

Recovery

for people experiencing mental illness

Many articles have been written about recovery, including some by people experiencing mental illness. These articles often provide research results, give a personal perspective or discuss the major elements of recovery.

This document boils down information from many different sources into key elements that may help you in your recovery. It is one of a series of publications compiling research on recovery. Two other documents are also available – one on how people working in mental health agencies can support recovery, and one about how organizations can promote recovery. References are provided on the back page so you can read the article where the information was taken from. Many of the articles referenced are available for free online or from your local library.

What we know about recovery goes beyond research to the personal lives and wisdom of people who have experienced mental illness and recovery. Your story is important and will also provide you with valuable insight. As Dr. Patricia Deegan wrote, “We can become experts in our own journey of recovery.”¹

What is recovery?

Research has shown that people with a mental illness can recover.² This may mean you don’t experience physical or emotional symptoms as much as you used to, or that they go away completely.³ It may also mean that your relationships improve, you live on your own or that you have a job.⁴ Recovery looks different for everyone.^{5,6,7,8} It means that having a mental illness doesn’t prevent you from having a full and meaningful life. “Recovery is described



Recovery
happens.

Be part of the change.

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hope

as a deeply personal, unique process of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills, and/or roles. It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful, and contributing life even with limitations caused by illness.”⁹

Have hope

Hope is a source of strength for you in your recovery.¹⁰ It means believing that you can feel better.¹¹ It also means recognizing the ups and downs of the recovery process and realizing that it takes time.^{12,13} While hope is something you need to have for yourself, you also need people in your life to be hopeful with you.¹⁴

“Slowly and gradually I found people who understood. I found friends and support people who could help me hold the hope when I was going through tough times... These people believed in my capacity to heal.”²²

Find support

Having relationships with people who support you, encourage you and care for you is very important to your recovery.^{15,16} This may be hard to do at first¹⁷—especially because having a mental illness may affect how social you are able to be.¹⁸ Many people with mental illness have found it helpful to talk with others experiencing the same things.^{19,20,21}

Manage symptoms and take care of yourself

Everybody has different symptoms. Other people with mental illness have found that understanding and managing symptoms was an important part of their recovery.^{23,24} For some people this may involve medication.²⁵ In one study of people with mental illness, 72% reported that medication was an important factor in their recovery.²⁶ In another study, participants reported that exercise and being involved in various activities helped to manage their symptoms.²⁷ There is strong evidence that exercise can greatly reduce symptoms of mental illness.^{28,29}

Discover meaning

Discover what is meaningful to you.^{30,31} For some people, this is an activity like paid work, volunteer work or a hobby.³² Some people have also found spirituality helpful in their recovery.^{33,34}

support

Define yourself beyond your illness³⁵

Understanding and accepting your illness is a large part of recovery.^{36,37} The key is to accept your illness as part of your life³⁸ – but remember that it is only part of a bigger picture.^{39,40} You are a whole person, with strengths and weaknesses. Your recovery involves all of you.⁴¹

“Our real work is to realize that we are not broken things that need to be fixed, but rather that we are called to become a new creation.”⁴²

Recognize that you have choices

You have choices in your treatment, in how you live your life and in who is involved in helping you.^{43,44,45} When given choices, ask for as much information as you need to make a decision.⁴⁶ Recognizing that you have choices is as important as the decisions you make.⁴⁷

choice

Take responsibility

You can be responsible for your recovery. This means that you can be in control of the decisions that impact your life.^{48,49} Sometimes these decisions work out for the best and sometimes they don't and that's okay.⁵⁰ You have the right to make your own decisions, even if other people do not agree with you.⁵¹

Get involved

Sharing what you have gone through can help other people and benefit you.^{52,53} Many people support their recovery by helping others who are experiencing mental illness or trauma.^{54,55}

Empower yourself

Recovery takes a tremendous amount of courage.⁵⁶ Often, the most difficult part is getting beyond the prejudice and discrimination that you have experienced and taken to heart.^{57,58,59}

Your path of recovery may include some of the factors discussed above – it will also be completely your own. The important thing is that you are part of it.

empowerment

Notes

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