



Community: The Power of Belonging

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Dressed only in panties and a short green hospital uniform, I awake. All sweaty, on a blue plastic bed in the middle of a small room. There are no windows, only a big black chalkboard, painted on the wall. I feel like I can't get any air and my heart starts to pound. On the floor are four plastic cups filled with water and a container made of the material that is normally used to transport eggs in. In the corner of the sealing, I see a camera observing me very prominently. It makes me feel even more trapped and watched. For a moment I wonder if I'm dreaming, or is this real? After all the recent events, I really don't know any more.

My head and body hurts because I am covered in bruises. And then it comes back to me: the moment five aid workers jumped on me, forced me to the ground and held me down. I screamed and begged them, "please don't, my baby, my baby"! They didn't listen. They injected something in my behind and forcibly dragged me to the isolation cell and hurled me in. I look at the iron door, the little window is like you see in movies, in a prison cell. That's exactly how I feel, a prisoner, a criminal. Only I don't know what I did wrong. What did I do to deserve this? I walk to the door and press the bell next to it. The aid worker comes to the window and asks me what's the matter. I beg him to be let out, tell him that this is all a misunderstanding and that I will behave nicely. With a gruff tone, he lets me know that he cannot decide about this. "You can smoke again in an hour", he tells me. The window closes with a bang. Several times a day I am allowed out to smoke and I take full advantage of these moments. 24/7, I am alone with my confusion. I am trapped in this so-called stimulus-free space. I go through all kinds of emotions. I sing, laugh, dance, cry, yell, meditate, do yoga and write loving texts on the blackboard, using my spit for lack of crayons. After three days, the door opens and a counselor tells me that I can return to the department. Like a tame animal I follow her.

I grew up in a small grew village not far from Amsterdam. I had a loving family and a lovely childhood that I would wish upon everyone. I was pretty confident and had the idea that I could do and achieve anything I wanted. When I was 26, my life changed completely because for the first time I experienced mental problems. I noticed it especially at work. There I felt more and more insecure. Every day I had less energy. I started to have anxiety and panic attacks. At night I couldn't sleep. I began to believe my own, dark thoughts more and more. I was thinking how the world would be better off without me. These thoughts lasted for weeks. Until I couldn't deal with them anymore. I contacted a psychologist. He told me I had a depression.

After a year of therapy and medication, I overcame my first depression. When I had my second depression, my psychologist advised me to have intensive therapy of three days a week, to figure out where the depressions came from and how to get rid of them. During this time my father died. While I was looking at my passed away father in the hospital, I could not believe this really happened. It felt like I had entered a bad movie. I think the distancing psychotic process had already begun at this point. It was too much for me, I could not understand this and did not want to.

Increasingly these kinds of situations took place, where I was functioning completely outside reality. For the people close to me, it was clear that my behavior was not normal and they understood less and less of what was happening to me. My mother contacted the center where I had therapy and she expressed her concerns. I agreed to go with one of the therapists to a crisis center for a checkup. This was the first moment I felt really tricked. After some

testing it was decided by the counselors -which was later approved by my family - that I had to stay for further testing and medication.

I had nothing to say about this. I just had to follow orders from then on. Of course this went quite wrong. I was used to doing exactly what I wanted and now suddenly there were people who thought they could decide for me. Without my approval and often without consulting me. As a result I became very rebellious and defiant. This caused me to be placed in a locked department and placed under observation. The place resembled a prison, with only crazy people running around. Very institutional and cold. The counselors observed us all day long from behind glass, tapping away behind their computers. The other people there looked totally lost and crazy to me and I did not understand at all why I had to be among them.

The counselors stuck to handing out medication and observing. There was no room for personal contact. They had no idea what was going on in my world because nobody ever asked. I missed my daughter and my father. I felt humiliated and misunderstood by my family and other loved ones. So I couldn't even turn to the people who were normally my trusted ones. I felt very lonely and betrayed by them. What I really needed, more than anything, were loving and understanding people. Above all I needed someone to listen to me, as a person, not as a mental patient.

Although things improved and I was allowed to the open department, they had - casually it seemed - stuck the diagnosis of 'bipolar disorder' on me. To this day I cannot remember anybody ever telling me what this means, exactly what it is, or how I could deal with it. But with the new diagnosis, they had to adjust medication accordingly. Lots of different medication they tried on me. In no time, my energy level dropped. It kept dropping and dropping, slipping me back into a depression. But the center concluded I was not unbalanced anymore. So I was sent home, with a brand new diagnosis - and a serious depression. Coming home was very tough. I was angry, sad and ashamed of the person I had become and pushed away everyone I loved because I didn't trust them anymore.

