



**CHANGING OUR EMPLOYMENT MINDSET:
Raising our Expectations**

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Just after last's years USA Clubhouse Conference, a good friend of mine, and valued work colleague were walking around Washington DC reflecting on the conference. He said **"we have lived in good times** – we entered our careers at the height of deinstitutionalization and we've seen the growth of community mental health supports and our members living successfully as full citizens."

In a short 25 years the "mindset" regarding the capabilities of people living with mental illness and the quality of life they can obtain has changed drastically. Yes I recognize that there is still a long way to go, and as our members continually step up and demonstrate what recovery from mental illness looks like, the "mindset" seems to change more quickly.

At Genesis Club, our "mindset" seems to constantly evolve as our members evolve.

The good times we look forward to over the upcoming years include a generation of people diagnosed with mental illness who are in the workforce, managing their illness and using workforce accommodations as well as supports of Clubhouse communities to live the lives they choose.

But for now, we are a long way away from that.

In 2012, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics found that employment rates for people living with mental illness declined from 23 percent in 2003 to 17.8 percent in 2012. So that means the unemployment rate for people living with mental illness in 2012 was 82.2%, up from an unacceptable 77%. People living with mental illness around the world are the most under employed and unemployed group of people. In the United States, people with mental illness are the largest and fastest growing group of SSI and SSDI beneficiaries.

Yet I look around Genesis Club and people living with mental illness are running the place. Sometimes more efficiently and for more hours a week than some of our people who are not living with a mental illness!

We have very strong employment services at our Club, we have a strong culture that believes in and supports work. But there are still a lot of challenges. Many of our members see themselves as not able to return to work and most live in poverty.

Our work with young adults – who by the way ALL have a goal of getting a job or enrolling in education towards a career goal – led us to understand more profoundly why this is the case. We saw 18, 19 year old talented, smart young adults enter the mental health system and the first interventions of case managers and providers was to sign them up for SSI, Medicaid and food stamps. We would say – but they want to work and might not need those entitlements – and the response was "let's apply just to be safe". Thus begins the preparation for a life of poverty, a message that you won't be able to sustain employment and a fear of losing what is intended to be a safety net – not a way of life.

In training we regularly hear that Clubhouse members are afraid to work because of the impact on their benefits – a very real fear! Losing health coverage for a person with a significant illness is life threatening. Not having an income and therefore nowhere to live and nothing to eat is scary.

But the flip side of that is staying on benefits – at least in the United States - keeps you poor. And keeps you living in poor, devastated often violent ridden neighborhoods. It keeps you sitting in social security offices, welfare offices, housing authority offices constantly having to reauthorize benefits or fix mistakes made by those agencies or worried about benefits being taken away.

So a diagnosis of mental illness is not a diagnosis of poverty, but the system seems to be organized to support that life. Our employment services too were using a lot of resources to support that life – making sure people worked only enough so their benefits were not affected, getting TE's with hours and wages that didn't put anyone at risk – subtly sending a message that we, too, did not believe our members would ever be safe without the entitlements our government provides.

Our Clubhouse sent subtle messages – making sure we got free tickets for our Saturday socials, that we didn't charge for the holiday party, that we had good connections with food pantries, thrift stores. Where we put our resources didn't send a message that pushed our members to set higher expectations for themselves. In many ways, we didn't set higher expectations.

But as with everything – our members proved us wrong. Some young adults refused to go on benefits, not wanting to get trapped in that system. Other older members – not many, but a few every year – work their way into full time employment and a large enough income with company benefits that government entitlements are no longer needed. And they are not living in poverty.

Nor are they asking other members for money or rides, or making sure we don't attend a community event that costs money. They budget their income to purchase the things that support the life they choose. They have cars and better living situations and some have married and had children and have taken their lives back. All of these members credit Genesis Club as the only place that believed they could regain that life and provided the supports for them to do it.

Our new “mindset” is that we would rather put the time and resources into supporting every member to take control of their own income (rather than allowing the government to control it through entitlements) and find ways for every single member to be successful in the workforce to their fullest capacity. If you are living in poverty, getting a job is not a choice – it is the way out of poverty. And we think there will be a time in every member's lives when they are ready to find their way out. Supporting members to manage the symptoms of their mental illness and build skills to succeed in the workforce is where we choose to focus.

All of us have to decide our place in the workforce – how much we want to earn balanced with how much responsibility we want to take on, how hard we want to work and how stressful a day we want to have. And we make different decisions about those things as our lives change. I see our members do that all the time at Genesis Club, and we are learning how to help them translate those skills into the workforce.

Entitlements are intended to be a temporary bridge during a difficult period of life – not a way of life. Some of our older members who have lived their lives on government benefits say – I'm waiting for the first of the month when I get paid. We reframe that – you are not getting paid, you are getting your monthly support money. But you can get paid, and eventually you can earn much more than what you are getting now – not right away, but over a period of years with planning and support to get used to the “new normal”.

As we have moved to talking about planning to come off benefits – again over a period of time, not as a point in time, members now think differently about the possibilities for their future. There is still a lot of fear, but mixed with possibilities.

So let's talk about it from the perspective of the workforce – of the world going forward. Our world is missing out on the brilliant contributions that our members – people living with mental illness – are not yet sharing. With an 82% unemployment rate – that means millions of people are not involved in researching new discoveries, running businesses that keep the world moving, providing care and breakthroughs in the health industries, moving governments forward, and on and on. Thinking about that has changed our thinking about job development as well. We now approach businesses as partners who need the workforce that we have at Genesis Club – the untapped, skilled, eager workforce that needs an opportunity.

We are living in good times – Clubhouse members have the supports and services to live the lives they intended while recovering from mental illness. None of them intended a life of poverty, but of course none of them intended a life with a devastating illness either. For a period of time, members may need to be out of the workforce and receiving support through entitlements until they feel ready to return. Most will return to the workforce slowly, with lots of support that they may no longer need as they gain confidence in their abilities to earn an income. Most can regain a foothold in the workforce that allows them to rise above poverty, control their own income and spend their days thinking about other things besides whether their benefits will be cut and maintaining a life of poverty. Most of our members! – certainly many more than the 17.8% of people living with mental illness that were employed in 2012. What we know in the Clubhouse is we believe for our members until they believe for themselves – and at Genesis Club, we believe that despicable unemployment rate can be turned on its head and members can earn an income above the poverty level and take back their lives – even financially.