

# The Voluntary Nature of the Clubhouse

By Mark Glickman

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The voluntary nature of the Clubhouse is a cornerstone of our Clubhouse philosophy and one of our standards. It is so basic a part of our Clubhouse practice that it often goes unexamined, and its ramifications are seldom clearly understood. Misconceptions about this essential element of our philosophy are often at the root of many serious problems in Clubhouses.

The evolution of my own thought about this issue began when I was first a member of a Clubhouse almost 20 years ago. I had come to Fountain House very disabled by extreme anxiety and depression and was unable to concentrate. My participation consisted for the most part of just being there and getting to know people. However, I was very influenced by the Clubhouse environment. The fact that other members were working both in and outside of the Clubhouse impressed me deeply and led me to believe that I could someday do the same.

On the other hand, if I had been forced to participate in some way, I would have been unable to. I had to go at my own pace. In my case, that meant at first just socializing. Gradually, I became more involved in assuming Clubhouse responsibilities, and going out on Transitional Employment Placements.

What is essential is that we are struggling with a disability, which is for the most part invisible. Unlike a physical disability, psychiatric disability cannot be measured. Hence, we must allow people to pace themselves because it is beyond our ability to say what someone can or cannot do.

Yet I can understand the temptation of well-meaning people to attempt to mandate participation. We grow up in a world where school requirements are set down, where medical treatment is prescribed, and where employment revolves around a structured set of demands. But a Clubhouse is not a school, a hospital or a job. A Clubhouse is an opportunity center where, as adults, members have the right to use their own discretion about the opportunities and relationships they choose. This very dignified right of choice is the fundamental right of membership, and one of the basic ingredients in the success of any Clubhouse.

With the voluntary nature of the Clubhouse comes the obligation to design, and support a program that strives to offer each day a welcoming atmosphere, with an attractive set of relations and opportunities. Participation is based upon the success of these opportunities and relationships and is not effected by artificially imposed guidelines for participation. For example, setting a minimum number of days or hours will be counterproductive and can only lead to a decreased sense of ownership by members. Artificial rules to control

participation also serve to camouflage the real problem, which is so often an unwelcoming and unattractive environment that poorly serves the members' needs.

Because our members always have the right to say "no", Clubhouses must see the issue of participation and motivation, like people in the world at large. Those who run restaurants and stores never question the motivation of their customers. They simply ask, "How can my service or merchandise be made more attractive?" When members say, "no", we must question what we are doing and offering rather than impose requirements for participation. Tampering with the voluntary nature of the Clubhouse seems like the easy way out, but the imposition of regulations undermines and infantilizes our relationships. By simply saying when to be at the Clubhouse, how long to stay, and what to do while there, we end up by saying to our members "you cannot decide what is in your best interests".

The right of voluntary participation is also balanced by the obligation of members and staff to reach out enthusiastically to all members who choose not to participate. Ultimately it is through our relationships, which we must earn, that participation is truly based. It is the bond of successful relationships that draw members to the club and leads to satisfying participation, not rules and regulations.

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