

Updating the Helper Therapy Principle

Recovery rates for alcoholism doubled for those helping other alcoholics.



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The therapeutic benefits of helping others have long been recognized by everyday people. This concept was first formalized in a highly cited and often reprinted article by Frank Riessman that appeared in 1965 in *Social Work*. Riessman defined the "helper therapy" principle on the basis of his observations of various self-help groups, where helping others is deemed absolutely essential to helping oneself. These are grassroots groups that nowadays involve tens of millions of Americans. As the saying goes, "if you help someone up the hill, you get closer yourself." Riessman observed that the act of helping another heals the helper more than the person helped. In the early 1970s, the "helper therapy" principle was noted in a few premier psychiatry journals as professional researchers found that helping others was beneficial in a variety of contexts, including among teens doing tutoring for younger children (Rogeness & Badner, 1973). Whether the group is focused on weight loss, smoking cessation, substance abuse, alcoholism, mental illness and recovery, or countless other needs, a defining feature of the group is that people are deeply engaged in helping one another, and are in part motivated by an explicit interest in their own healing. These groups adhere to the view that people who have experienced a problem can help each other in ways that professionals cannot - i.e., with greater empathy and more self-disclosure.

The members of these groups are replacing negative emotional states with the positive state called "the helper's high," a pleasurable and euphoric emotional sensation of energy and warmth. The "helper's high" was first carefully described by Allen Luks (1988). Luks, in a survey of thousands of volunteers across the United States, found that people who helped other people consistently reported better health than peers in their age group, and many stated that this health improvement began when they started to volunteer. Helpers report a distinct physical sensation associated with helping; about half report that they experienced a "high" feeling, 43 percent felt stronger and more energetic, 28 percent felt warm, 22 percent felt calmer and less depressed, 21 percent experienced greater feelings of self-worth, and 13 percent experienced fewer aches and pains.

Indeed, many state offices of mental health, including that of New York State, emphasize the role of helping others through involvement in self-help groups, recommending this activity for persons recovering from depression and schizophrenia (New York State, 2006). This kind of state initiative is reminiscent of the famous "moral treatment" era in the American asylums of the 1820s and 30s, where persons with melancholy and other ailments were treated with compassion and also, whenever possible, directly en-

“Seek to do good, and you will find that happiness will run after you.”

— James
Freeman
Clarke



gaged in prosocial activities (Clouette & Deslandes, 1997).

My favorite example of how helping others can be incorporated in mental health recovery is the Magnolia Clubhouse community in University Circle, Cleveland. It is based on the ICCD (International Center for Clubhouse Development) Model begun by Fountain House in 1948, in New York City. There are now about 200 ICCD Clubhouses all over the U.S., and close to that number abroad. They offer training, certification, and research conferences on the ICCD model. In Cleveland, Magnolia Clubhouse is a training site for students in psychology and psychiatry, and is loosely associated with Case Western Reserve University. Members of the Clubhouse (18 years and over) typically have significant histories of mental illness, live in the area (usually in small apartments or occasionally with family), and are referred to the Clubhouse by health professions. When they come by the Clubhouse (a large converted red brick mansion), usually in the morning or at mid-day, they decide on what helping activities they will engage in. As Lori D'Angelo, Ph.D., Director of Magnolia Clubhouse, responded to a question we posed about the members' helping others, "I think that people tend to be more stable and happy if they feel like they are benefiting people more than themselves, or outside themselves. It helps them feel con-

nected to a larger picture, and I would think that of human beings in general." Members are not assigned duties, but choose the kind of helping they want to do, and to the extent they wish. Some prepare meals, serve in the snack shop, help with hospitality, write letters, handle finances, do day-to-day cleaning, outside groundskeeping, snow ploughing and the like. ICCD is a self-help program that is reminiscent of the moral treatment era. Clubhouse members, of which there are a couple of hundred at any given point in time, are treated with immense compassion by the staff and by volunteers from the community (www.magnoliacubhouse.org).

The oldest and largest self-help group in the United States is, of course, Alcoholics Anonymous (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1952). Researchers at Brown University Medical School (Pagano, et. al., 2004) examined the relationship between helping other alcoholics to recover (the famous 12th step) and relapse in the year following treatment. The data were derived from a prospective study called Project MATCH, which examined different treatment options for alcoholics and evaluated their efficacy in preventing relapse. Two measures of helping other alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous (being a sponsor and having completed the 12th step) were isolated from the data, and proportional hazards re-

I Want To Volunteer!

So you've decided that you want to volunteer, but aren't sure what to do next? The Volunteer Bureau can help you along in your search. The first step is to come into the office and sit down with one of the staff for an intake interview.

At this meeting, we will explore your skills, traits, and interests that will guide us and help us to find the volunteer opportunity that best suits you. Once we determine a placement you'll be interested in and have your approval, we will

organization and set them up with your information. We essentially do the leg-work for you! It is crucial to the life-span of your volunteer placement that you enjoy what you are doing, and the Volunteer Bureau insists on this principle.

