

Recovery from Mental Illness

Recovery from Mental Illness is Possible

Developing psychiatric problems can be scary. It used to be thought that recovery from serious psychiatric illness was rare. We now know that many people who have an initial episode of psychiatric illness will not have another one. Others will have recurrences but be relatively well in between and continue to be productive and have satisfying lives. Even individuals coping with the most severe forms of recurrent mental illness can work towards recovery and set meaningful goals for themselves and improve their quality of life. It is always possible for people to improve their situations. In other words, mental illness does not need to lead to a lifetime of disability. There is hope.

Definition of Recovery

The President's New Freedom Commission says that "Recovery refers to the process in which people are able to live, work, learn and participate fully in their communities. For some individuals, recovery is the ability to live a fulfilling and productive life despite a disability. For others, recovery implies the reduction or complete remission of symptoms. Science has shown that having hope plays an integral role in an individual's recovery." (P. 5, *Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America (Final report)*, Rockville, MD: President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (published July 22, 2003).

The US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration defines recovery as "A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential" (<http://www.samhsa.gov/>).

Both of these definitions highlight some core features of our current thinking about recovery from serious psychiatric illness. These include:

- There is hope.
- Individuals with psychiatric illnesses make the most progress when they take control of their lives and their recoveries.
- Recovery is a process, which takes time and effort.
- Even when people have symptoms, they can still have full lives. This is not unlike someone who has a bad back or asthma and has to live with episodic flare-ups but learn how to cope to manage it.

How Can Families Help With Recovery?

- Research shows that active family support can have a positive impact on the recovery process. Love, support and patience from family and friends are important elements in recovery.
- It is helpful for family members and friends to know that there can be a lot of ups and downs on the road to recovery. It is critical that family members remain hopeful and realize that symptoms can wax and wane over time. Every individual's personal goals and recovery journey will be different.
- Family members also need to recognize that they may also need to personally work on their own attitudes and beliefs as a means of responding to losses and difficulties that they may experience when their family member becomes ill.

Strategies For Recovery

*Strategies for recovery include the following:

- Setting and following through on personal goals. Developing a step by step recovery plan that includes important personal goals can be very helpful.
- Becoming involved in self-help programs such as support groups.
- Staying active during the day. Making a list of things to accomplish during the day as well as fun things is helpful.
- Developing a support system. It's better not to rely on a single person.
- Maintaining physical health. Eating well, exercising, and having regular check-ups is important.
- Being aware of the environment and how it affects the person with the illness. Some people may prefer quiet environments or prefer to decrease interactions with critical people.
- Making time for leisure and recreation
- Expressing creativity. It can be very satisfying to have a creative outlet such as writing, painting or music.
- Expressing spirituality. For some this may mean participating in an organized religion. For others, it may involve meditating or nature.
- Following through with treatment choices. Attending self-help and professional care regularly can help people develop healing relationships and healing skills and feel empowered to continue working towards recovery.

*Adapted from "Practitioner Guides and Handouts: Illness Management and Recovery." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Mental Health Services, HHS Publication No. SMA-09-4462, 2009)