

PUBLIC SPEAKING FOR CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

In Hawaii, over 1100 consumers statewide recently completed a needs assessment. One of the greatest needs identified was increasing self-confidence. Learning public speaking is a good means to increase feelings of self-worth and self-confidence.

Toastmasters International has an excellent training for people to learn public speaking in a variety of situations. There is a Toastmasters chapter in one of the correctional facilities here in Hawaii. A training class will be established at one of the Clubhouses and anyone who identifies as a consumer may join. Toastmasters training materials will be utilized.

The presenter has done approximately 200 presentations of various kinds over the years and is a largely self-taught speaker. It was difficult to learn how to present in front of groups. The first time he was asked to speak in public, he felt so uncomfortable he could not say a single word and sat down. He learned how to speak while a member of various rehabilitation programs, which often had a daily seminar featuring a variety of topics. He also participated in a student speaking group, an affiliate of Toastmasters International, the Gavel Club, while at the University of Hawaii.

The dynamic between speaker and audience informs and strengthens them both. The audience is educated; the speaker is informed and empowered. There is some benefit, which is generally not measured, gained from the interaction. This is true for both extemporaneous and prepared speeches. For someone who has experienced the devastating effects of mental illness, this empowerment can be helpful in building self-confidence, poise and self-worth. This is a gradual process and actually helps recovery.

Good benefits arise from a shared presentation as well as a solo presentation. The best type of presentation of this kind is when there is a “free flow” between two or more presenters. Panel discussions also are helpful. Coordinating with another speaker actually is excellent training for both speakers. Just last week, the presenter did a speech between two other speakers. All the speeches complemented each other. The audience responded well.

Participating in a meeting also is a type of public speaking. Good participation includes listening to the thread of the discussion, knowing when to speak in turn, and knowing when to “turn” the discussion to another topic. A facilitator or chair can also bring up agenda items and keep the meeting on schedule.

Preparing and delivering testimony on bills for legislative hearings is another type of public presentation that involves not only speaking, but also writing skills. There is tremendous gratification from your participation in the legislative process, that your testimony helped in the passage of a bill into law.

Speaking in front of a hostile audience or having a controversial topic can also be beneficial. This can be so especially if a hostile audience is converted to your point of view. However, this is most difficult. This type of audience might be encountered at a meeting concerning locating a new mental health facility in a neighborhood. NIMBY audiences can remain that way, especially when they are ill informed about mental health issues. Sometimes, it is better if people speak one on one or in small groups when faced with this type of situation. There was for example much opposition to locating a Clubhouse on a downtown Honolulu mall. Now, the Honolulu Clubhouse is a good neighbor and it is difficult to keep the public out!

The presenter has encountered difficulties, including heckling, in different situations. He presented a workshop with another speaker at an annual statewide consumer conference. One person kept asking disruptive questions in the workshop. All the questions were answered and still he would ask more. Learning how to deal with these situations also is beneficial to the speaker. Unfortunately, consumers themselves can be challenging audience members. People may actively hallucinate and have other mental health problems while listening. Audiences can be diverse, with much variety in composition. Mental health professionals can be difficult if they have inflexible attitudes. Line workers at inpatient facilities present quite a challenge. Most audiences are, however, understanding and supportive, especially when the speakers share both their difficult and lighthearted experiences with having a mental illness.

A speaker should be open to audience participation via questions and answers. Sometimes the speaker can pose a question to the audience to stimulate the audience. Some conduct an entire speaking engagement via questions and answers. A popular medication workshop consists entirely of consumers asking a psychiatrist about medications. This workshop has been presented for many years at the Hawaii Statewide Consumer Conference, and this has always been popular and even runs overtime.

The Mental Health Association in Hawaii runs a Speakers Bureau of volunteers who go into the community and talk about mental health. The speakers are largely consumers. Recently a multi-cultural "Mixed Plate" speakers group has started with members that reflect the diversity of Hawaii's largely Asian and Pacific Islander culture. The name "Mixed Plate" is taken from a type of meal served on a plate with a variety of cuisines popular in the Islands. In "Mixed Plate" particular attention is paid to matching the culture of the speaker to that of the audience. For example, the presenter who is Caucasian was asked to present at a local military hospital with its largely Caucasian audience. Because there is such a multi-cultural atmosphere, it is important to be culturally competent. It is not necessarily pertinent that a speaker has a bilingual background, but be willing to support ethnic community building. In any case, sensitivity to culture and knowledge of culture is a must when speaking about mental health and awareness of mental illness.

A federally funded "Community Commitment For Mental Health" program is run through United Self-Help, the statewide consumer organization. This pairs the USH Executive Director (a consumer), consumers, and a mental health professional speaking

to various community groups. The goal is to change organizational attitudes towards mental illness and mental health. This presenter has participated in this program and the Mental Health Association programs and has gained benefits from each. "Community Commitment for Mental Health" pays the consumers a small stipend. The program has been going on approximately two years, with over 100 presentations throughout Hawaii. Many community groups are ill-informed about mental health issues and actually elicit a favorable response after some education. Changing organizational attitudes reduces stigma and increases acceptance. Educational funding can originate outside the Center for Mental Health Services, for example, the Preventative Health and Health Services Block Grant funds this mental health education program. Other jurisdictions might examine whether to use these funds for mental health education.

The USH Executive Director, has matured and blossomed as a dynamic public speaker since the debut of this project. The other consumers who have also participated have also gained benefits. They are more willing to talk about their personal experiences with mental illness and are more relaxed and poised with audiences. The Mental Health Association Speakers and Mixed Plate Speakers have also gained poise and self-confidence through their volunteer service. Many speakers derive good feelings from a job well done! Pre- and post- surveys and evaluations sampling speakers and audiences might help quantify what is gained.

Public speaking and public presentations of various types help consumers of mental health services gain increased poise, self-worth and self-confidence. A training class utilizing the Toastmasters model will be established. The Mental Health Association volunteer programs give consumers an opportunity to derive these benefits. Hawaii has recognized a need for community education and has funded an innovative program through the consumer organization. More research will quantify these benefits and help disseminate this information.

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