

Give generously

A group of mental health patients has set up a pampering group which is increasing the wellbeing of its members and those around them, say Phil Coombes and Naomi Stanfield

Research published in the journal *Science* claims that donating money to charity activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure. Researchers using MRI discovered those who donate money to charity increase activity in brain areas called the nucleus accumbens and the caudate nucleus. These areas have previously been associated with the brain's response to rewarding stimuli, such as viewing pictures of loved ones.

This theory is now being put into practice by a group of patients of Raphael Healthcare, a mental health care provider for women. Women there have set up a pampering group called Boost, which aims to increase confidence and encourage them to feel good about themselves. The founders provide the supplies and offer free pampering sessions to other patients at the hospital. They also run sessions at charity events and donate proceeds to their chosen charity.

As well as giving to charity, the patient-led groups help to break down stigma and to allow normalisation to occur; it can be frightening and isolating to feel like you are the only one experiencing problems. The ability to share experiences and have them validated by others who have gone through something similar has a highly therapeutic benefit.

Boosting self-esteem

Boost was developed by a number of patients at Raphael Healthcare's Farndon Unit in Newark who wanted to look after and care for others around them. Through caring for others we can gain a vicarious way of caring for ourselves. Hopefully this inspires a balance between caring for others and meeting our own needs while allowing others to care for us. Unfortunately, this state is often hard to achieve, especially if we have been told or had it enforced in us that we don't deserve to feel cared for or loved.

As part of Raphael Healthcare's care pathways, the company supports the emphasis of 'delivery of self-directed care' in which the patient is the main component in orchestrating their own care and progression. Establishing initiatives like Boost encourage self-esteem and self-worth.

By enabling patients to gain a degree of control of their own care they can disseminate this down to their everyday experiences. Being part of a group where the main aim is to care for others increases levels of self-

efficacy and the desire to help others understand what they think and feel.

Some of the latest work focused on self-compassion is based on the idea that in order to be able to shift from self-defeating cycles, one has to believe that you deserve not to feel that way. Change can not truly occur if deep down patients feel they don't deserve care or love and that others' needs are more important than their own.



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Humans are social beings and flourish with one-to-one contact and social interaction. Primal instincts allow people to feel safer and supported in groups, be that from physical or emotional threat. The chemical balances that shift when we smile, laugh, cry, gain empathy and understanding are all well documented in various scientific experiments where different parts of the brain are activated depending upon the emotion elicited.

Working together and towards something gives purpose and meaning. A meaningful day gives structure and formulation to our lives; if we do not have things to work towards we can feel lacklustre and self-defeating.

Embracing change

Depression is often linked to a feeling of hopelessness about ourselves and the future, and by developing small attainable goals we are able to shift ourselves from a position of despair to one of hopefulness. With the shift to hopefulness we are able to access emotions which may have been blunted in order to allow us to survive in a depressed state; this moves us from existing to living. It can be scary to shift from existing in a low mood which can feel rubbish but acceptable – with patients often feeling that it's 'better the devil you know' – rather than make changes that feel uncomfortable.

Change is one of the most difficult and uncomfortable states to be in but is often more tolerable and achievable if you have a group of people together who are facing the same challenges. Social support has been seen as one of the most influential factors in allowing or facilitating change successfully. Peer support is the addition of someone else who knows what it is like to be in your shoes who can add their experiences and skills to your own in order to allow you to cope with difficult days.

Promoting structure allows individuals to feel more in control of their day and ultimately of their life. Having meaning to that structure is essential in ensuring that individuals attach a sense of purpose and value to what they are doing. Another aspect of having structure and meaning to our life is that it ensures that we remain mentally and physically active, which promotes the notion of self-efficacy and a healthier lifestyle. The importance of promoting involvement in activities and occupations which are enjoyable and rewarding is vital as it heightens the benefits of the activity in terms of enhancing confidence, self-esteem and feelings of achievement and accomplishment.

Within mental health services it is also about asking people what is important to them, how they would like to be spending their time, and how they would like to develop their routine.

Responding to individuals' needs and goals ensures that we are all working collaboratively towards a constructive recovery pathway that individuals can identify with.

Humans need to feel like we have a purpose and a role in life and getting involved in different activities and initiatives, whether it is creative, social or vocational, helps us to want to keep striving and working towards something. It's also about working with people to identify and help them to overcome obstacles and barriers that they may be facing or may face in the future, so that they are able to cope with challenges and difficult situations that life may throw at them. We all need to feel supported and it is important to recognise this. Offering support to someone and working closely with them to help them achieve their goals can really make a difference to their mental state and sense of self.

While relationships and social interaction cause most difficulties in our lives, they allow the most pleasure. Interaction and relationships are vital in mental health recovery and can flourish when fellow patients work together. These benefits, coupled with giving to charity, mean that groups like Boost provide vital support in battling mental health issues. ■

