



The Restorative Power of Giving Back: Contributing your talents and strengths to your Clubhouse community

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In this session we are going to talk about the “Restorative power of giving back: Contributing your talents and strengths to your Clubhouse community”.

This is about the fundamental value of a Clubhouse community – that recovery and growth cannot just be about receiving treatment and support from professionals – but that it also requires the genuine opportunity to be a valuable and contributing member of your community.

You will hear strong stories from powerful members.

To tell about my experience is a difficult task, I felt a lot of resistance when I wrote this.

Long ago, I grew up on a small farm and had a good childhood. I was number three in a flock of eight siblings. On the farm there was space enough for everyone. At school everything went smoothly, and I went through primary school and college without any problems.

Then I applied for and was accepted into the Army’s technical school, where I graduated after three years and served another three years. After this I served in the United Nations interim force in Lebanon, as a supply officer.

I went back to civilian life after this and worked as head of the maintenance department at a local factory. The job at the factory required a lot of me, and I started to feel worn out. After four years, I had to sign up for sick leave and after a year I was transferred to other support schemes. I experienced that my personality changed. I withdraw from social settings, avoided people, and got more and more isolated. I was divorced and my life fell apart. I was alone, I was lost.

Then one day my doctor said to me, Knut I believe you need to talk to someone professional. I will refer you to a psychiatrist. “*What are you talking about!*” was my response. I was not mad! But after a long dialog I accepted to meet with a “shrink” and the ball started rolling.

Very quickly I was diagnosed with bipolar depression, I was medicated and got into therapy. But my encounter with the “system” was a crash. I felt that I was being pushed into boxes that I did not fit into, there were no acceptance for alternate thinking, everything was by the book. There was no room for me, I was only a number, a diagnosis. I lost my identity. A lot of people told me what was best for me, what I was able to do. Nobody asked me what I thought. I lost my personality. I became a patient. This went on for several years and my frustration increased.

Since I had so many bad experiences, I got in touch with, and helped to start a local branch of Mental Health Norway. I was very quickly recruited into central work for this organization. This work gave me a greater understanding of how the mental health work was organized in Norway, and that I was not alone. Many people struggled with a health system that they did not fit into.

This work led me into my first contact with the Clubhouse community. My way into the Clubhouse world was very special.

One day, proofing and recommend applications for financial support from the Extra stiftelsen, I came upon an application about funding from someone who wanted to start something they called a 'Clubhouse.' I did not understand what this was, so I did not approve this application. It was turned down.

By then I had started to work part-time in an office furniture business, and one day a couple of ladies came into my office and wanted to buy some furniture. They were going to start something they called a Clubhouse. I sold them the furniture and they were satisfied, but a couple of days later I got phone from these ladies. They had some problems assembling this furniture, so they asked me for help.

And since then have I been a member at my Clubhouse.

I became quickly well settled into the operation of the Clubhouse, and my experience from Mental Health Norway was very well appreciated. Soon, I was selected to be the first member in my Clubhouse to participate in two weeks training at Genesis Clubhouse MA. Later, I was invited back to work as a staff intern at Genesis.

From day one at the Clubhouse I felt that I was needed, that I could contribute with my experience, and that I was appreciated. I was a member of a family not only in my own Clubhouse, but also worldwide. There was no focus on the illness, only on possibilities. I changed from being patient to being a person; I got myself back.

Today, I have almost a normal life. I am employed, and I have a seat in our local city council. I am on the boards of several different organizations and finally, I have been elected as a board member in Clubhouse International.

As a member of my Clubhouse, I got everything I did not get in the healthcare system. I experienced that belonging to a Clubhouse community is of utmost importance for people who struggle with the effect of mental illness.

We must have a Clubhouse in every larger city in Norway, I realized. I was not the only one who had this thought, so suddenly we had established our coalition: Clubhouse Norway. (Maybe not suddenly -- but that is another story.)

Where am I going with this?

From being a person who was only receiving services from a healthcare system, I have now become a fully functioning person that contributes almost every day at the Clubhouse. Being valued, appreciated as myself - a unique individual-, and having the opportunity to use my fully skills and talents, has given me my life back. So, every day when I enter my Clubhouse, my thoughts are on how may I contribute to make the day better for my colleagues.

Thank you

Now I would like to introduce our next speaker:

Carla Giuffrida, a member of Academy at Glengary, will be reading the speech written by her Clubhouse colleague Michael Sanacore, who is not able to be with us today.

After Carla speaks, we will hear from Paula Boyd, a member of Putnam Clubhouse, California
Our last speaker will be Mike Tibbles, member of Pathways Clubhouse, British Columbia