

Engaging Young Adults

Mental illness usually first occurs during young adulthood, ages 18 to 25, yet often people do not get to Clubhouses until their 30s or 40s or 50s. Early engagement of young adults in Clubhouses gives them allies, resources, and opportunities when the illness first strikes.

Typically, however, young adults hit by mental illness don't know what's happening to them, or don't want to know what's happening to them, and don't go for help. Therefore, engagement of young adults requires Clubhouse to actively reach out to find and attract them. Genesis Club, in Worcester, Massachusetts, writes: "Go out and get 'em! Young adults don't walk through the door, for the most part."

Following is a summary of practices that Clubhouses have found effective in attracting and engaging young adults.

- **Establishing liaison relationships with high schools, colleges, churches, hospitals, clinics, and organizations in local communities with programs serving young adults.**
This entails developing contacts with staff, such as guidance counselors in high school and disability counselors in colleges, who can facilitate referrals to Clubhouses. In addition, information and awareness of Clubhouses can be spread more generally by Clubhouse presentations to staff and young adults in these organizations and through tours and open house forums at Clubhouses. Such communication can serve to normalize Clubhouse participation and reduce stigma so that people first experiencing mental illness will more likely come forward and be supported by their peers. Thus, it is crucial that young adult Clubhouse members be involved and give testimony in presentations to other young adults.
- **Immediate involvement for new and prospective young adult members at the Clubhouse in activities and services that meet their needs.**
Bureaucratic delays and a sluggish Work-Ordered Day will likely turn them off.
- **Young adult members welcoming new young adults at the Clubhouse through giving tours, participating in orientation, and acclimating them to units.**
- **A strong clubhouse focus on the technology that attracts young adults, such as E-mail, chat rooms, My Space, and video and sound presentations.**
Correlating technology with outreach and Clubhouse presentations can enhance the appeal of Clubhouses.
- **Integrating activities specifically designed for young adults with the rest of Clubhouse life.**
Establishing a "young adult unit" segregates young adults from the full range of opportunities available in the Work-Ordered Day. Larger Clubhouses, with more than 80 or so members attending on a daily basis, have successfully used some specialized activities such as a young adult feature column in the Clubhouse newsletter, a young

adult committee, and/or young adult social events. However, it is important to be careful to avoid separating the young adults from the overall Clubhouse membership as this interferes with the young adults' ability to access the full Clubhouse community, and can also cause resentments among existing members when separate programs are developed for special groups.

- **Strong Clubhouse education and employment programs.**

Typically, young adults hit by mental illness have dropped out of college or other schools, and their paths to employment and a career have been interrupted. By providing opportunities to get back on such a path as soon as possible, Clubhouses will meet an urgent need.

- **A facet of Clubhouse housing directed to young adults so that they can live with each other.**

Also interrupted for many young adults entering Clubhouses have been efforts to live independently. Housing where young adults can support each other gives them a foundation for independence.

- **Social and recreational events which promote the development of camaraderie, friendship, and dating relationships among young adults.** The enhanced self-esteem developed through the array of Clubhouse opportunities can be expressed in the social involvements that are crucial to young adults in building fulfilling lives.

A special focus on engaging young adults is a relatively new feature in Clubhouse life, and effectively accomplishing the practices cited above can present challenges. However, if Clubhouses fail to attract young adults, it can mean many years lost in the lives of many people. Clubhouses need to bolster each other's efforts through sharing information on engaging young adults.

Genesis Club, in Massachusetts, and Fountain House in NYC, offer a one-week training track on strategies for successfully attracting and engaging young adults in Clubhouses.

With many regional Clubhouse conferences scheduled in the upcoming months, we urge the Clubhouse community to utilize these powerful events for networking with other Clubhouses about this important issue. Visit the ICCD website (iccd.org) for information about the upcoming conferences.