

Making it !

An introduction to ideas about recovery for people with mental health problems and their families and friends

*"Recovery is a deeply personal unique process ... it is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of a new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of illness."*¹

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with a great deal of help from many other people who have
experienced the challenge of living with mental health
problems.

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In conjunction with service users, South West London Mental
Health Trust has developed 'Taking back control. A guide to
planning your own recovery' (written by Rachel Perkins and
Miles Rinaldi) that will give you more suggestions about how
you might plan your own recovery. These are available from
rachel.perkins@swlstg-tr.nhs.uk.

You might also like to look at 'Wellness and Recovery Action
Plans' on www.mentalhealthrecovery.com.

Many people find a diagnosis of mental health problems devastating.

*"When I was diagnosed I felt 'this is the end of my life'. I felt I was not viable, flawed, defective."*²

- Perhaps those ordinary everyday things you have always done without thinking feel impossibly difficult.
- You may have to cope with strange and frightening experiences that no-one around you believes or understands.
- People may start treating you differently - maybe they avoid you, or stop believing what you say.
- You may lose confidence in yourself and feel very alone, and very frightened:
 - .. frightened about what is happening to you
 - .. frightened about the prospect of using mental health services
 - .. frightened that you will lose everything you value in life, like your friends, your work, your home, your college place, your position in the community
 - .. frightened that you won't be able to achieve your ambitions - do all the things you had planned to do in life like raise a family, travel, get a good job.

*"Last month I was a regular mum walking down the street with my kids in their push-chair ... now I'm just a mental patient."*³

*"Out of the blue your job has gone, with it any financial security you ever had. At a stroke, you have no purpose in life, no contact with other people. You find yourself totally isolated from the rest of the world. No one telephones you, much less writes. No-one seems to care if you are alive or dead."*⁴

Too often it feels that you cease to be a person and become a 'mental patient'. It may feel like all those things that some people say about 'mental patients' suddenly apply to you. Things like, 'they are dangerous and unpredictable', 'they are stupid and cannot make decisions for themselves', 'they are like children and need others to look after them', 'they cannot work, study, have a home of their own, raise children, live a decent and successful life'.

None of these things are true, but they are widely believed and this can make the prospect of having mental health problems terrifying.

But it does not have to be this way. Whether your problems have started recently or whether you have had a diagnosis for some time ...

RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE.

It may not always be easy, but many, many people with mental health problems have shown us that it is possible to lead a satisfying and successful life.

Most people with mental health problems have homes of their own, families, friends, a social life. With the right sort of help and support, most can study, work and contribute to their communities in many different ways. And think about all the famous people who have had mental health problems and been successful - people like Winston Churchill, Napoleon Bonaparte, Agatha Christie, Frank Bruno, Beethoven, Spike Milligan, Stephen Fry, Einstein and many, many more.

What is recovery all about?

When we talk about 'recovery' we are talking about the experience of people as they accept and overcome the challenge of mental health problems.

Recovery is the process of developing a new sense of self, meaning and purpose in life.

Recovery is the process of rebuilding a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life with a diagnosis of mental health problems.

*"Recovery is a process of healing ... of adjusting one's attitudes, feelings perceptions, beliefs, roles and goals in life. It is a painful process, yet often one of self-discovery, self-renewal and transformation. Recovery is a deeply emotional process. Recovery involves creating a new personal vision for one's self."*⁵

With the right sort of treatment and support, some people's problems and symptoms can be eliminated. But you may still need help to rebuild your life and do the things you want to do.

There are other people whose symptoms remain or come back from time to time. But recovery is still possible. You can live a meaningful and contributing life even if your problems continue.

Indeed some people think that their success is, at least in part, a result of their mental health problems, that these problems have made them more sensitive and creative. Although they have problems that, at times, may be distressing or debilitating, they also see their experience as positive and creative.

