

Is Recovery Possible?

In recent years the concept of recovery from mental illness has been introduced into the mental health field, the underlying assumption being that people with mental illness can effectively manage symptoms of their illness and regain social roles and identities that contribute towards achieving a quality life.

The fact that people can and do recover from serious mental illness is often first met with suspicion by service providers and families. Research has found, however, that the majority of people dealing with a mental disorder do in fact recover to a substantial degree and are able to lead productive and satisfying lives.

What Is Recovery?

When people hear the word “recovery” they often interpret it in a traditional sense to mean “cure”. Because of this, it can be difficult to see how recovery can apply to mental illness.

In medicine, the term “recovery” is applied to long-term or chronic disorders such as diabetes, asthma, many physical disabilities, and substance abuse problems such as alcohol addiction. It is not meant to imply a cure, but rather refers to a return to full or partial functioning in most aspects of one’s life.

In a broad sense, to be “in recovery” refers to finding ways of resolving issues that arise in the course of having a mental illness and creating a more positive, meaningful, and satisfying way of life.

Recovery is a Process

“Recovery in severe psychiatric disability involves a process of restoring or developing a meaningful sense of belonging and positive sense of identity apart from one’s disability and then rebuilding a life in the broader community despite or within the limitations imposed by that disability”

Davidson, 2004

Recovery is a process that occurs over time. It is rarely straightforward and is often characterized by steps forward and back. Recovery seldom involves a simple “quick fix” and requires optimism, patience, and commitment.

Recovery does not always mean that a person will live symptom-free or recoup all the losses incurred as a result of their mental illness. It does mean, however, that people can live without feeling enveloped by mental illness or feeling that their potential is irredeemably curtailed because of it.

“Between 45%-65% of people with schizophrenia will experience significant improvements over time, some recovering fully; 80% of people experiencing a major depressive episode will recover fully; the outcome for bipolar disorder lies somewhere between the two (ie 60%-75%).”

Harding, 1987

“Recovery is “the establishment of a fulfilling, meaningful life and a positive sense of identity, founded on hopefulness and self-determination.”

Andresen, Caputi & Oades, 2006

Four Key Components of the Recovery Process

- **Finding and maintaining hope**—believing in oneself, having a sense of personal agency, feeling optimistic about future
- **The re-establishment of a positive identity**—finding a new identity which incorporates illness but retains a core, positive sense of self
- **Finding meaning in life**—making sense of illness, finding a new meaning in life despite illness
- **Taking responsibility for one's life**—feeling in control of illness and life

*Andresen, Caputi & Oades,
2003*

Mental illness can at times impede a person's ability to exercise choice and manage their life, but there are still important areas where even individuals who are quite ill can make choices and take action—for example, developing social contact, taking advantage of professional help and services available, and moving towards looking after their own health.

Recovering from a mental illness can involve learning new skills (and perhaps the relearning of some old ones), coping with challenges, and assuming a new role—the role of someone who is successful despite having a mental illness.

We cannot predict the future of every person who experiences mental illness. We can, though, accompany them as they grapple with the tough realities of their lives and be there to celebrate their successes.

Essential Ingredients for Recovery

Recovery means people reaching their full potential as responsible individuals and community members and is facilitated through relationships and environments that provide hope, empowerment, choices, and opportunities.

The following is a list of essential ingredients in the recovery process:

Acceptance: Acceptance of the diagnosis by the ill relative, family, and friends is essential for the process of recovery to begin. Acceptance is more likely to result in early intervention.

Early Intervention: Early intervention and early use of new medications lead to better medical outcomes for the individual. The earlier your ill relative is diagnosed and stabilized with treatment, the better the long-term prognosis.

Adherence to Treatment: Medication and therapy greatly aid in recovery. Although the benefits may not be completely obvious at first, following a treatment plan will significantly improve your ill relative's mental health.

Empowerment: Recovery is aided when people are given the support and education to make their own decisions and to exercise their "right to try".

Holistic Approach: Recovery encompasses the varied aspects of an individual's life, including housing, employment, education, recreation, mental health and healthcare services, addictions treatment, spirituality, creativity, social networks, and community participation.

Strengths-Based Approach: Recovery focuses on validating and building upon the strengths, capabilities, coping skills, resiliency, and inherent worth of individuals. This involves a constant awareness that “you are not your illness”.

“Learn when to switch from the caregiver to the supportive role and then let me monitor my own recovery.”

Husband diagnosed with bipolar disorder

Responsibility: Outcomes are improved when people take personal responsibility to pursue and sustain recovery to the greatest extent possible. This involves taking steps towards identifying and achieving personal goals and can include creating a Ulysses Agreement or Advance Plan which will enable your ill relative to state what they would like to happen in the event that they become ill or relapse. (See Section 2: Caregiving Planning for more on Advance Planning and Ulysses Agreements.)

How Family Members Can Help

With an understanding of the essential ingredients for recovery, family members are better equipped to:

Nurture hopefulness, with high expectations

Aim for recovery—a full life, beginning with clear, attainable, smaller goals

Foster self-determination and critical thinking

Value healthy independence

Support their ill relative to take risks and exercise their “right to try”

Emphasize opportunities for community connections and rebuilding a meaningful life

“Hope has been consistently defined as grounded in achievable reality..... It has been identified as a central feature of recovery from chronic illness.The presence of hope in patients predicts better outcomes of treatment..... Hope, along with acceptance and support, are central and necessary parts of recovery..... Hope is central to the process of reconstruction of a sense of self in patients with chronic mental illness....Hopefulness in the caregiver is a crucial part of the coping process...”

Bland, 2007

How Does the Family Recover?

Families embark on a process of recovery alongside their relative. Much like the ill person’s journey, it will not be straightforward and will involve both progress and setbacks. Many challenges, such as acceptance of the illness, developing coping strategies, and building on successes, will be present for both the ill person and the family. Some challenges will be faced simultaneously while others will be staggered in their timing and severity.

Each family’s journey will be unique and will depend upon a host of factors, including the nature and severity of illness. While specific circumstances vary, several families in our focus group talked about recovery as meaning that the illness was no longer in the foreground. They expressed a sense of moving away from living and breathing mental illness toward focusing on getting their own lives back on track.

The following is a sampling of remarks made by family caregivers regarding the recovery process:

- “You learn to define life with a new reality.”
- “It’s the ability to cope with crises so it doesn’t take its toll like it has in the past.”
- “It’s acceptance of the situation; getting over the fear that something will happen.”
- “It’s being able to not get sucked in.”
- “It’s developing interests outside of concern with their well-being.”
- “It’s living life as one wants to.”

Hope And The Expectation Of Success

When we speak of hope, we are not advocating a false optimism where everything will turn out well when the facts suggest the opposite. Instead, we believe in a hope rooted in the real experiences of thousands of people who have recovered from mental illness to become successful participants in society.

It is possible to gain effective illness management and lead meaningful, productive lives. Given the proper treatment and support from caring people around them, many people experience significant mental health gains, leaving them with minimal interference from their illness.

Summary

Recovery is a concept that has gained acceptance in the mental health field. Family members can also engage in their own recovery journey alongside their ill relative.

“Relief of symptoms is only the first step in treating depression or bipolar disorder. Wellness or recovery is a return of a life that you care about. Recovery happens when your illness stops getting in the way of your life.”

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, 2007

