

## Having faith: Supporting a personal journey of recovery

To be of use and to feel productive . . .

For many of us, we think of our jobs. But what if finding or keeping that job was a challenge? What if your mental health became a barrier to employment?

For Astha, a 29-year-old woman of South Asian heritage, numerous relapses and hospitalizations for debilitating anxiety disrupted many areas of her life, including completing her educational goal and finding that long hoped-for job.

Although she had completed a bachelor's degree, Astha experienced an overwhelming sense of anxiety that led to a self-imposed isolation and fear of being "labeled." It was these symptoms that brought her to the Synergy Center at Clubhouse of Suffolk in the early 2000s. She asked for help in dealing with her mental health issues and, when ready, help in finding and keeping the job she desired.

At the Synergy Center, which in May 2007 became a licensed PROS program, Astha found services grounded in the belief that meaningful employment—a salaried job or volunteer position that provides a sense of satisfaction—is often essential for personal fulfillment and good mental health. She found skilled, respectful, and passionate staff trained in evidence-based practices. She found people who desired to help her manage her symptoms and work on her own goals. Astha learned what "meaningful work" meant to her, and she recognized that her greatest strength was writing. With staff, she mapped out a plan and specific activities to help her reach her goals.

As Astha worked closely with an employment specialist, she determined that her top priorities were to earn an advanced college degree and gain full-time employment in her chosen field of education. Stigma and family cultural expectations, along with the related anxiety, were challenges that needed to be addressed. Staff worked through these challenges with her and with this support, she came to realize her own unique strengths and skills. Drawing upon them, she addressed barriers to pursuing a job and enrolled in a graduate study program with pride and confidence.

The year after she secured a position as a teacher's assistant, Astha was accepted into a graduate studies program in education. Despite ongoing feelings of anxiety, she maintained her job until she suffered a relapse and was hospitalized for a month. While she did lose her job, she did begin medication during the hospitalization that helped her manage the symptoms of anxiety. Following



her discharge, she started her graduate classes and was able to secure another teacher assistant position.

Recovery from a diagnosed mental illness is a journey, sometimes with unexpected detours, as Astha recounts: "After graduating with my master's degree, I had a relapse and had to go back to the hospital for a month. I contacted Clubhouse and began receiving services at Synergy Center again. I attended classes on yoga and meditation skills, medication management, and constructed a relapse prevention plan with my vocational rehabilitation counselor."

"We worked on my personal recovery and job search, and after about five months after my relapse, I found a full-time position as a clerk/research assistant at a local university. I worked for about a year and had another relapse. This time, I took the advice of my vocational counselor to disclose my health situation to my employer. When I felt better, I returned to the *same* workplace. . . something I didn't think was possible after disclosure. The staff at Synergy Center ensured me that my disclosure would be treated with privacy by my employer and that going back to the same workplace was not going to be a problem. Sure enough, I have been back at work for over a year."

Astha's journey reminds us that good mental health, like all areas of health, must be attended to and nurtured. Our journeys differ, but the process is one that we each define. For Astha, she now has the skills to do her job while managing her health and she is doing both well.

To learn more about the PROS program and employment support offered at Synergy Center, Clubhouse of Suffolk, contact Lisa Koop at [Lisa.Koop@clubhouseofsuffolk.org](mailto:Lisa.Koop@clubhouseofsuffolk.org) or visit the website at <http://www.clubhouseofsuffolk.org/index.cfm>.

clinic (Steve Schwarzkopf Community Mental Health Center) on the grounds of the Psychiatric Center, using the mo-

bile community-based model to meet the needs of high-need individuals.