

Clubhouse Relationships Need Work!

By Robby Vorspan

Clubhouse relationships. The clubhouse topic that just won't go away. In every seminar, every regional conference, every clubhouse training, every collection of clubhouse writings, we always comes back to this: What *is* this unique relationship that exists between members and staff in a clubhouse?

Way back when, when we first began to attempt to articulate the nature of these relationships, the way that we understood them was by focusing very heavily on what they *were not*. We all agreed that the relationships that existed between clubhouse members and staff were quite different from what we had formerly experienced in traditional mental health settings, — whether as patients or as staff workers. We recognized, first of all, that the vast divide between traditional mental health workers and their patients did not exist in our clubhouses. Another obvious difference was that in our clubhouses, staff, by and large, did not have separate staff meetings, staff trainings, or staff offices. Another sharp distinction was that clubhouse staff was not required to remain silent about their own personal lives, goals, hopes, and frustrations, as staff in traditional settings are.

So we began the process of defining the unique nature of clubhouse relationships by pointing to everything they were not. They were not one-sided; they were not authoritative; they were not formal.

When we did take the next step, and tried to describe clubhouse relationships in terms of what they actually *were*, we got as far as to say that they were “friendly,” “respectful,” “dignified,” and “mutual.” Because, unfortunately, these words so often did *not* characterize the relationships between patients and staff in traditional mental health settings, for many years these descriptions of clubhouse relationships were useful enough for us. They were successful in making a very important distinction between the relationships we were building in clubhouses and those we had all experienced in other mental health institutions.

But, now, things have changed. We are at a new plateau in understanding clubhouse culture and relationships. For one thing, to whatever extent they have actually been able to achieve it, even the most traditional mental health agencies today *claim* to have “friendly,” “respectful,” and “dignified” relationships with their clients or patients. Yet even so, we all know that those kinds of relationships do not even approach the kinds of

relationships that are at the heart of the healing process that occurs in clubhouses. So we are pushed to ask ourselves: *What is the difference?*

By now it is quite clear that words such as “friendly” and “respectful” only scratch the most superficial surface in describing what we have come to know as the ‘magic’ of clubhouse relationships. But calling it ‘magic’ isn’t good enough any more. As we, as a clubhouse community, come to a deeper realization of how uniquely powerful and effective our way of working is, it becomes more and more incumbent upon us to *know* exactly what it is we do and why it works so well. It is the only way we can strengthen our own clubhouses, and help develop new clubhouses that are worthy of the name ‘clubhouse.’ So we need to look again, and again try to grapple with this question of questions: What is behind the ‘magic’ of clubhouse relationships?

In my job at the ICCD, I am in the fortunate position of being able to read many certification reports. For a long time I found myself troubled by a theme that repeatedly surfaces in the reports. Often, when the consultants deal with the section of the Standards on Relationships, everything sounds fabulous. They often even go so far as to say that there are *no* problems in this area — that there is a wonderful, warm, collegial feel in the house; that there is a strong sense of community; that there is laughter and easy socializing throughout the house. That relationships are, in fact, ‘friendly, respectful, mutual, and dignified.’ Summary: No problems in the Relationship department. . . .

Then, though, they roll into the section of the report that addresses the Work-Ordered Day, and the whole landscape changes. Here, there are vivid descriptions of units in which nothing is happening; in which staff are busy doing the work while members chat amongst themselves on the sidelines. There are descriptions of charts and lists of tasks hung up on the wall so that members can come in, do a task or two, and never have to be involved with staff at all. Then there is the unit, so often held up as some kind of clubhouse ideal, which functions fine with no staff present at all. And there are the units in which staff and members spend most of their time, kicked back, sitting around talking.

In one house, in which the relationships all appeared to be “friendly” and there seemed to be a strong sense of community, the one staff worker in the clerical unit had her own office which housed one huge desk behind which she secluded herself and did the work of the unit. Sure, she was friendly, but the work belonged to her alone. Members came in to the clubhouse, looked at a white board outside of her office, and chose from among

several simple tasks, which required no engagement from staff. Then, after doing one or two of these tasks, members would retreat to the smoking room.

Something is definitely wrong with this picture. Friendly, respectful, etcetera, etcetera, is clearly not enough, nor is it the heart of what makes a clubhouse a clubhouse; nor is it the key to helping members to reclaim their lives.

