



The Key

ASSISTANCE REPORT

Focus on Volunteerism

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

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A CRITICAL OUTLET

For people with serious mental illness, volunteerism can provide a critical outlet for rejoining the community, acquiring confidence and moving forward in recovery.

For a 2003 study by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) in the United Kingdom, researchers interviewed hundreds of volunteers with mental illness, a majority of whom volunteered every week. Respondents said that their mental health difficulties had many negative effects on their lives, including unemployment, a lack of confidence and motivation, an inability to concentrate, difficulties in trusting people, an inability to make or sustain friendships, and feelings of isolation, frustration and anxiety.

At the same time, respondents agreed that volunteering had improved their mental health by bringing structure, direction and meaning to their lives; widening their social networks; improving their vocational and interpersonal skills; and helping them develop future career plans and gain access to paid employment, education and training.



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In her mid-twenties, Rosanna Tarsiero was struggling with bipolar disorder, panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder when a doctor told her she would likely have to give up her dream of attending medical school. Around that time she became involved with an online support group and was asked to serve as a volunteer moderator. "Volunteering was helpful in many ways," Tarsiero said. "For one, it made me feel like there was indeed still something I could be useful for, and that was a big relief. Secondly, helping

others was what I'd always wanted to do, so I didn't experience it as 'just volunteering.' Volunteering gave me more than I was searching for." Tarsiero continued: "I began to feel part of a community, albeit an online one, and self-worthy because the service I helped provide was useful to other people. Unexpectedly," she said, "I stopped sinking in my own misery and started rebuilding my identity around values and worldviews developed while volunteering, in a process that mental health professionals call 'recovery.' "

Tarsiero eventually left her longstanding volunteer position and founded Bipolar Dream, an online self-help group staffed by consumer volunteers. “My dream was to support others and get support while learning to use bipolar disorder as a resource to improve my empathy and helping skills. But my dream was also to have people with mental illness experience recovery through volunteering,” she said. Today, Tarsiero, who lives in Pisa, Italy, is studying medicine and preparing a thesis on bipolar disorder. Bipolar Dream has 190 members and eight volunteers.

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SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING

Some organizations, called “supported volunteering” programs, offer volunteers a variety of services and supports to help them obtain and keep volunteer jobs. According to Tarsiero, an effective supported volunteer program might offer illness management training, with an educated supervisor helping participants gain awareness about and manage their illness; an individualized approach to vocational support that trains volunteers in appropriate hard and soft skills; and a peer-support

and/or social network that allows volunteers to create meaningful connections with others. (“Hard skills” involve the ability to meet the technical requirements of a position; “soft skills”

are those personality traits, communication skills, personal habits and social graces that characterize each of us.)

An example of a supported volunteer program is the Volunteer Internship Program (VIP) at the Volunteer Center of United Way in Hartsdale, N.Y. At VIP, funded by the

Westchester Department of Community Mental Health and United Way, Westchester-based consumers referred by mental health professionals are matched with volunteer opportunities. The consumer commits to a 10-hour-a-week internship for six months. “Placements vary, depending on the needs and skills of the individual,” said VIP coordinator Maxine Elkins. “They can range from working in a soup kitchen to working as an administrative assistant to teaching computer [skills] to the elderly in nursing homes – at any nonprofit organization that needs a volunteer.” During that time, the Volunteer Center reimburses some of the volunteers’ travel expenses and organizes monthly

meetings and social lunches for discussing successes and challenges that arise. Elkins also provides supportive counseling along the way.

Elkins has seen a range of people with various needs and interests participate in the program. “Volunteers run the gamut in terms of their background. Some have GEDs and some have Ph.D.s. Usually it’s somebody who has been hospitalized or is coming out of a program and they are not yet ready to take on a paying job. They do this to prepare themselves for the next step. Or others are of retirement age and looking to keep busy and give back to the community.”

BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEERING

One major barrier to volunteering for people with serious mental illness is the fear of starting something new. In the IVR study, half the respondents said they lacked confidence in their own skills before becoming a volunteer.

Another major issue for some would-be volunteers is the question of whether to disclose their mental health issues to a potential employer. “It’s an individual comfort thing, and it may depend on how accepting the person you’re working with is going to be,” said Becky Choma, a researcher who – with the Center for Research and Education in Human Services in Ontario, Canada – studied a supported volunteer program

HOW TO FIND VOLUNTEER WORK

1.) **Narrow your focus.** With a world of volunteer opportunities to choose from, finding a volunteer position can be overwhelming. “Think about your interests and narrow down an area of volunteer work that you’d like to find, whether it’s working with children or the elderly, or working with computers,” said Becky Choma, who has published research on volunteerism. Some volunteers, like Rosanna Tarsiero of Bipolar Dream, choose to help others with mental illness. Organizations such as Bipolar Dream, NAMI, Mental Health America and the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance offer roles in peer support as well as other types of volunteer opportunities.

2.) **Contact a volunteer agency or a place that you might want to volunteer.** If you’re uncomfortable doing this on your own, recruit a friend or family member to help you.

