

Clubhouse members rise to find their self-esteem

Sylvia Hui

A year or two ago, Linda Ha seldom ventured out of her flat. She had little self-esteem and hardly ever talked to anyone because she feared the world would find out about her mental disease.

Ha, who is vague about her age ("30-something") and the nature of her illness, now earns her living working three to four hours a day, five times a week, as an administrative coordinator at a prestigious law firm.

"I get along fine with my colleagues, and I've made some new friends," Ha said proudly. "I don't have so much fear of the disease now."

As with around 300 other people recovering from mental illnesses, Ha has begun to cope with what they call "the outside world" thanks to Phoenix Clubhouse, a mental rehabilitation center that helps recovery patients effectively reintegrate into society.

The community psychiatric rehabilitation center, the first to introduce the "clubhouse" notion to Hong Kong in 1998, gives its patients ("members") more respect and responsibility by allowing them to work together with staff in a non-institutionalized setting.

The success of Phoenix Clubhouse has led to the establishment of three similar clubhouses in the SAR.

Now, psychiatrists at Phoenix are working to introduce the clubhouse concept across the border in the mainland, where community rehabilitation facilities are scarce and government resources are lacking.

"There aren't even any day-care services for mental patients at mainland hospitals," said Dr Michael Wong, a member of Queen Mary Hospital's community psychiatry team and doctor-in-charge of the clubhouse.

"We are looking to establish something similar to Phoenix Clubhouse in China and we are applying for a three-year project in either Shanghai, Beijing or Changsha in Hunan province."

He said mainland academics and psychiatrists are keen to learn from the Hong Kong experience. Last November, nearly 40 mainland psychiatrists attended an Asian conference on the clubhouse model, organized by the Phoenix Clubhouse.

In September, the facility will open its doors to visiting psychiatrists for orientation and on-site training.

"We hope our experience with setting up such a facility — including experience in soliciting funding and donations — can help mainland psychiatrists set up their own clubhouses," Wong said.

Phoenix Clubhouse had its own challenges to face when it first introduced the concept to the territory.

Established under Hong Kong University's department of psychiatry and Queen Mary Hospital, the clubhouse is technically part of the hospital and uses its premises.

Its staff and running costs are also provided by the hospital, but an injection of funds and a new attitude were required for the realization of the clubhouse concept.

"Traditional rehabilitation centers are very institutionalized and patients have a very passive role," Wong said.

"They do what they're told, but some tasks just are not very practical to help them reintegrate into society."

"Folding pieces of paper, for example: how does that help the patients when they get out to the real world?"

Having secured HK\$6 million from a medical foundation, the premises



Phoenix Clubhouse is a pioneering mental rehabilitation center that helps recovery patients effectively re-integrate into society.

were modernized and fitted out with computers, a kitchen, and other facilities to provide members with practical work experience.

About 40 members now turn up at the center each day to work on tasks ranging from gardening and cooking to receptionist and Web site design, assisted by eight staff.

Wong said members attend the clubhouse voluntarily.

Recalling difficulties in the early days, Wong said: "The staff here had

to give up their uniforms and their sense of superiority; they had to adapt to the idea that the members and themselves are equals.

"We had trivial problems like persuading the hospital to let us cook our own meals and use real money instead of tokens here, as well as more fundamental ones, such as requiring staff to do lots more liaising with employers."

A popular scheme called transitional employment is provided for members, who, like Ha, work part-time from six

months to one year for a pool of 10 employers offering clerical or administrative jobs for members. They receive market rate hourly wages.

"We have lots of difficulties in convincing employers to hire our members," said Eva Yau, who is in charge of the clubhouse.

"The skills we offer are in great demand, and it would be good if more employers offer our members an opportunity," she said.

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