



Youths Dealing with Mental Health Challenges Find New Hope in Peer Support

“Depression can be a dark place, and while I was holding it together on the outside, the pain I felt inside was gripping.”

-- *Krissy Dristy, Youth Peer Support Statewide Coordinator,
Association for Children's Mental Health*

The Issue: The stigma associated with a mental health diagnosis is difficult enough for adults to grapple with, but those experiences can be particularly overwhelming and isolating for youths. Untreated, mental and behavioral health conditions can adversely impact school performance, lead to disciplinary actions and juvenile justice encounters, and negatively impact future educational and career outcomes.

For families seeking resources and supports to help, the [Association of Children's Mental Health](#) (ACMH) provides those and referrals for children impacted by anxiety and depression, Attention Deficit Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, Bi-polar Disorder, Eating Disorders and others. Now, the ACMH is also integrating youth voice in the treatment field by creating a [Youth Peer Support Project](#), a Medicaid-funded service that operates through community mental health organizations. With DHHS, the Association created a training curriculum last year and hired a statewide youth coordinator, Krissy Dristy, to oversee the training.

A Personal Journey: Dristy, 28, a Western Michigan University graduate in psychology, came with strong experience in helping youths find their voice, having previously worked for Kalamazoo's Advocacy

Services for Kids before joining ACMH in July 2015. Dristy also brought personal insight. As one who's dealt with depression and anxiety since childhood, she brings an insider's grasp of the challenges youth and their families experience with mental health as she bravely speaks out about her own journey before groups and in her online writing.

"Navigating the system while managing a mental health challenge can be a scary and lonely experience at times," Dristy wrote in a recent blog. "I know that had I been able to connect with (a peer) – someone who knows how hard it could be, someone who wouldn't judge me or look down on me -- I would have been able to get on the road to recovery sooner."

Dristy's message is one of youth empowerment and learning to participate in one's own life-long health care and treatment as she once did. "There is so much shame and stigma around mental health," she said. "To feel there's something internally wrong with you is so scary. A huge piece of this is hopelessness. These are feelings that youths go through every day – that and not knowing what to do about it."

Dristy said she struggled with anxiety and depression for as long as she can remember, beginning as a young child waking up with frightening night terrors. She often resisted going to school and acted out in frustration. "It was difficult to control those kinds of emotions," she said. "I felt like the bad kid, like something was wrong with me." Though her family was supportive and loving, Dristy said her mother often seemed lost about what to do. The topic of mental health was not openly discussed. "A lot of families experience shame and that prevents them from getting the treatment they need," she said.

Things changed for the better when Dristy went to college and actively sought counseling services and became engaged in her treatment. "It took a long time for me to understand the pieces in my childhood experience," she added. "Through recovery, I understood that I wasn't acting out for no reason -- that I wasn't just a bad kid."

The Initiative: The Youth Peer Support Project matches trained peers, 18 to 26 years old, with middle- and high-school youth being treated for serious emotional disturbances. Peers share their stories, and become part of the youths' treatment team. "When young people connect with other young adults who bring a sense of empathy and their own experiences, it does break down some of those barriers," Dristy said. "These connections ignite a sense of hope."

ACMH has historically recruited individuals with personal experiences with the children's mental health system including parents. Parent Support Partners formed from a partnership between the family organization and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services in 2010. "This was a great triumph for families who, through the public health system, were now able to receive support from parents who could directly identify with their challenges," Dristy said. Its success led to the spinoff for a peer support initiative.

Since its inception, Dristy and lead trainer, Sara Reynolds, have helped launch two sets of peer support specialists – 12 individuals with backgrounds from juvenile justice, child welfare and child protective services. They've worked with groups in Kalamazoo, Muskegon and Wayne and Oakland Counties. A third cohort is planned for August in Lansing.

After an initial three-day training, peers work in the field for six weeks before returning for two additional days of intensive training. They continue to receive monthly coaching calls to reinforce what they've learned and one-on-one technical assistance, returning to Lansing every three months for a

refresher course. “We talk a lot about engagement and relationship building, strategies for sharing your stories and boundaries,” Dristy said.

Peers and youth work one-on-one and in groups. They talk about topics including skills to resolve conflicts, interactions with family, school and community, setting goals and problem-solving. Learning to advocate for oneself and become involved in one’s own treatment is essential as youth grow up and transition to adult mental health services.

“Sometimes these settings can be really intimidating for young people,” she said. “It’s about empowering youth to use their voices and find the confidence to meet the goals in their individualized treatment plans.”

Apart from anecdotal evidence, there is no hard data to gauge effectiveness because the program is still new, she said. But Dristy said they are learning from evaluation tools developed in adult-to-adult peer programs that can inform her program’s practices.

ACMH Director Jane Shank said it was essential that the program coordinator position be filled by an individual who has life experience within the mental health system. Her personal journey and ability to relate to others make her uniquely poised to lead the new effort, she added.

“I can’t begin to say what a great job Krissy’s been doing. It’s vital that one’s lived the experience; it’s just a must. It’s built into our philosophy and ethical approach to this work,” she said.

Shank said Dristy’s personal strengths made her a stand-out, as well. “At her core, Krissy has absolute sincerity, integrity and passion for this work because she knows the difference it can make. She’s non-judgmental and has a strength-based approach with others,” she said.

Shank said peer support programs involving parents have been in place in Michigan since the mid-90s although the concept is part of a larger continuum of peer support that also includes addiction recovery coaches. The model was created with input from 35 statewide stakeholders including state administrators, public mental health, youth organizations, and parent partner groups. Part of a national trend for youths helping youths, Shank said other states were tapped for their experiences, too.

As the project matures, peers will be called upon to use their leadership skills in other ways, specifically to share their stories with policymakers who can help further the work statewide.

“When you feel there’s hope and you’re not alone, it is just life-changing,” Dristy said. That’s where healing can start.”