



FRIENDSHIP IS TO PEOPLE WHAT SUNSHINE IS TO FLOWERS

Loneliness and isolation are common experiences of people with mental illness. Social support—perceived comfort, caring, esteem, and the help a person receives from others, such as a mentor—has been found to add resilience in people during times of need and danger. Compeer, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that attempts to increase this resilience among people with mental illness by creating social support networks between youth and adults with mental illness and adult volunteers. Compeer's primary service is to match adult volunteers with adult and youth clients, who agree to spend a minimum of four hours together each month for at least one year.

Compeer first began in Rochester, New York in 1973, and was officially established as Compeer, Inc. in 1977. Since then, Compeer has expanded, and the organization currently has approximately 115 affiliate programs across the United States, Canada, and Australia. In 2000, Compeer touched the lives of over 5,550 clients with mental illness and 4,200 volunteers, of which more than 11 percent also have a mental illness.

While the clients involved with Compeer already receive treatment from a mental health professional, these individuals lack a different type of support that can be provided through a friendship relationship. The positive feelings and behaviors that can result from friendships, such as an increase in self-confidence and a decrease in loneliness, are consistent with the treatment goals of these clients.

Social interactions between people with mental health challenges and those without also benefit society at large by helping to decrease the stigma of mental illness and lower public expenses on psychiatric hospitalization. Clients have shared statements with Compeer that they



feel more normal, better understood, and more accepted as a result of their Compeer friendship. Volunteers have reported that their Compeer experience has helped them to be less judgmental of people with mental illnesses and that they have realized that people with mental illnesses have abilities and feelings similar to people without mental illnesses.

Volunteers are recruited and carefully screened. Compeer checks on the employment history, personal references, and criminal background of each volunteer and also conducts a 90minute interview. The referring therapist also conducts an interview.

These lengthy interviews help with the matching process. Compeer makes matches based on the volunteer's experience and comfort level with mental health issues, geographic area, preference for age, and interest in activities. Compeer staff provide ongoing support to the matches through office visits, telephone and written communication, and newsletters.

Compeer's youth clients range in age from 6 to 18, and all youth clients must be referred by a mental health professional. In 2000, Compeer served 462 youth matches across the country. The motivation and commitment of the Compeer volunteers is reflected in the statistics that are collected on a monthly basis. The Rochester statistics reveal that in any given month, approximately 50 percent of volunteers spend more than the required amount of time with their friends. Some volunteers report spending *two to eight times* the required amount of time.

Another indicator of Compeer volunteers' enthusiasm is the length of time the Compeer relationships last. More than three-quarters of the current Rochester youth matches (typically, there are about 100 matches in Rochester in a given month) have been together for the one-year minimum requirement and are

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continuing their friendships. Some of the current Compeer friendships have been growing for 5 to 10 years. The average length of match for the 106 current youth matches in Rochester is two years. The average length of match for friendships that dissolved in 2000 was 1 year and 10 months.

Stories from Compeer matches exemplify the mutual growth and the rewards that come from the companionship. For example, one young girl, referred to Compeer at the age of 10, was quiet and isolated. She lived with the hardships of a father who died at an early age and a mother who had a mental illness. When this young girl obtained a Compeer friend, she gained a special adult in her life that set aside time specifically for her. The friends enjoyed numerous activities together; they went to concerts and plays and took walks by the lake. The volunteer supported her friend as she pursued her educational and personal goals. As the friendship progressed, the maturing girl graduated from high school and earned a full scholarship to college. She is currently making the Dean's list. The friends still visit with each other when they are both in town.

While the benefits of the one-to-one matches are abundantly expressed through verbal and written stories, Compeer must assess the effects of services using measurement tools. In year 2000, Compeer evaluated its youth matches using surveys sent out to the clients, their parents, their volunteer friends, and their mental health professionals. Many positive findings surfaced from this assessment. Of the 227 people who returned their youth match surveys, 95 to 100 percent of the four groups of respondents felt the volunteer helped their friend feel better. One hundred percent of the respondents said the volunteer and the client enjoyed spending time together. Ninety-three to 100 percent of the people reported satisfaction with the match relationship and with Compeer. Nineteen potential goal areas were included in the survey to see on which goals the most number of

youth were working and with which goals the youth were having the most success in making improvements. Improving self-esteem, trust, and caring were goals on which the greatest number of clients were working. When comparing perceptions of overall client improvement, a greater percentage of youth reported improvements than their parents, volunteers, or mental health professionals. The goals with the highest percentages of improvements across the four groups of respondents were improving self-esteem, optimism about the future, getting along better with others, and making good choices.

Compeer has been recognized as a model mental health volunteer program by the American Psychiatric Association and has been highlighted in print and electronic media. Compeer has received several national awards, including the Presidential Recognition Award by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Eleanor Roosevelt Community Service Award.

Despite this positive attention, the need for more Compeer volunteers is an ongoing challenge, as more and more clients with mental illness are constantly referred and the stigma of mental illness remains in society. At the end of 2000, there were more than 3,238 clients referred to Compeer who were not yet matched with a volunteer friend.

To learn about various ways to get involved with Compeer, from starting a program in your community to becoming a volunteer to offering a donation or sponsorship, call Compeer at 8008360475 or visit the website: www.compeer.org. The life you change may be your own.

Tracy Griffiths is a Rochester native with a master's degree in Health Psychology. She has been the Research and Education Coordinator at Compeer since November 2000.