3.) **Assess whether it’s a good fit.** If both parties are interested, there will likely be an interview process. It’s important for potential volunteers to determine their comfort level with their prospective “employer” and the work setting. “This is also a time where a volunteer should think about whether or not they want to disclose their mental health issues,” said Choma. Some experts urge people not to self-disclose; others suggest a more open approach.

4.) **Try the job on for size.** There’s no substitute for time spent on the job in assessing whether it’s the right one. “A lot of it is trial and error,” Choma said. “As with any other job, you have to figure out whether it’s the right place for you. But if it doesn’t work out, it’s not a failure – it just means it wasn’t a good fit. There are plenty of other roles out there.”

and co-authored a paper entitled “Supported Volunteering: A Community Approach for People With Complex Needs.” At the same time, she said, an employer who is aware of a volunteer’s situation might also be more accommodating in providing more flexible work hours and understanding a volunteer’s needs.

Ultimately, creating awareness among volunteer “employers” is something of a chicken-and-egg issue. “Often, people don’t understand that they can behave in ways that aren’t welcoming. Having more people out volunteering in the community can educate others about what it really means to live with mental illness,” said Choma.

Other consumers are put off by the task of finding a position. The process can be overwhelming, and there are only a handful of supported volunteer programs in existence. In her research, Choma found that supports such as assisting with placements, “coaching,” and accompanying volunteers to an interview were especially effective. “It would be wonderful if there were more programs like this to assist people in the process, [but] people can do it without these programs,” she said. “Even peer or family support can be very helpful.”

Some aspiring volunteers are held back by a lack of meaningful volunteer positions. Volunteerism is more than free labor – ideally, the work also “gives back” to the volunteer. “A person can find a job somewhere, but you want one that is going to make you feel good,” Choma said. Volunteers are more likely to be rewarded by a welcoming, accepting environment that matches their relevant skills and interests.

Transportation can be a major obstacle for some people with mental illness. The IVR study noted that 24 percent of respondents said that travel and other expenses were a barrier to volunteering.

BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

Some argue that choosing a volunteer position may be “shooting too low,”

keeping recovering consumers from exercising more responsibility and attaining financial independence.

At the same time, the benefits of volunteering are manifold. Working anywhere is a good way to acquire new skills and, for many, volunteerism is a means of career preparation. “The benefits are limitless. You’re gaining new skills and meeting new people, gaining references for jobs,” Elkins said.

Volunteers who have been out of the workforce for some time due to serious mental illness can add this new experience to their résumé and help fill in the “gaps” while having a safer space to explore working life.

“I strongly suggest volunteering whenever job coaching [or supported employment] programs aren’t available,” said Tarsiero. “Volunteering under the supervision of a competent volunteer manager helps the person with mental illness to gradually be confronted with tasks of increasing difficulty and, in so doing, [to] acquire more and more self-confidence.”

A volunteer position can be a stepping-stone to a paid position or an end in itself. “Either way, it’s equally valuable. But for someone coming out of a difficult time in their life, it can serve as that first step to getting their feet wet again,” said Choma. Elkins reports that some of her volunteers have eventually been hired at their workplaces.

Working is an important outlet for interacting with the community, which can create a more solid foundation for recovery. “When you volunteer, you’re engaging with the members of a community in a meaningful way,” said Choma. “That leads to a sense of purpose.”

“After four years [with Bipolar Dream], I know for sure that volunteering can transform the lives of many people with mental illness,” said Tarsiero. “They became active, empowered citizens rather than passive subjects of charity services.”

Another significant benefit is having added structure in the day and the opportunity to stay busy. “Getting up in the morning, being around other people and feeling involved in life [are] very important,” said Elkins. “People with mental illness tend to isolate themselves but in this case someone is really depending on you to show up.”

Of all the benefits of volunteerism, however, the most commonly reported is an increased sense of self-worth. “In a volunteer role, you can be on the giving end rather than the receiving end,” said Choma. “That’s an empowering feeling and empowerment generally helps with recovery, especially when you’re going through rough patches.”

In her seven years of experience in volunteerism, Tarsiero has seen its positive impact firsthand. One volunteer, named “C.J.,” was dealing with uncontrolled bipolar and dissociative identity disorders when she started at Bipolar Dream. “She became my senior moderator, married and now has a social life. With time, love and a lot of feedback, C.J. blossomed.”

RESOURCES

Bipolar Dream

<http://www.bipolardream.com/>

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

www.dbsalliance.org

Idealist.org

www.idealists.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness

www.nami.org

Mental Health America

www.mentalhealthamerica.net

Corporation for National and Community Service

www.nationalserviceresources.org

ServiceLeader

www.serviceleader.org

ServeNet

www.servenet.org



The Clearinghouse welcomes all programs in which consumers play a significant role in leadership and operation to apply for inclusion in its Directory of Consumer-Driven Services. The directory, accessible at <http://www.cdsdirectory.org>, is search-

able by location, type of organization, and targeted clientele, and serves as a free resource for consumers, program administrators and researchers.

Apply online at www.cdsdirectory.org/contact, via fax at 215-636-6312, or by phone at 800-553-4KEY (4539). To receive an application by mail, write to info@cdsdirectory.org or NMHCSH Clearinghouse 1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1100 Philadelphia, PA 19107.

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