In her book 'Touched with Fire' (and various other academic papers) Professor Kay Jamison demonstrates that there is a relationship between creativity and mood disorders. She describes the relationship between manic depression and depression and creativity in many artists and writers. And remember that Winston Churchill successfully led the country through the trials and tribulations of the second world war in the face of recurrent depression.

"I look forward to every day of my life now ... It has made me appreciate the good times even more. It may sound odd that I arrived in this place through the darkness of a severe depression. Yet I can appreciate the experience. I am reminded of that Dickens novel, Tale of Two Cities, which begins: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Having been through the worst, I can now fully appreciate the best."

Peggy, author and grandmother, talking about her depression⁶

"As I found myself, psychosis ... can be at least the beginning of spiritual enlightenment. It may open doors to such experiences that a person can make productive use of later when they are well."

Academic, author and university lecturer Dr Peter Chadwick talking about his experience of schizophrenia⁷

"Because I have faced this pain, I am able to feel more deeply, reach out to others more authentically."

Student David Alexander talking about his experience of schizophrenia⁸

"I have often asked myself whether, given the choice, I would choose to have manic depressive illness. ... Strangely enough I think I would choose to have it. It's complicated. Depression is awful beyond words or sounds or images ... So why would I want anything to do with this illness? Because I honestly believe that as a result of it I have felt more things, more deeply; had more experiences, more intensely; loved more, and been loved; laughed more often for having cried more often; appreciated more the springs, for all the winters; worn death 'as close as dungarees', appreciated it - and life - more; seen the finest and the most terrible in people, and slowly learned the values of caring, loyalty and seeing things through."

Professor Kay Jamison talking about her own experience of bipolar disorder (manic depression)⁹

"Now I view myself as the new, improved product. For the first time in my life I know what empathy feels like. Not a coping, professional façade but actually sharing the pain and joy of others. Perversely I find it to be a wonderful gift. I do still have

the occasional setback, periods of anxiety, but I know that they are not permanent. An hour, a day or a week long but they do pass."

Eddie, a policeman, talking about his experience of depression¹⁰

It may not be possible for everyone to become a famous writer, scientist, artist or musician. But you can make most of your experiences and talents. You can find meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life.

Recovery is not something that mental health services do. It is the deeply personal journey of growing beyond your mental health problems and/or other challenges that you have faced.

Mental health workers may be able to help you in your recovery journey. However, you may find the support and encouragement of friends, relatives, and others who are close to you, at least as valuable. Many people have also described the hope and inspiration they have gained from others who have experienced mental health problems.

*We must never " forget the gift that people with mental health problems can give each other ... hope, strength and experience as lived through the recovery process ... a person does not have to be 'fully recovered' to serve as a role model. Very often a person who is only a few 'steps' ahead of another person can be more effective."*¹¹

*"What was helpful and comforting was the other patients. I learnt a great deal from them ... I don't mean to glamorise them but they were great people, prepared to face up to things."*¹²

While others can help (or hinder) you along the way, each person owns their own recovery journey, and everyone's journey is different.

It can be a rocky road with lots of ups and downs along the way ... but many, many people with mental health problems have shown that a meaningful, valued and satisfying life is possible.

What helps people along their journey of recovery?

Many people who have faced the challenge of mental health problems have described what has been important in assisting their recovery. While everyone's journey is different, and people find different things helpful, there are three things that seem to be particularly important: hope, control and opportunity.

Let's start with hope ...

Hope is central to recovery. No matter what challenges you face, if you cannot see the possibility of a decent future for yourself it is not possible to rebuild your life.

Relationships with other people can be very important in helping you to hold on to hope. What others think of you affects how you think about yourself. If everyone around you believes

that you will never amount to very much then it is very difficult to believe in yourself and your own possibilities. We all need someone to believe in us!

Sometimes it is difficult to live hopefully in the face of what seem like overwhelming odds. At times like this you need others - friends, relatives, mental health workers - who can hold on to hope for you. You need people to believe in you when you find it difficult to believe in yourself.

