

“Would you like fries with that?” On Being a Service User

by Rachel Howse

The term “service user” fluttered into my consciousness a year ago, during a conversation with the new curator of the archives and museum I work at. “We have to be aware of the service users who visit this museum,” he said, in reference to Mental Health Day.

“Service users?” I looked at him, puzzled. “What service users?”

“You know, the patients that come from the hospital grounds to visit the museum.”

“Why don’t we just call them patients or patrons, or guests?”

“Because the government has thought up the term ‘service user’ to make patients feel more a part of the system. A bit much really, but there you are.”

I chewed on my lip thoughtfully as he retreated to his office. A bit more a part of the system? What were they, the clients, the patients, the guests? Lounge furniture? Service user just felt. . . .banal.

Five months later, the term didn’t sit any better with me. Only this time, I was a “service user,” having reached a stage in my mental health where I needed a bit of assistance. I’m primarily what I like to think of as a “lone gunman” when it comes to my mental health. I utilize the library and my friends as resources until it becomes apparent that I should work with professionals. I refer to this as “free-lance neurosis” and I see psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, and counsellors as contractors that I collaborate with on my mental health. They provide a service, my mental health is the item being serviced, and I am an intelligent and (usually) agreeable customer who is genuinely interested in the service that mental health professionals provide.

For me, the term “service user” has negative connotations. It makes me feel like I am at an automobile garage being talked down to by mechanics and their receptions who are out to fleece me without knowing that I know how much it costs and what work is involved replacing a radiator hose. “Well, ma’am, that’s a mighty nasty piece of pipe we’re talkin’ about replacing. This is gonna take awhile and it’s going to be expensive.” The term provides no sense of the cooperation involved between doctors, administrative staff, and

the clients they work with. I find it isolating and not a little degrading to be referred to as a "service user." Like someone queuing at a take-out restaurant, being waited on by surly staff who have every intention of spitting in my food, the term makes my temper rise.

I would almost prefer to be called a patient or a patron. A client or a customer. These terms all offer a sense of collaboration and respect that I feel I – and every mental health consumer – is warranted. Treat me with a little respect and I'll happily work within the framework of the established bureaucracy to get better.

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