



Strategies for Engaging Young Adults



What We Know From the Field

Young adults can be actively engaged and retained in services that are important to them by using proactive approaches. We know that young adults often under-utilize services for serious mental health conditions. The scarcity of treatment resources, the lack of adaptation to young adult culture or needs, and the challenges of navigating the treatment system as adults may explain unmet treatment needs. Moreover, young adults may need to develop self-advocacy skills because their parents or others in their support system may have advocated for them in the past. Simply providing young adults with information about how and where to get care or services does not always work.

Change is a cornerstone of the transition to adulthood. Aside from their mental health needs, young adults living with mental health conditions may need support with obtaining meaningful employment, education, housing, community integration, mentoring and peer supports, and/or developing supportive relationships or social networks.¹⁻⁴ Be aware that their services may need adjusting as their needs and goals change.

Providers need to develop a connection, build trust, and create a working therapeutic alliance with each young adult. See each young adult as a partner. Try to be flexible, and respond according to where the **young adult is at in his or her life**. Utilizing these principles will help providers to develop a strong foundation of mutual respect and the rapport needed to work effectively with young adults.



Guiding Principles for Working with Young Adults

- **Develop a therapeutic alliance with each young adult by:**
 - **Establishing a connection by using a functional and person-centered approach** (rather than a medical approach). Focus on the young adult, their goals, interests, desires, and skills rather than their diagnosis.⁵ Find out what the young adults' goals are and allow them to drive the process. Ask questions and really listen to what they want and which areas they would like support.
 - **Being helpful** by connecting young adults with the services they feel they need to achieve their goals.⁶
 - **Being genuine and likable** (e.g., friendly, empathetic, compassionate, honest, and amiable) with young adults by clearly expressing interest in helping them find the services and supports that meet their goals/needs. Avoid taking on an authoritarian or parental role.⁷
 - **Allowing for flexible meeting times and locations.** Help with transportation, if needed. Young adults may miss appointments more than older adults so try to be flexible with cancellations and missed meetings. Assist young adults in scheduling and setting up reminders about future appointments, and brainstorm with the young adult about ways to hold them accountable to attend their appointments.
 - **Being consistent and following through** on plans and promises.⁶
- **Get to know each young adult by:**⁶
 - **Understanding their** reason or reasons for coming to services
 - **Finding out the importance** of school and work in their life
 - **Discovering who influences** them in their life; getting to know their social influences
 - **Discussing the role of family** biological or otherwise youth-defined
 - **Describing** releases of information and making sure they understand their purpose and need

Some tips for meeting with young adults:

- **Ask one open-ended question such as** “What do you like to do for fun?” or “What do you need help with?” and then STOP to listen to the answer. Do not ask questions in quick succession.⁹
- **If you think the young adult is missing something** or needs more information, ask a question instead of just giving them the answer. For example, if a young adult wanted to take an art class ask him or her “I wonder if there are costs associated with taking the class”.⁹
- **Try to be descriptive when offering praise** or talking about a strength. Say more than “great”. Also offering congratulations for accomplishments (large and small) is important.⁹
- **Provide reflection** when a young adult says something meaningful, important, or personal, or mentions something often.⁹



- **If technology is available to you, use texting and social media to engage young adults.** Young adults rely on heavily on texting and social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram) to communicate. Checking in using texts and sending appointment reminders via text are good ways to connect with young adults. Discuss with the young adult what his or her preferred communication and establish parameters for using them.
- **Ask the young adult about any desires or goals** they may have to make academic and/or employment changes.⁶ Refer to services that:
 - Focus on career development and exploration that may include resume building, how to apply for a job, how to dress, and how act being in a professional environment.⁸
 - Assist young adults in finishing high school and/or transitioning to post-secondary school education.
- **Identify services and supports that are developmentally appropriate.** Young adults may have stronger skills in some areas than others. Try to find services and supports that match the developmental stage of the young adult.
- **Make and keep connections with other agencies and organizations** to create a more integrated approach and to assist with referrals. Use a proactive, but gentle approach. Do not assume the young adult will follow-up later. Do a warm hand off. Encourage young adults to use their service authorization person or case manager’s telephone number to schedule the appointment.
- **Assist young adults in developing important life-skills** such as advocacy and self-determination.
- **Refer young adults to services and supports** that have been specifically adapted for young adults and that have near-age peer mentors.
- **It takes cultural sensitivity and respect** to relate to young adults effectively.
 - Providers should have sensitivity to the diverse cultural/linguistic values they may come across while working with young adults. Be aware of socioeconomic differences, sexual orientation, and gender identity.
 - Be attuned to the generation you are talking to. In general, young adults have different values, language, technology dependence, and expectations when compared to older adults.

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SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Achieve My Plan (AMP's) Top Ten Tips for Engaging with Young People: <https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/proj-5-AMP-top-ten-tips-for-engaging-young-people.pdf>
- Davis, M., & Golden, L. (2018). Annotated bibliography: State-of-the-science conference proceedings. Worcester, MA: University of Massachusetts Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center (SPARC), Transitions Research and Training Center. Retrieved from <https://www.umassmed.edu/globalassets/systems-and-psychosocial-advances-research-center/images/annbib-sos2018.pdf>
- During Meetings I can't Stand It When...: A Guide for Facilitators and Team Members: <https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/proj3-facilitator-guide-2013.pdf>
- Jivanjee, P., Brennan, E. M., Grover, L., Sellmaier, C., Roser, E., Pathways Transition Training Collaborative, Youth M.O.V.E. National, & Pathways Transition Training Partners. (2018). Transition mental health service provider core competencies. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University. Retrieved from <https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/projPTTP-core-competencies-2018.pdf>
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- TIP Case Plan Goal Domains: https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/HTItoolkit/files/04-Service_and_Delivery/2-Individualized_Planning/C.TIP_Case_Plan_Goal_Domains.pdf

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- ⁶ *HYPE practice guide: Engagement & intake*. Unpublished manuscript. Worcester, MA: University of Massachusetts Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center (SPARC), Transitions Research and Training Center.
- ⁷ Green, C.A., Wisdom, J.P., Wolfe, L., & Firemark, A. (2012). Engaging youths with serious mental illnesses in treatment: STARS Study Consumer Recommendations. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 35(5), 360-368. <http://doi.org/10.1037/h0094494>
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- ⁹ Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures. (2016, September). *AMP's Top Ten Tips for Engaging with Young People*. Available at <https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/proj-5-AMP-top-ten-tips-for-engaging-young-people.pdf>