



The Restorative Power Of Giving Back

Mike Tibbles, Pathways Clubhouse

Greetings all from Canada. My name is Mike Tibbles, and I am a member from Pathways Clubhouse in Vancouver, British Columbia.

To give you context for how the power of contributing my talents to the Clubhouse community has impacted me, I need to share some of my history. I had a difficult childhood, replete with sexual and physical abuse. I tried my best to ignore the abuse and escaped into my mind. In my teenage years I began to manifest symptoms of depression and began hearing voices. I did my very best to ignore the depression, told no one about the voices, and hid in my room for six months out of my grade 12 year. A suicide attempt was thankfully unsuccessful. Somehow, I managed to graduate, and moved on with life. I was never able to come to terms with what was going on for me because it wasn't identified as a mental illness. I managed to get a job as a lifeguard and held it together for several years. I was later living alone when I experienced a home invasion, where I was badly beaten. I think this further entrenched my mental illness which I had still not identified. Fast forwarding several years found me married with three small children. My wife struggled with her own mental illness, and I had a busy job in human resources, so I had no time to pay attention to my own mental health. I had no close friends, as I tended to avoid intimacy due to my experiences in childhood, which included my family moving around. This led to my complete breakdown in 2011, where I had to leave work. I was hospitalized several times that next year, culminating in a month long stay in the psychiatric ward in the summer of 2012. My wife left me with our children saying that she was unable to cope with my mental illness. This breakup was incredibly difficult for me, but looking back, I can see how it was a necessary part of my recovery journey.

When I was discharged following my longer stay in hospital, I was introduced to a number of supports including Pathways Clubhouse. I went to Pathways for a short time, didn't open up to anyone, and fell back into isolating myself. Living alone now, and with only a friend I had made in an outpatient program at the hospital, I fell into a deeper depression. The voices became unbearable, and I attempted suicide a number of times. Fortunately, my case manager at the mental health team stuck by me and was a great support. I'm not sure why I decided on my own to try Pathways again, but I think it was the sense that I got when I attended for the first time that there was an intangible there, that they had what I needed. This was truer than I could have imagined at the time.

Re-attending the Clubhouse a few years later was transformational for me. It started when I was cutting out pictures to make a poster for the clubhouse. Dave MacDonald, who I knew was the Executive Director, and who many of you know as a shy, retiring Canadian, gently teased out my history as he sat beside me at that big table cutting out pictures with me. He asked me about my story and found out about my three daughters and my journey through the healthcare system. He also asked about my work background and learned that I had worked in management and human resources. That's when he got really excited. He said the clubhouse's HR was a disaster. He needed me to clean up job descriptions that were years old, and would I help them update their employee manual? A part of me I thought had died, the part that took pride in my accomplishments, was reawakened in that moment. Here was the person in charge of a major mental health facility asking for my input and advice!

When I was in the hospital, the care providers, as kind and supportive as many of them were, were often isolated from us as patients. I remember so sharply how the one unit I was in had a glassed-in office where staff would go, close the door, and presumably discuss our illnesses. We had all of our personal items, cell phones and the like removed and stored in the office. Whenever we needed something, we had to go to the door of the office and wait for one of the staff to acknowledge us. We were not allowed beyond the threshold of the office. Patients who acted up were drugged and locked in a cell-like room called “segregation”. Staff there also had separate staff washrooms, and a private staff room with a tv and a big easy chair. Sadly, the environment in the hospital contributed to me feeling dirty, unsafe, and a bit like a pariah. I estimate that my stays in the hospital often contributed to my depression, rather than abating it. I was certainly not asked how I thought the hospital should be run. To be fair, it was a necessary place for me to be in the depths of my illness. I wasn’t able to look after myself, so it was good to have a place to go where I couldn’t hurt myself.

Contrast this with the Clubhouse where we shared everything. The bathrooms even!

There are no separate rooms where staff go to discuss members. If they need to talk to us to ask questions or challenge behaviour, they do so directly in a kind and gracious manner. I noticed right away the set of standards prominently displayed on the wall of the Clubhouse reinforcing staff and members rights and responsibilities including the members’ right to access all areas of the clubhouse (Standard 14). The standards also ensure that there are no staff only (or members only) meetings where member issues are discussed (Standard 8).