"The turning point in my life was... where I started to get hope that I could actually make the leap from being sick to being well ... Dr. Charles believed that I could. And Rev Goodwin believed that I could. Certain people believed that I could... and held that belief even when I didn't believe in myself." ¹³

"When I left hospital I was given a social worker. She was my lucky break, she was fantastic. She was interested in all of me. I still see her every week and the book is dedicated to her. She was the one who said I should apply for the Creative Writing Course at the University of East Anglia. She always saw a future for me outside the psychiatric system, even when I didn't." ¹⁴

Receiving a diagnosis of mental health problems can be devastating. It is a kind of bereavement. Just like with any other bereavement like losing someone you love, redundancy or divorce. People often experience a range of emotions - shock, fear, denial, anger, despair, guilt.

In the face of mental health problems people often ask themselves questions like, 'Why me?', 'What have I done to deserve this?', 'What is the point in my life?'

Everyone has to make sense of what has happened to them - and you need time and space to do this. Sometimes it helps to talk things through with a mental health worker, someone close

to you who you trust or someone else who has experienced what you are going through.

When you are feeling at a low ebb, it is easy only to see the bad things about yourself and your life.

- Sometimes it is helpful to make lists of your skills and abilities. The things you are doing and have achieved. Doing this can help you see that things may not be quite as bleak - that there may be possibilities open to you.
- Sometimes it can be helpful to ask someone else to help you think about your skills and achievements and the opportunities that may be open to you.
- Sometimes it is helpful to get encouragement and inspiration from talking to other people who have experienced mental health problems, or to read books or articles they have written.

Most of all, it is important to remember that you are not alone. Many, many people really have made it with mental health problems, discovered a new sense of value and purpose and successfully rebuilt their lives.

"Recovery to me is not only coming to terms with what has happened in my life, the dark side of me and the things I have done, but having grown as an individual because of my experiences. Focusing on this experience as a source of growth has been the source of inspiration for recovery. I can now look back in time and know that everything that happened helped me to become the person I am today."¹⁵

Believe in yourself and your possibilities. However bad things seem, it is possible to move forward.

There is always hope.

But as well as hope, you also need to regain as much control as possible over your problems and your life.

So let's move on to taking back control ...

"We are learning that those of us with psychiatric disabilities can become experts in our own self-care, can regain control over our lives, and can be responsible for our own journey of recovery."¹⁶

It often feels as if mental health problems are completely beyond your control. It can be tempting to think that you must leave the expert professionals to sort out your difficulties for you. Mental health workers have developed some treatments and therapies that can be helpful. They can provide some support. But each person with mental health difficulties can become the real expert in their own self-care.

"I have more control over my illness than I ever realised ... knowing that gives me hope because I know that next time I start to get ill I can turn it around. You don't have to let your illness run your life."¹⁷

It is important that you have all the information you want, and are fully involved in making decisions about what treatments work best for you. But finding the best treatment is only part of the story.

By reviewing the pattern of your own difficulties you can find things you can do yourself to keep well. You can learn to identify the things that may make your problems worse and manage your own ups and downs.

You may find it helpful to write down plans for yourself:

- what you will do each day and each week to keep yourself on an even keel (like getting fresh air and exercise, talking to friends, eating well, getting enough sleep, not drinking too much)
- how you can tell when things are not going so well (maybe you get into arguments with friends, feel anxious or elated, withdraw from others, start to drink too much) and what you can do to make yourself feel better (for example, take some time out from activities you find stressful, talk things through with a friend, listen to music, give yourself a treat)
- things that may trigger your problems (like painful anniversaries, starting new activities or meeting new people, pressure from work or studies, relationship difficulties) and ways to decrease the effect that these have on you (like reminding yourself of the things you have achieved, pacing things, seeking the company and support of people you trust)
- what you would like others to do if things get so bad that you cannot look after yourself - sometimes these plans are called 'Advance Directives'
- how you will get back to your life after a crisis, for instance, how you will resume responsibilities like working or studying or how you will get back to your usual leisure activities and catch up with friends .