Clubhouse relationships are no accidental hocus pocus magic. They are dependent on a very clearly defined set of criteria, which are set out in our Clubhouse Standards, without which, no matter how “friendly” or “respectful” they may be, they are simply not *clubhouse relationships*.

Standard #8 says that “clubhouse staff are sufficient to engage the membership, yet small enough in number to make carrying out their responsibilities impossible without member involvement.” Clubhouse member/staff relationships are built in and through the work we do together. Without the sharing of clubhouse work as the framework upon which our relationships are built, our relationships wither and lose their transforming power.

It isn't possible to examine these two clubhouse essentials as separate entities. You can't have a house with great relationships but a weak work-ordered day. Nor, for that matter, could you have a house with a strong work-ordered day but weak relationships. Clubhouse member/staff relationships and the clubhouse work-ordered day are totally interdependent. You can't have one without the other.

It is the essential job of the clubhouse staff to *find* each and every member, and to *engage* him or her in the real, meaningful, and important work of the clubhouse. The job of the clubhouse staff worker is simple. It is to take each opportunity to look into a member's eyes and say: “I need *you*.” Recovery does not happen simply in the doing of the work: it happens by doing work in the context of this kind of real, human engagement.

Mental illness robs people of their identities, their sense of self, and of the meaning in their lives. We begin the process of rediscovering who we are when someone looks us in the eye and says, “I need you.” If and when we are genuinely addressed this way, we begin to accept, even if only in the most tentative and tiny way, that there is actually still a ‘me’ to be needed by another person. And then, when we step out to meet that need, and agree to engage in whatever the work is, we have no choice but to acknowledge that “I *am*, still.” That though broken, I still *am*, and that by working together with this other person, I seem to grow, ever so slowly, stronger.

This is why the example of “clubhouse” I gave earlier is so gravely off the mark. Though the community was ‘nice’ and ‘friendly,’ and there was some work going on, the heartbeat of the clubhouse was missing from that place. Members came in and read a white board that listed tasks, and proceeded to do them. What is missing is the experience of being seen by another person, who acknowledges needing *me*; needing the *specific* person that I am and what I have to offer.

It’s not the work in itself that heals. And it’s also not, in itself, the nice, caring, supportive attitude of staff toward members that heals. In fact, it is very possible to maintain nice, caring and supportive attitudes toward people from whom we expect nothing. There are plenty of workers in back wards of state hospitals who are nice and supportive toward their patients, but who expect nothing of them except the strange antics of mental illness.

What does heal is the fact that clubhouse staff meet members in the context of needing them. Staff are pushed to look beyond the ‘shell’ the member hides under, and to seek to find the person, no matter how tightly hidden or inaccessible that member has made him or herself. Because there is real, demanding work to be done, the staff has no choice but to try to connect with the place in that member that is vital, healthy, and full of hope, whether or not the member recognizes that such a place still exists.

And staff, in this process, are also deeply changed. The urgency and need that are built into the work-ordered day push staff out of the ‘comfort zone’ of their own pre-formed ideas of what they can expect from people with mental illness. Clubhouse staff have to face and address their own prejudices about mental illness, or they are unable to do their jobs. Looking into someone’s eyes and *genuinely* saying, “I need you” is not possible if you are unable to see the healthy ability within that person.

In working together like this with a staff worker, members reconnect with themselves; with their talents, their abilities, their strengths. They begin to feel that they can, and would like to, take on more responsibility within the clubhouse. As they grow stronger, they become eager to take bigger steps, with more responsibility and more opportunity. They move into transitional employment, supported employment, and independent employment. They begin to re-experience their own hopes, dreams, and desires. They look for and find better housing options through the help of the clubhouse. They begin to recognize that they are valuable, worthwhile people, worthy of friendships and community, and they develop meaningful relationships both inside and outside of the clubhouse. The clubhouse member/staff relationship puts all of this into motion, and then is there as a constant support as it unfolds.

The work-ordered day and clubhouse relationships are not two parallel worlds in the clubhouse. They are one and the same. If there is no genuine, meaningful work ordered day, in which staff are pushed into the position of needing members, then there can be no real, healing, Standards-based clubhouse relationships.

To be healed, we need to be found by one another. To find one another, we have to need each other. To need each other, there has to be a structure in place that ensures that there are important things to be done, which we cannot do without help.

That is the genius of the structure of the clubhouse. The work is there, the need is there, and the people are there. It is not magic. But when all of these pieces are in place, though, the transformation that takes place in the heart of our lives, is more powerful than the magic of a million magicians.