

# Why Work Works

By Roberta Vorspan

Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal

Vol.16 No. 2 October 1992

As many of you already know, last year Fountain House received a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to partially support a major project which we are calling The National Clubhouse Expansion Program. The project has many goals, but one of the biggest is to allow us to offer intensive two and a half day consultations to any program in our directory that is interested. Since we began the project last year, we've had the wonderful opportunity to get an in-depth experience of many of the clubhouses around the country. Before beginning the project, a group of us put together a long document that we call The Protocol, which consists of dozens of questions meant to help the consultants order their observations of the house, and to help them focus their attention in areas for potential growth and improvement.

The questions cover all aspects of club functioning, from special arrangements to clubhouse relationships, and to begin with we didn't attempt to weigh the questions as to which ones were the most crucial to the making of a strong, vibrant clubhouse. But as we have experienced more and more different clubhouses and attempted to arrive at an understanding of what really are the most fundamental elements of a clubhouse, one major ingredient rises to the surface over and over again.

I think that many of us have had the experiences of going into a clubhouse and immediately sensing a breath of life, a feeling of vitality, of activity, of growth. You have an immediate sense of health and hope when you can't tell who the members are and who are the staff, and they are all buzzing around together in a constant cloud of clubhouse activity that is taken with the utmost seriousness by the whole house. And many of us have also been in clubhouses which, though they may have all the external trappings of a clubhouse, still exude the stale mustiness of hospital day rooms or stagnant day treatment programs. The more we re-live these two experiences the more we understand that the radical difference between these two kinds of programs comes down to one fundamental issue, and that is their investment in a genuine work-ordered day, or a day that gets its momentum, meaning and life from the work that structures it.

Most groups that set off to start a clubhouse do understand that on some level the club day involves a work, or vocational component. But for some or many reasons, it seems to be extremely difficult for many of us to conceive of the work as the heart of the clubhouse, rather than as one of its peripheral limbs.

I can use myself as a probably not too atypical example of this kind of stubborn resistance. I came to work at Fountain House after spending many years as a patient myself, in an out of psychiatric hospitals and intensive therapy.

Before coming to Fountain House, my professional career had been in in-patient psychiatric settings and in traditional therapy oriented day treatment programs. I had become deeply entrenched in the view that the "way out" of the pain and bottomless

despair of mental anguish was only through insight, therapy, confrontation, and introspection. Attacking the pathology in a person, to me, meant grappling with it constantly. If one, two and three hours of therapy a week were of value, then wouldn't 24 hours a day of therapy be that much more valuable?

So when I came to Fountain House and was thrown into the lively chaos of our clerical unit, and the structure of my day suddenly revolved around having our funding statistics up to date and our research projects accurate, I was uncomfortably jarred. It felt to me as if Fountain House were giving up, resigned to the belief that people would never get better, so that the least the program could do was to "function", to stop being a burden to those around them, and to pay their taxes. I felt that the members were being cheated of the opportunity to change their lives in a radical way, and instead were being patched up to return to the world, and to hell with whatever turmoil, confusion and anguish underlined the prized "functioning."

At the same time that I was experiencing all of this, I was still climbing out of a very deep, dark, and painful period in my own life. Every morning I would wake up feeling terrible, with the overwhelming temptation to crawl deeper under my bed covers and turn off all of the pain. But I would remember that two of the other staff in the unit were out on TE placements that day, and that the attendance statistics were already three days late, and I still hadn't written a social security letter for Lucille.

So I would reluctantly drag myself out of bed and go to work, where the high pitch of activity and obvious investment of those around me in the work of the house, quickly caught me up into its own rhythm and order. All of the difficult and conflicted realities that I was dealing with in my therapy would of necessity have to temporarily sift down out of my conscious experience, and I would have to "function".

When I walked into Fountain House every morning a whole net of very real relationships, based on the reality that we needed each other and appreciated what each of us could bring to our shared work, spread itself out beneath me. Despite the chaos and confusion that threatened to paralyze me, every day as I entered the busy, vibrant work-driven environment, I was carried into something greater than myself. Since the work I had to accomplish in my unit was far too much for me to handle myself, I had no choice but to engage the assistance of members and other staff. I experienced a connectedness in those work relationships based on shared work that I had been unable to experience in other contexts. For hours at a time I was no longer alone, I was part of a living organism that was bigger than I was.

