more practical way — accompany them to Centrelink, to view properties etc. However, this is also an opportunity to actively encourage young people to be more involved in change making, taking more initiative, and sometimes doing the things that we may have been doing with or for them.'

There has been an increased focus in the work with young people on harm reduction, anxiety management and coping skills for daily life:

'I am continuing to use strengths based and trauma informed approaches however I have found I am using and identifying a harm minimisation approach far more with young people, almost developing and unpacking a safety plan each time we talk whereas in the past we may have used the same safety plan for weeks.'

Using Technology in Relationship-based Practice: Challenges and Successes

BYS workers have noticed that while engagement has at times decreased with some young people who have struggled with the lack of face to face contact, for others it has increased due to increased stress levels. There are also young people who have discovered that phone engagement works better for them.

'Some young people because of social isolation through Covid-19 are wanting contact two to three days a week, especially if they are stuck at home with small children and feeling overwhelmed.'

'Adapting contact has been different for each young person that I work with. Some prefer texting, others are open to video, and some have just been honestly more engaged than ever due to phone contact.'

'The level of engagement has not really dropped, if anything most of my clients are still well engaged and identifying that they still need this support and are so thankful that we're still able to provide support during this time'

'For some clients, phone contact has appeared to be a less vulnerable way of engaging. One young woman stated, "I'm really enjoying not being able to see my support workers because I'm not constantly looking at your face wondering what you might be thinking, I can just talk freely". She identified that not physically seeing me has allowed her to be more open and honest. She noted that this has never occurred to her before and she was able to reflect on why she feels more comfortable with phone contact.'

Some workers are reporting that while young people don't seem to be particularly concerned about talking on the phone rather than meeting face to face, it is more challenging for workers to consistently engage and feel a good sense of connection over the phone.

'I personally find it a bit more challenging to build a relationship with young people over the phone, however, I don't get that same feeling from the young people themselves. They seem to be quite ok with it — "it's just what it is". I plan and offer the same level of frequency of actual contact by phone as face-to-face — the only major difference is that I think with face to face contact, there might be a little bit more "accountability" — young people might feel more inclined to turn up to a pre-arranged meeting and time, while they can now choose not to answer their phone or respond.'

While zoom and phone calls offer a level of equivalence in interpersonal personal interaction, workers are noticing that texting is becoming more frequently the preferred way of interacting in the absence of face-to-face appointments. This aligns with social norms for young people who more often text each other than speak on the phone in person. This offers additional challenges for assessing and responding to complex

needs, with tone of voice and other cues missing from the interaction.

'I have found young people I support are less likely to Zoom but are communicating better over phone calls in time. I have changed the way I structure my calls and also I am texting young people a lot more now. This has been impacted by Covid-19 as I usually would request they come in for face to face support so I can get a proper understanding of what they're asking for, or if I'm concerned for their wellbeing.'

Gendered Differences in Young People's Responses to Covid-19

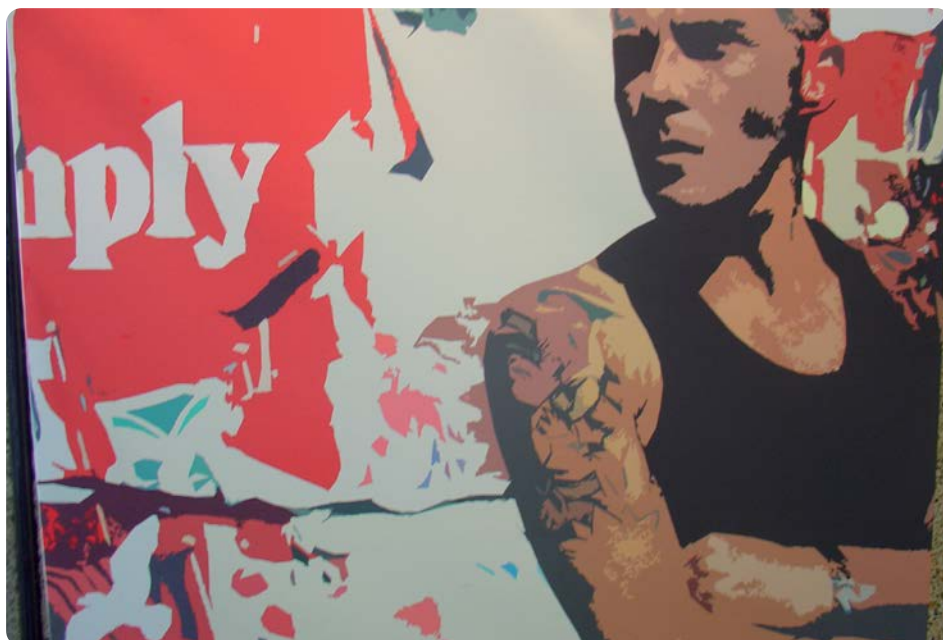
It is interesting to note that patterns of ways of responding to Covid-19 have, in some ways, been observed to differ for young people along gendered lines:

'As is often the case when appealing to young people to help 'others' they have understood and reacted with kindness and compassion. Interestingly, the young males began wearing facemasks on all their outings almost immediately and were very adamant they didn't want to catch the virus and it was the females within the house who appeared to be less focussed on the danger of contracting the virus themselves, but have been motivated to adhere to the restrictions to protect others.'

'Definitely have found young female identified clients are welcoming the idea of social distancing whereas male identified young people are less concerned about this, sometimes portraying ideas of scepticism around Covid-19 or being dismissive that it can affect them (almost invincibility to anything hurting them).'

'The young women I work with seemed to have transitioned to phone/zoom quite well. They are coping with social distancing as they want to protect their children. The young men I support are struggling with "staying at home", one young dad tells me every time we talk that he is bored and he feels like he is going to lose it.'

'I work with one young dad and have definitely noticed a



difference in his engagement. He has struggled to engage via phone calls, manages to text and is not interested in video calling. The young mothers and young women I support are definitely more aware of social isolation restrictions and concerned about exposing themselves and their children to others.'

And for many young people facing risks associated with homelessness, Covid-19 is just one more aspect of the life crises that they are dealing with on a daily basis.

'I think particularly for young people who are very transient it is evident that despite a pandemic going on, it's the least of their worries. It has definitely added to the energy around them, but they are still trying to work through obtaining safe and secure housing, keeping their children in their care or working towards their own life goals while the rest of the world is focusing on this pandemic.'

Overall, BYs's experiences have so far been characterised by the resilience and adaptability of both young people and workers as we navigate the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. We continue to manage business as usual but have seen that the number of occasions of support provided to young people has almost doubled to over 4,000 contacts a month through the March-April period of transition to social distancing restrictions. There has

been a 30 per cent increase in the number of triage calls to the service and this continues to rise week by week. We are now providing online groups, with art programs and other virtual social activities flourishing and showing higher attendance than ever. As we continue to creatively adapt and expand our approaches to supporting young people we strengthen, as a service and as a sector, our ability to meet the diverse and emergent support needs of young people.

As our CEO described it: *'We are able to respond well to this crisis, because we deal with crisis every day'*. It seems that youth homelessness services may emerge from Covid-19 stronger than ever in our capacity to flexibly respond to the needs of vulnerable and at-risk young people.

Acknowledgements:

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Endnotes

1. Vichta R, Gwinner K, Collyer B 2018, 'What would we use and how would we use it? Can digital technology be used to both enhance and evaluate well-being outcomes with highly vulnerable and disadvantaged young people?'. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 222-233.
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