Dave’s analysis of the Clubhouse’s state of HR was pretty accurate. The employee manual was a bit of a mess, and the job descriptions were inconsistent, and outdated. Over the next few months I slowly began to update job descriptions and redesigned the employee manual. This was real work that I could totally sink my teeth into, and that allowed me to experience myself as a valuable and useful human being Ever-present while I worked was Dave. Sometimes all I could do was sit there and stare at the screen. The staff were fine with that. Dave and the other staff at the clubhouse became allies in my journey toward renewed health. I began to learn about them, as they learned about me. This was the common ground of work at the clubhouse. I never once thought of the staff as a ‘service providers’, or myself as a client. We were each part of a close community, and we each had something useful to contribute. That is a transformative experience, after having been treated like an unsafe pariah in need of segregation.

Dave in particular continued to go out of his way to include me in the life and work of the Clubhouse, and I began to see myself in a new light. I was becoming a friend. For the first time since I was in elementary school, I had someone I could really confide in. The other staff and members at the clubhouse were wonderful too. They were so supportive and kind.

This is not to say the next few years were without bumps. I still lived alone and was triggered on a number of occasions where I ended up in the hospital. My mental health care team was very helpful over this time and helped me to see the positive things in my own life. The Clubhouse was always there for me, and members and staff visited me in the hospital whenever I wasn’t well enough to be in the community.

A couple of years later Dave told me about his plan to get a semi-colon tattoo, which in the words of its originator, represents a person’s desire to continue their life, in the same way that an author uses a semi-colon to continue a sentence rather than ending it. This resonated with me on many levels., and I told Dave I was interested in getting one too. He suggested we get the tattoo together, and we did. We recorded this part of the journey of our lives together, and you can find it on YouTube under Pathways Clubhouse if you are interested.

A few years later, as my health renewed further, and I became stronger, Dave suggested the next step. He asked me about “getting back out there” and dating again. I agreed, and we sat together and created an online profile for me, with my likes and interests and I activated the profile. The first time I met someone in real life at the local coffee shop, Dave came undercover, and “just happened” to run into us. He later texted me his blessings for Quennie, and that gave me the confidence I needed to go for dinner with her. While we were having coffee, Bruce another member of our clubhouse, stopped at the coffee shop and said “hi”. Later at Dinner, Aj, another acquaintance I met through Dave was at the restaurant and he greeted us too. Quennie wondered if I knew everyone in the city. I’m pleased to report that Quennie, the lady I met with Dave’s help has now become my wife. Dave was the best man at my wedding last year, and Quennie and I have just celebrated our first anniversary.

This year my health has renewed to the point that I was able to rejoin the working world. Dave was a reference for me to my new employer, and I was so inspired by the support I had at the clubhouse I disclosed my mental health history to them in the interview. They responded by not only hiring me as their Director of Human Resources, but also have carved out 10 hours a month for me to continue to help Pathways Clubhouse with their HR needs. To this day I continue to assist at the clubhouse with hiring, challenging personnel issues, disability management and other HR matters. It's an honour to be placed in such a position of trust where I now work on issues even some staff are not aware of.

I recently met Jack Yatsko over dinner with Dave and Jack's families. The similarities in approach are uncanny. Jack told me about faculty training, but what really stood out was the invitation to visit him and his family if I'm ever in Hawaii. I've since been accepted for Accreditation faculty training, and if I am fortunate enough to be successful, I look forward to finding yet another powerful and important way that I will be able to use my talents and strengths to give back to the global Clubhouse Community.

A few weeks ago, I was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Thankfully it is operable, but I'll tell you the first person I reached out to for support after my wife was Dave MacDonald.

To staff, while it may seem like your efforts are in vain in many cases, please know that you make such a difference in our lives as members. I am confident that I am only alive today and able to be here talking to you because of the efforts of Dave and the other staff at the clubhouse. I consider myself to be truly blessed to have found my Clubhouse, where I have found a community of people who are willing to treat me as a colleague and a friend. This doesn't mean that all staff need to run out and get matching tattoos with members or stand up for them at their weddings. But just being genuine human beings and colleagues, appreciating members and inspiring us to tap into our real talents and strengths, is what I found really worked for me, and I can see it working for others too.

To members, please know that you each have unique talents and abilities. The Clubhouse you belong to is a great place to find your personal niche. Take the opportunities you are given and consider saying "yes" the next time a staff or member asks you to work side-by-side with them on a task. You never know where it will lead, and you may find it contributes to your recovery!

Thank you to my Clubhouse community, and to the global Clubhouse community, for giving me the opportunity to regain my sense of self and to have the experience of being able to make an important contribution to a community I care about. It is such a gift to no longer just be a patient or a client, always on the receiving end of others' services and treatments. Today, I am someone who has something valuable to share, and a place to share it, and people to appreciate my contributions.