Looking back at that first year or so at Fountain House, it seems amazing to me that I could have been so blind. My reproach of Fountain House that it's unwavering commitment to a work-ordered day was a result of its not believing in the potential of its members, oddly, was never shaken by my own experience of growing stronger and healthier and happier through the vehicle of shared work. I was too close to the situation to realize that the standard that I was applying to myself was very different from the standard I held for the members.

As I've thought more and more about why the clubhouse seems to work as well as it does, I've had to look at what "work" is, and what it means to people in general, and to people who are mentally ill in particular. On the surface, it is true; working is something that we do to keep ourselves from being burdens on other people, and to pay our taxes like good citizens. But work goes way beyond that.

We always say that in the clubhouse we don't do therapy, and maybe that was part of my initial resistance to this way of working. By saying that we don't do therapy, I had inferred that therefore we are no longer looking toward the radical integration and growth that we usually think of as the goals of therapy. But what we are really saying, I now believe, is something very different from that. We are saying that in the medium of shared work, in the very special context of a clubhouse community, we are discovering an extremely effective means to achieve the kinds of things we have always looked for solely in traditional therapy.

No matter who you are, work has a profound meaning in your life. It gives you a sense of who you are among other people. Working pushes you to come in touch with your own very unique strengths, talents and abilities. As you discover and rediscover these things in yourself, you gradually begin to define a more and more consistent representation of who you are to yourself and how you are unique and how you are the same as those around you. This consistent sense of yourself, I think, is the absolute prerequisite to self-esteem, and to the ability to develop real relationships with others.

In the natural chaos of our minds and our inner worlds, work provides a direction for us to grab hold of. It lays down a firm groundwork beneath us upon which we can direct and organize our days. Without the external structure of our work, any of us would have a much harder time keeping our heads above the swirling chaos of our thoughts and feelings. And our work gives us a handle on the future. The future is a vast unknown, full of potential pitfalls and dangers and our work is something that gives us a bridge between our lives as we now experience them and our imaginings about tomorrow. We are better able to imagine ourselves as part of the future when we can reasonably predict the work that we will be engaged in.

Although the specifics of each of our individual work paths may differ, they do put us into the immediate relationships with one another. Whether or not we are actually working at the same job or on the same project, the very fact of our working gives us a common ground with each other. The most common question asked when meeting someone new is inevitable, "what do you do?", and having an answer to that question gives you immediate entry to the normal flow of life.

Through work, we learn that we as human beings are multilayered. We learn that we operate on several planes simultaneously, that we can be crushed by the break-up of a relationship or overwhelmed by moving to a new house or any other emotionally wrought situation, and at the same time might be able to undertake complicated work assignments.

We learn that we are not as fragile as we might sometimes feel ourselves to be, as we bring our pains and stresses into our work and somehow manage to stay afloat.

Work gives us an opportunity to develop new relationships in which we can immediately feel good about ourselves. When our relationships develop out of shared respect for the unique talents we all have, it is much harder to sink and destroy them with feelings of being not worthwhile enough”, or having “nothing to offer” to this relationship. We know deeply that we are being taken seriously and respectfully by someone who is depending on us to help accomplish a job.

People who have mental illnesses are first of all people and can benefit from work in all of the same ways as everyone else can. But what I have been discovering through my journey through the clubhouse experience is that work has the potential to be even more integrating and powerful for people whose lives have been shattered by mental illness than it is for other people.

All of the issues that I mentioned, like the need to combat the natural chaos of the mind, or the need for a structure to help us move towards an unknown future, or the need for a common ground on which to develop mutually respectful relationships, are needs which are at the very heart of the anguish of any mental illness.

It is not the illness itself that hurts the most, it is the effects of the illness, - the panic at the thought of the future, the very widening chasm the person feels between himself and everyone else, the dread of drowning in the intensity of one’s own thoughts and fantasies. Once a person experiences the trauma of mental illness, he or she inevitably feels snapped off from the tree of normal everyday life. Social interactions become more and more difficult as the common realities you used to share with others slide away from you. It is not that people who are mentally unwell simply lose their ability to socialize, but that they lose their sense of connectedness with others in a very deep and frightening way. Becoming engaged in the valuable work of the community provides a re-entry point into the mainstream of life. It provides a sense of belonging, being valued and being needed. The work a person is engaged in also becomes a very basic starting off point in making conversations, something which can be very difficult for people who have become isolated in their illnesses.

