



Young People's Minds Matter

Young Catalysts of Change: The CHAT Ambassadors Programme in Singapore

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Topic

Youth Mental Health, Youth Participation

Introduction

In Singapore, individuals aged 18-34 years had the highest lifetime prevalence and 12-month prevalence for any mental health disorder¹. Despite alarming statistics, distressed young people often prefer to talk to informal sources such as friends and family instead of seeking professional help². Peer influence is an important leverage to facilitate early help-seeking behaviour for mental health concerns by distressed young people.

Established in 2009, CHAT – Centre of Excellence for Youth Mental Health, Singapore aims to improve mental health literacy and accessibility of quality mental health services for youths and young adults aged 16-30. In recognizing the importance of youth participation to help CHAT stay responsive to young people's changing needs, "CHAT Ambassadors", a volunteer-based youth participatory group was formed in December 2014 to partner CHAT in its efforts to continually refine its clinical services, outreach, research and capacity building efforts.

Aim

To describe how CHAT Ambassadors have partnered CHAT in areas of service improvement and advocacy.

Approach

CHAT Ambassadors are youths and young adults (aged 16-30) passionate about youth mental health service improvement and advocacy work, who have demonstrated an openness towards collaborating with fellow youths to further a common cause.

For a minimum period of nine months, they are engaged in advocacy projects with varying degrees of participation and autonomy (adapted from Treseder, 1997³):

CHAT Ambassador-initiated, shared decision with CHAT
CHAT Ambassadors empowered to initiate, design and execute service improvement projects that are also aligned with CHAT's organisational goals. CHAT takes on a consultative role and supports project with relevant resources.

CHAT-initiated, shared decision with CHAT Ambassadors
CHAT Ambassadors are involved and engaged in the planning, decision-making and implementation of CHAT-initiated projects and strategic planning.

CHAT-initiated, CHAT Ambassador informed
CHAT Ambassadors are briefed about upcoming opportunities to partner CHAT staff and lend their voice from the youth and young adult's perspective in public outreach, training programmes, collaborations with student projects etc., and volunteer to participate based on their interest and availability.

Structured and on-the-job training is provided for areas of mental health literacy, project management, outreach and peer helping to empower young people to carry out the tasks required of the projects they embark on.

Results

Since December 2014 to date, 78 CHAT Ambassadors have been recruited and involved in various outreach/advocacy initiatives. These include partnering CHAT staff in local and international conferences, roadshows, panel discussions, participating in CHAT's strategic planning retreats and co-facilitating training programmes for young people and other service providers. They have also successfully implemented ten service improvement projects that range from changes in internal work process and service delivery to outreach campaigns.

Anecdotally, meaningful and sustained youth participation was achieved – CHAT Ambassadors expressed deep appreciation for the opportunities to step out of their comfort zone and impact change in areas that they believe in, make decisions and see the projects through. They have also forged long-term relationships amongst their peers and with CHAT staff in the process. 60.3% continue to volunteer beyond the stipulated nine months and close to 10% moved on to be employed in the mental health field, with four of them being converted to full-time CHAT staff.

This is noteworthy, as youth participatory efforts in Singapore are rarely self-initiated and are often limited by the high pressures for academic excellence and achievements⁴: (a) 15-year-old Singaporean youths have been found to spend 50 hours a week studying⁵, leaving little time left for leisure or volunteering activities; and (b) Singaporean youths often view youth participatory efforts as a school obligation or stepping stone into one's desired course or career⁴.

Conclusion

CHAT Ambassadors' contributions have helped CHAT continually refine its service delivery efforts and approaches. Anecdotally, the partnership has also facilitated personal and professional growth for the individual CHAT Ambassadors and the CHAT staff who worked alongside them.

CHAT is currently embarking on a qualitative Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to explore factors that facilitate or hinder youth participation, as well as how youths and young adults have benefitted from their involvement as a CHAT Ambassador.

Future directions include sharing our experiences with other service providers with a keen interest in youth participation, as well as empowering CHAT Ambassadors to collaborate in more aspects within CHAT.

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