Some people find it useful to make lists of possible supporters who can help them in their recovery journey like relatives, friends, mental health workers, religious leaders, colleagues, fellow students, voluntary organisations and other people who have had mental health problems.

"To me recovery means being in the driving seat of my life. I don't let my illness run me. Over the years I have worked hard to become an expert in my own self-care. Over the years I

have learned different ways of helping myself. Sometimes I use medications, therapy, self-help, mutual support groups, friends, my relationship with God, work, exercise, spending time in nature - all of these measures help me remain whole and healthy even though I have mental health problems." ¹⁸

Taking control over your life also involves making decisions about what you want to do in life: your dreams, ambitions and goals. It might help to think about the steps you can take to pursue your ambitions, the sort of help you might need, and how you can go about getting it.

But this means that you need to have the opportunity to do the things you want to do.

So we need to think about opportunity ...

Having the chance to do the things that you value - the things that make life worthwhile - is critical to recovery. Prejudice and discrimination can make it more difficult to do the things that others take for granted, but it does not make it impossible.

- Remember all those people who have made it with mental health problems.
- Remember that one in four people has mental health problems at some time in their life. So an awful lot of people out there understand more about these difficulties than they sometimes let on. Often they just don't talk about their problems for fear that others will think badly of them.
- Remember that all the people with mental health problems who live independently, work, study, raise children, create pictures, play football and even climb mountains help to break down prejudice by showing what it is possible to achieve.
- Remember that you have rights. The Disability Discrimination Act includes people with mental health problems. The Act makes it illegal for employers, educators or people providing any sort of services (libraries, shops, leisure centres or anything else) to discriminate against people with mental health problems. But it also goes further. It says that they must all make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate you. The adjustments people need differ but they might include working or studying part-time, not having to do parts of the job you find particularly difficult, having extra help and support, taking more regular breaks or having time off for appointments.

You might want to talk through with your mental health worker what you want to do and how you might get the help you need to do it.

The first thing that is important is working out how to hang on to the things you have already got (like your job, your friends, your college place). For example, it can be important to keep in touch with your friends and explain some of the problems you have been having. It

may be sensible to think about arranging to go back to things like work or college gradually and to decide what help you may need to do this.

You may also want to try new things - social and leisure activities, work, college, music, the arts, religious or political possibilities. Sometimes it can be difficult to think what you might like to do, so you may need to do some research. Talking to friends and relatives, reading local papers, contacting local Job Centres or colleges, going to libraries, using the Internet, looking through council directories can all provide you with some ideas about what your options might be.

Whether you are trying to go back to something you were already doing or starting something new, there are two things it might be helpful to think about:

- what sort of help and support you need and who you can get it from - some people get help from mental health workers, others get help from friends and relatives, or seek the support of particular agencies like Jobcentre Plus, or Connexions or go to all sorts of voluntary organisations.
- whether you are going to say anything about your mental health problems - and if so, who will you tell, what will you say, and when will you say it. It may be helpful to go through the pros and cons of different courses of action, or discuss the options with someone you trust.

A journey of discovery

Everyone's journey of recovery is unique. Each person must discover what assists them and what does not.

Some people find they no longer require help from mental health services. Others find intermittent or ongoing treatment and support are important. For some people, self-help groups play a vital role. Many people find work and education offer important possibilities, but others realise their talents in other ways through the arts, volunteering, politics, charitable endeavours, sports, raising children and grandchildren. Some people find that participating in their faith community gives them strength and hope. Many people find friendships and relationships to be key.

Rebuilding a satisfying and contributing life when you have experienced mental health problems is not always easy, but it really is possible. There will be ups and downs, set-backs along the way - times when you seem to falter, slide back and have to re-group and start again. Hanging on to hope, working out ways of taking back control, seeking opportunities to do things that you value and pursue your ambitions. These things are all important. But most of all, it is important to believe in your own possibilities.

Never lose sight of the fact that you are not alone. Many, many people experience mental health problems. And many, many people have shown us that it really is possible to live well and to make a valued contribution to our communities.

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