



## The Restorative Power Of Giving Back

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Hi, I'm Paula.

How did I get here, today? How did this start? How did Putnam Clubhouse become part of my life and what does it mean for me and my family?

Well it started 20 years ago. After three miscarriages I was treated for depression. Eventually I was taking two kinds of antidepressants at their maximum dosage. Searching for better treatment, a new doctor told me I had ADHD. I was taken off the antidepressants and put on a new medication, which worked for two weeks, until it didn't. He then diagnosed me with S.A.D. (seasonal affective disorder) but the treatment didn't help. Finally, he diagnosed me with Bipolar Disorder. But how could that be? I never even got to go shopping!

Then after 18 years of teaching, in 2011, I had the boss from hell who knocked me over the edge. Although, truly, the symptoms were already there, but this guy was just the last straw. But now I also got diagnosed with acute stress disorder, and had to take a year off work. When I went back, it wasn't any better,

The hospitalizations began on Christmas day 2013.

In and out of the hospital, over the next two years, I saw six different doctors and was diagnosed, in this order: Major Depressive Disorder, ADHD, S.A.D., Bipolar Disorder, acute stress disorder and PTSD. No one was sure of anything, other than my poor little amygdala was exhausted!

Since 2013 I've been on quite a cocktail of medications as we wandered through a maze trying to FIX me. Looking for a magic pill, I tried more than 20 different medications: Cymbalta, imipramine, Cogentin, Welbutrin, Valium, Depakote, Vraylor, Amantadine, propanerol, pristiq, Abilify, Ativan and Adderall  
Safris, Cymbalta, Seroquel, --  
Trazadone, Trintellix, Trileptal, --  
Lithium, Latuda and Lamiktal,

There were several others not on this list -- they didn't rhyme, but you get the gist.

I thought I kept my illness hidden from everyone. I kept things together at work but at home I isolated from friends and family and had fits of rage. I tried to beat my floor with a coat rack (floor won, coat rack lost)  
My husband was often the target. I was sure I at least kept things hidden from my son, however I totaled two cars with him in them so even he knew something was wrong.

The last hospitalization came about because of a trip to the ICU after a nearly successful suicide attempt. My husband tells me he stayed with me only because we couldn't afford two households. I wasn't the person he married anymore.

During the next two years, I was a resident at three clinics and was an outpatient in four different programs. My husband, suddenly, had become a single parent. I was miles away from home, in and out of hospitals for more than a year. I finally returned home Christmas Eve 2015, having missed a lot of age 11 and 12 of my son's life.

But today, I am no longer with the Walking Dead. Let me tell you why.

During my multiple stays in the hospital, I was introduced to Putnam Clubhouse by a member - who brought flowers for us patients in the hospital. When I finally got home, I was ready for something more than isolating and watching reruns on TV. So, remembering the visit and the flowers from the member when I had been in the hospital, I joined Putnam Clubhouse.

At first, I thought it had nothing for me. I didn't feel that I'd fit in. But since I could see that it would be an improvement over sitting home on the sofa, so I started going.

At the Clubhouse, at first, I expected to only find a place to show up, and get out of the house -- a way to keep to a schedule. But then Tamara Hunter, the Executive Director, noticed my strengths, talents and abilities, so she engaged me in meaningful work. She started me on Fundraising. Something I'd never done before and had no idea how to do. Before I knew it, I was the lead.

I began to feel valued -- and I recognized that the fundraising I did really contributed to the Clubhouse and to other people. So finally, I began to interact and engage with others.

This was the crossroad in my recovery process. At the Clubhouse, I was finally treated like someone who had something to contribute -- and not just like a patient whose role was to get diagnosed and medicated. When I was treated like someone with something of value to give back, I began to experience *myself* as someone of value, capable of making a meaningful contribution to my community. That experience of self-worth is a game changer, and in my mind, it is the beginning of real mental health.

I have recently finished my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of doing Fundraising at Putnam Clubhouse. Some of the exciting auction items and raffle prizes people bid on the last few years came about because of my letters, phone calls and visits. I don't do it alone though - a team has grown around me and now many Clubhouse members are involved in the effort. This is also an incredible, healing, and restorative Clubhouse experience. I am part of a community, and we are all helping each other. And as we do that, we are all also helping ourselves.

I also assist with new member orientation and meet so many people, sharing my story, encouraging them to come for our Work Ordered Day.

Our "DREEM Unit" (Development, Retail, Education, Employment, Administration and Multimedia) helped me with Transitional Employment at a financial company. It was a job I was very nervous about, but they held my hand and kept saying "You can do it!" and I could!

Today, I am a responsible member, a Clubhouse driver, even a leader -- someone others can count on. I miss everyone when I'm not there, and I feel missed by them.

I still have occasional bad days. We all do.

Now though, thanks to the Clubhouse, I have the tools to deal with it, and a support system. I have friends who understand me and I've got a place to go. My bad days stay days just like everyone else's. They don't turn into bad weeks, months or even years. When I go to the Clubhouse, and have the chance to give back to my community, I feel myself as a healthy person, and that begins to have a momentum of its own.

Today I have a smart 15 year old stinky son with a sharp wit and a relationship with a wonderful husband who could've given up many times, but didn't. I'm building friendships for the first time in my life. I serve on the Putnam Clubhouse Board of Directors, helping shape the future of our Clubhouse. I have reclaimed my life. Although I still take medication and live with the side effects, I haven't been back to the hospital. And I have hope in my future.

So today I understand the 'restorative power of giving back.' Giving back, through my Clubhouse experience, is gradually restoring me to health and hope.

My recovery is very dependent on giving back. One of my favorite roles at my Clubhouse today is to pay it forward - by bringing flowers to the current patients at the Hospital's Behavioral Health Unit -- where I used to be - and introducing them to Putnam Clubhouse. I want these patients to know what Putnam Clubhouse is. I want patients who are feeling useless and without value and unable to make a difference in anyone's world -- to have the opportunity to experience themselves as needed -- as I have, in my Clubhouse community.