Through a companion whom I had met at the center, I found my way to Clubhouse 'De Waterhevel'. In the beginning I really had a hard time to accept that I was a person with a psychiatric disorder. Therefore, it was hard for me to see myself as a member of the Clubhouse, which in my mind reminded me all the time that I was ill. Of course this was the reflection of my mind and not the Clubhouse. The people in the Clubhouse were always nice to me and accepted me before I had even accepted myself. The formula of the Clubhouse was so different from my experience at the Center, that I came there every day for one year. This was because the formula worked well for me. It allowed me to regain structure – and finally - I had real people around me, that I could connect with. The people at the Clubhouse did not see me as a 'mental patient,' but as a person. They encouraged me to use my abilities and other good qualities, which made me feel increasingly better. Over time I began to crawl out of my shell and regain control of my life.

But because of my new diagnosis and not knowing how to deal with it, I started to bounce back and forth between mania and depression. Until I got a psychosis again. This time I knew exactly how to behave in the crisis center, and they let me out in three days. The only problem being that the psychosis was not over yet. Fortunately, this time I had my Clubhouse community, which made it possible that I didn't have to be committed to the center again. The reason I always voluntarily returned to the Clubhouse was that they offered everything I needed to recover. Firstly, the Clubhouse offered a community of people – who actually cared about me as a human being. The staff and other members had time for me and when I needed it, they took time to sit down and talk. They always looked at what I could do and did not pay much attention to what I could not. The members and staff at the Clubhouse actually seemed to like me, and to welcome me. They listened and showed understanding. They also offered activities that built my self-image and self-esteem.

As most of you here probably have experienced these simple basic things makes all the difference when you are struggling with the devastation of a serious mental illness. As I connected more and more to my Clubhouse community, my life began to become stable again. Through a T.E Job arrangement , I started working part time. For the first time in 10 years I did not feel like a patient, but like someone contributing fully in society. I grew more and more in my abilities until I was back at my old level. It was at this moment that I was asked to join the trip to the World Seminar in Denver exactly 4 years ago. I remember well that I was sitting in this huge conference room at one of the first plenary's with 400 likeminded people. Listening to the stories of members, I was totally overwhelmed by the effect that it had on me. For the first time in my career as a diagnosed person I felt connected with this unique group of people from all over the world.

For the first time since I had mental issues I accepted myself as a person with a mental illness and with everything that comes along with it. This was a huge breakthrough in my recovery process. Up until that moment I only wanted to recover and leave everything that had something to do with psychiatry behind me. It was at this point that I really started to admire all the people that made me proud instead of being ashamed to belong to this great group of people. The funny thing was, that when I was sitting on my chair in Denver, I wished that I would have the self-esteem and the guts to stand on that stage and be that person that could proudly tell this is who I am and this is what I stand for. Never in my wildest dreams I would have thought that I would be standing here today and tell you my story, but this is what could happen to any of you here, too. If you can dream it, you can do it. So be careful what you wish for because it might be you who is standing here next time telling your story.

With this remarkable experience I went back to Holland, I really had a different state of mind, so after working a while, I wanted to do something that was close to my heart, so I could always completely be my unique self. I trained to be a 'professional with experience,' which in the U.S. is referred to as a 'peer counselor'. It turned out that this job really appeals to me. I think having professionals that have lived through a similar experience as their clients can be a huge enrichment. And for the past year and a half, I have been working in another in Clubhouse in Amsterdam, as a Clubhouse staff worker.

During this period 'De Waterhevel' supported me as well. They coached me when needed and helped me with all kinds of practical stuff. The director Petra showed me the way to get me a founding for my peer counselor training. Now that I was stable in my bipolarity and having my life back on track, I still felt very much the need to stay connected with our Clubhouse and to the world wide Clubhouse community. That's why I loved to participate in several groups like, the leadership training, the board of 'De Waterhevel' and the faculty of Clubhouse international. This way I could contribute in knowledge from my experiences and stay connected with the community at the same time.

My experience of being a psychiatric patient in a crisis center gave me the deeply painful experience of what it is like to be alone, be misunderstood and to be treated like a criminal or a bad person simply because I was struggling with a significant mental illness.

My experience of becoming a part of my Clubhouse community was a very stark contrast to that, and basically showed me that the Standards are the important pillars off my recovery. At the Clubhouse, from my first visit, I was always welcomed as myself. I have been accepted, appreciated, heard and listened to. They empowered me to follow my dreams. Now I truly, always have a whole community to fall back on.

I think that the international Clubhouse community is a great gift to people all over the world who are living with mental illness and want to re-build there life in dignity and respect. My dream for the future is that the there are plenty of clubhouses worldwide accessible for everyone who is in this kind of need. So that more people like us could use our Clubhouses as places where they can truly belong, a place where they can be taken seriously as human beings.

Places where they are deeply needed, wanted and expected. Knowing and feeling that you belong, and that you matter.

That is according to my experience:

The true power of belonging !!!