So when we insist on a clubhouse day that springs from real and meaningful work, we are not ignoring the profound reality of the pain of emotional illness. We are addressing it head-on. We are saying that work can become a potent tool in dealing with the deepest life issues for our members.

And in my own experience, I have also come to realize that it is genuine involvement in our work that allows therapy to become the very valuable asset that it can be. If therapy is conducted in a vacuum, in the absence of real work and life experience, then it turns in upon itself and leads deeper and deeper into the pain and confusion, with no toe hold to find a way out. Therapy is completely dependent upon the real things, works, relationships, obstacles and successes that make up our day. Spending one’s whole day

becoming a patient for endless expanses of time, can only result in becoming more and more of a patient.

I spoke earlier about the experience that many of us have had of immediately sensing a clubhouse that is working, in which people are growing and laughing and changing and are very busy. And I also said that it was becoming increasingly clear that the core that generates that kind of culture is a firmly established work-ordered day.

The reality of the clubhouse work-day, though, is very often misunderstood, which results in many clubhouses around the country which are clearly centered in work, but also very clearly are not the fertile soil of growth and spontaneity that the strongest clubs are. The misinterpretation is that the clubhouse ceases to be work-ordered, and becomes work dominated. Instead of not valuing work at all, which is the other extreme distortion in many clubhouses around the country; these clubs make work and productivity the reason for the program. Work becomes a god that we serve, instead of having work serve our needs.

Common characteristics of clubhouses that have elevated work to such god-like status are things like requirements for member participation and productivity; insistence that members spend a certain number of hours working each day; request that members leave for the day if they can't or don't want to work that day; structured "work unit" hours during which members are told that they must be in their units. Even pre-arranged, structured break times and lunch time seem to me to come out of a misconception that the clubhouse should attempt to mimic the work-place as much as possible. Work comes from the daily needs of the community and is taken up voluntarily with a sense of ownership, investment and pride. In the extreme case of a work dominated club, the work becomes joyless and meaningless, the relationship between members and staff becomes stiff and supervisory and the clubhouse ultimately is drained of its lifeblood.

The clubhouse is first of all a community. Clubhouse generated work acts to gather together the staff and the members and to shape them into a living community. Work as the motivating factor immediately restructures relationships, so that what used to be guarded, professional and distant relationships are transformed into spontaneous, personal and mutually appreciative ones.

The living, lively clubhouse knows itself to be a community driven by the work it needs to accomplish in order to continue to fulfill the needs of its members. Staff are invested with the bottom-line responsibility to make the clubhouse function, and the energy that drives the work-ordered day comes out of their pressing need to engage members in every aspect of the house's work. The clubhouse work has to be taken deadly seriously by the staff, and it is their passion, not some abstract prevocational rehabilitation goal, that inspires and entices the members into action.

The nature of the work of a clubhouse is paradoxical. The work is only meaningful and healing when it is a genuine work, work that has urgency and purpose. Yet if the urgency and purpose over-ride the even deeper reasons for the work, which are to provide

growth opportunities and mutually respectfully relationships for the members, then a clubhouse is missing the point. There needs to be a finely tuned balance between the genuine urgency of the work being undertaken, and the needs and interests of each of the members involved in that work. The community and the work have to feed each other, not detract from one another. When work is approached in this way, it is the soul of the clubhouse. In a real clubhouse, work can never simply be a “component” of the program, it is the life-blood of the healing and rehabilitation that clubhouse offers. If we try to delegate work off as one element of a program, the entire picture shifts out of focus and the program becomes something other than a clubhouse.

We as the clubhouse have to begin to understand and appreciate what we have created. The work-ordered day is not a way to keep people busy. Together with traditional verbal therapies, it is the way for people whose lives have begun to feel like a bottomless pit of pathology and patienthood to allow their health to express itself. It is an invaluable handle back into reality, into relationships and into the experience of satisfaction, self-esteem and appreciation. It is the jewel that illuminates the entire clubhouse structure and we need to see to it that we continue to value it and to always keep it in the center of our vision for our future.