

The Power of Small Wins: Why One Health Worker Sees Hope Despite Mental Health System Flaws

By Sarah Grimsted

Grazia Rutherford-Swan wakes up in the morning to serve as a community health worker at Amae Health, a startup mental health clinic. The clinic, with its mint green walls, sunken couches, and fake plants, may appear ordinary on the outside. But on the inside, Amae Health is home to mental health workers who face formidable challenges to help clients regain ownership over their lives.

Still, workers like Rutherford-Swan, 30, maintain a determined optimism as they try to make a difference for their clients, who present with a range of mental health concerns.

On an average day, Rutherford-Swan performs emotional check-ins for the clients, manages ongoing appointments for people seeking employment, housing, or food services, takes notes, and does hospital screenings.

She is also finishing a master's program for mental health counseling and has recently completed an internship at a harm reduction clinic. She's very impacted by patients' growth.

"I get very emotional when clients have even just, like, small wins, you know," she said. "Like, someone recently who has been having a hard time, just, like, daily functioning, told me that she cleaned her room and I almost started crying."

More than one in five adults experienced mental illness in 2024, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Rutherford-Swan believes economic issues are contributing to the surge in people looking for support and mental health counseling.

"I think that having such poor resources because of the way that our government is set up, really just leads to mental health crises," she said, citing soaring New York rents and food costs, along with a weakening job market as major stressors for many.

Amae is unique in that it takes health insurance, but some mental health clinics don't. Moreover, some health insurance policies don't cover mental health treatment. Nearly half of the estimated 60 million people in the U.S. with mental health needs are going without treatment, according to NAMI.

Amae Health faces unique challenges as a startup, relying on funding from investors. This means community health workers, therapists, and psychiatrists must be extra

careful about the quality of their work to maintain that funding. Amae's marketers must ensure that the company remains innovative, and employees must keep up.

Rutherford-Swan feels that continuing to take care of the individual person is still the most important thing.

"I'm just of the mindset that each person really needs individualized care and that we have to meet each person exactly where they are," she said. With so many people seeking help, community health workers such as herself are often overworked. There are physical, emotional, and psychological demands that go along with helping others who have experienced stress or trauma, Rutherford-Swan said. Those demands can leave caregivers depleted themselves.

"There's a lot of burnout in community mental health because there's usually not that much funding and they want to take everyone," she said. "Working with insurance, even though I love it, it really requires you to stay on top of your notes... You get compassion fatigue.

What keeps her going is her personal philosophy of giving power back to people.

"Each person has a really unique understanding of the world based on their own experiences. And so what I try to do is uplift what's already there," she said.

Kristen Allen-Zito, 45, a patient at Amae, said the clinic gave her a level of care she'd never experienced before.

"The staff and the community helped me believe in myself again after my hospitalization," she said.

For Rutherford-Swan, mental health care starts with understanding that everyone's brain is wired a little bit differently. Acceptance and celebration of neurodiversity is key, along with enjoying the small wins.

"It's so special to see people smile again," she said.

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2025, October 15). *Mental health by the numbers*.

<https://www.nami.org/about-mental-illness/mental-health-by-the-numbers/>