

‘Trust, settle and DO YOU’

Co-designing the Buddy Program at Mind Australia’s Youth Residential Rehabilitation

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Key points

- The **Buddy** program at Mind’s Youth Residential Rehabilitation (YRR) services was a co-designed initiative to support new residents by pairing them with a buddy resident to share knowledge and experience of available supports.
- An intentional **co-design** approach included clients, practitioners, and leaders as equal partners in defining and conducting the project.
- One year on, the program is fully implemented. **Buddies feel empowered** and new clients **settle in more quickly** with less anxiety. **Matching and timing** are important – a Buddy needs to be compatible with a new resident and the Buddy program may be best offered just before moving into a YRR program or after an initial settling in period.

Co-design at Mind

Co-design is a key part of Mind’s Lived Experience strategy and recovery orientation. **Co-design** involves Mind clients and supporters, practitioners and leaders as equal partners in decision-making. Rather than being a source of information, participants collaborate to define and direct a project. This intentional approach aims to create relevant, innovative solutions based on lived experience to improve outcomes (McKercher, 2020). By bringing people along on the journey, the co-design process may be as powerful as the outcome (Mind Australia, 2021).

Introduction

Mind Australia YRR Services provide young people with trauma-informed psycho-social supports during a 1 year live-in program. In 2020, YRR staff recognised that new clients needed to orientate to the program more effectively to access the supports on offer. However, young people moving into a YRR received a lot of necessary paperwork, and printed information about the supports available to help with their mental health challenges tended to get lost in the pile. Hence, clients were not effectively oriented to start accessing supports. Practitioners and managers met with the Mind Participation team to explore a co-design approach to solve this problem.

Methods

Staff and clients worked with Mind’s Participation Team in a co-design approach in 5 steps:

Step 1. Frame and engage: Staff defined the practice challenge “how might we help young people better understand what it’s like to live at the Youth Residential Rehabilitation program?” and determined the co-design approach.

Step 2. Explore and connect: Peer practitioners and residents built content for intervention using structured creative activities to facilitate information sharing.

Step 3. Imagine and create: Brainstormed and voted on intervention format: connect new client to a buddy; Introductory pamphlets, site tours, and key talking points.

Step 4. Make and test: Pilot designed with client feedback on language, content and processes before final implementation.

Step 5. Reflect and review: Staff and clients plan and implement improvements one year after full implementation.

Results

The Buddy program support new residents by pairing them with a buddy resident to share knowledge and experience of available supports. **Buddies** use pamphlets, site tours, and talking points to support new clients to ‘Trust, Settle and DO YOU’.

New clients can draw on previous clients’ lived experience, creativity, knowledge, and wisdom to guide their learning about available opportunities at YRR.

Client participants in co-design reported increased confidence, reduced stigma, and better relationships with staff and other clients.

YRR staff developed capabilities in consulting with young people and conducting co-design projects. Staff learned new concepts and applied them to practice challenges.

Reflections one year on...

Fully implemented: Offered to all YRR clients.

Co-designed materials: Relevant to clients, structure interactions without being prescriptive.

The Buddy experience: Buddies felt empowered through sharing learnings and gained a sense of pride and worthwhile effort that capitalised on their progress.

Having a Buddy: New clients felt less intimidated and that they could learn more about the program, and build skills and relationships, faster.

Matching Buddies: Making the right match was important for effective connection.

Not for everyone: Some new clients wanted to keep it “low key” and didn’t want a Buddy. Some clients felt being a Buddy might be too much responsibility. Good timing in offering the program is important for uptake.

Improvements: Peer practitioners are exploring optimal timing for offering a Buddy. Staff are also reviewing the best ways for clients to build Buddy skills before they step into the mentoring role. This may address the feeling of “too much responsibility” in being a Buddy. Clients feedback shows a preference for an alternative name for the program.

References

McKercher, K. A. (2020). *Beyond sticky notes. Doing co-design for Real: Mindsets, Methods, and Movements* (1st ed.). Sydney, NSW: Beyond Sticky Notes.

Mind Australia. (2021). *Mind’s Participation and Co-design Practice Framework: Working together to make a difference*. At https://www.mindaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/Participation_and_codesign_practice_framework.pdf

