

A Kind Gesture in the Psych Ward

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The psych ward can be an unbearably lonely place. We're often alone with our thoughts and reflections on relapses, struggles, disappointments, and hopelessness. I know. I've been there. I've suffered with severe bipolar I disorder with psychosis for over 20 years. Mental health crises landed me in the psych ward involuntarily three times.

There are rarely get well wishes or flowers on the window ledges. Many of us have no visitors at all. We feel forgotten and abandoned—I did and was, even by my own family. I felt unloved. I was heartbroken. These were the lows of my struggles, of my life. I have since reached recovery, but the pain of those hospitalizations never seems to go away.

After I reached recovery, I wanted to share comfort, support, and hope with my hospitalized peers. I created a program called Psych Ward Greeting Cards. The program is simple. It is based on kind gestures. People, very often with mental illness who have also been hospitalized, donate handmade, and store-bought greeting cards to us. The cards include hopeful messages of recovery. I distribute these along with chocolate and gifts through in-person hospital visits and shipments throughout the year.

I started the program in 2019, in the same unit where I had been hospitalized twice. My wonderful former occupational therapist, Chaya Weinstein and her supervisor enthusiastically embraced my program. I asked my ForLikeMinds online mental illness peer support and Facebook communities to donate greeting cards to me. Within days I began receiving donations. The great response wasn't too surprising. Mental illness peers have a lot of empathy and hope to share with each other. It's not always easy to do. Our program offers a way to reach those struggling directly often at their lows.

My hospital visits have been particularly impactful. My initial visits were the hardest. My own hospitalizations were traumatizing, because they were involuntary and involved a police response. It was deeply triggering for me to be back here, but also powerful. When I spoke to the patients, I began by saying "I'm just like you, I

was here too." At many times, I could not hold back my tears. That shared experience and connection remains the program's driving force.

Hospital visits are often in a group session format attended by patients and supervised by a therapist. I share my lived experience and answer questions. I openly and candidly discuss my own struggles making me more relatable to the patients. I share my message of hope for recovery using my own and other peer examples. I try to help them recognize their own internal strength and bravery as well as the support of peers who want the best for them.

We lay the donated greeting cards out on a table, and each patient selects one to keep. We read the messages aloud and then discuss them. The patients often make a thank you poster for my card donors. I share it along with pictures of cards on my social media. It has always been important to me to keep my card donors involved through the process as they care deeply about their peers and struggle too.

I always try to coax a smile from patients, often in exchange for chocolates, and usually succeed. I especially loved visiting the patients in the psychiatric emergency room. I would speak with those who were awake and willing to speak to me. If they were unable or unwilling, I would still leave a card and treats, often near their pillow. I wanted those asleep to wake up to a little surprise, to know that someone cared enough to deliver it.

Holidays can be especially hard on patients. The absence of friends and family members particularly if they don't visit can be very hurtful. I wanted to do something extra special on the holidays. Along with my occupational therapist, we spent about 6 h together during two holidays visiting every patient in her hospital. We distributed Christmas and Hanukkah cards, Christmas stockings with candy, and gelt.

Shortly after my program began, I was able to add a second hospital to our program thanks to increasing donations. I was immediately and warmly welcomed by two

therapists there. They told me that no one had ever wanted to volunteer in the unit. They were very supportive. Prior to Coronavirus Disease (COVID), I was visiting two hospitals per month. My visits have started to resume.

COVID stopped my program for only for 2 months. During COVID, my occupational therapist connected me to a third, a much larger psychiatric hospital. I now had even more patients to reach. I developed a wonderful relationship with the hospital's psychosocial rehabilitation manager who strongly shares my mission. I began shipping her monthly packages of cards, chocolate, and gifts thanks to a pick-up in card donations during COVID. I was no longer able to personally meet the patients, but I still wanted them to hear from me, so I now include my own recovery message in each card.

A few months later, I added a fourth, large hospital. I was very pleased to work with the hospital's rehabilitation therapy manager who was extremely supportive. I also began shipping her monthly packages. Around the same time, I started collaborating with a center for people aged 55 and older living with serious mental illness. They warmly embraced my program. While isolated during COVID, members caringly made cards at home. I assembled and shipped them to the hospitals.

Our program outcomes have far exceeded my original expectations. We have reached over 5000 brave patients. On nonholiday months we now reach nearly 200 patients and on holiday months many more. This past Christmas we distributed nearly 400 cards and puzzles and thousands of chocolates and peppermint candies during two extremely heartwarming in-person visits and by shipment. We partner with three leading hospitals. We have fabulous relationships with our patients, card donors, and hospital staff. Our donors from across the country and abroad have donated many thousands of cards. The program has been extremely highly praised by everyone involved. The patient and therapist reactions have been deeply moving.

There are many benefits to our donors. It allows them to take often negative experiences and use them to make a positive impact by sharing hope with patients. This gives them a sense of meaning and purpose and helps overcome the stigma that people with mental illness cannot make meaningful contributions to society.

The program also fosters peer support by connecting patients on the outside with their peers on the inside

creating a sense of connectedness even if they never meet. This unites peers, which benefits the community.

It raises awareness on the outside of the struggles of hospitalized patients, such as loneliness and isolation. Message writing is a therapeutic form of expression. Among many benefits, it helps peers heal through reflection on their own traumatic hospitalization experiences. It is a coping strategy for negative emotions, including depression, and feelings of loneliness.

Most important to me, patients clearly have been deeply moved and inspired by our donations. According to Lisa DeFelice-Fratto LMHC, Manager of Psychosocial Rehabilitation at New York Presbyterian Hospital, Westchester Behavioral Health Center:

"The impact of this program reflects the hard work and dedication Katherine so elegantly demonstrates, and illustrates the genuine desire for connection and sense of purpose which resides in each of us. Every card provides patients with strength for the day and hope for the future. These unique creations are tangible evidence that recovery does exist and is attainable."

Patients are consistently amazed and overcome with gratitude for the donors who take the time to reach out and offer support. When Katherine tells them 'I've been where you are', their faces light up with joy and relief, seeing the embodiment of recovery and hope standing in front of them in real time.

As a result of this program, many of the patients decide to incorporate volunteer work into their discharge plans, strengthening their recovery by helping others.

It is clear that one kind gesture, one heartfelt connection, one peer extending the hand of belonging can bring a profound sense of hope to those on this journey".

Lisa is an example of the tremendous support we have received from our hospital partners without which our program would not be possible.

To expand our reach, sponsorship, and resources, I have recently secured nonprofit 501(c)(3) status for our program. I also hope to inspire and support others to create their own programs in their communities. Evidence-based program development often takes years to conceptualize, develop, validate, and execute and frequently at great expense. But sometimes a kind gesture can be of comparable value and may even have a more meaningful impact. A simple kind gesture can inspire hope, which can inspire a recovery journey.