

Mental Health Recovery

How it started, what it is, what it isn't and why it's important

How it started:

- As a concept, began following de-institutionalization and started as a movement to restore civil rights of former inpatients as a full and contributing member of society
- Introduced in the lay writings of consumers beginning in the 1980s
- Inspired by consumers who had themselves recovered to the extent that they were able to write about their experiences of coping with symptoms, getting better and gaining an identify
- Fueled by research in the late 80s and early 90s challenging the belief that severe mental illness is chronic and stability was the best possible outcome
- Provided additional fuel by the U.S. Surgeon General's report calling for a transformation of the mental health care system and advocating recovery and consumer involvement

What it is:

- A process, an outlook, a vision, a guiding principle
- Overarching message is that hope and restoration of a meaningful life are possible, despite serious mental illness
- Instead of focusing primarily on symptom relief, recovery casts a much wider spotlight on restoration of self-esteem, identify, and on attaining meaningful roles in society
- "A journey of healing and transformation enabling a person with a mental health problem to live a meaningful life in the community of his or her choice while striving to achieve his or her full potential" (National Consensus Statement on Mental Health Recovery, 2004)
- "Recovery is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful, and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness." (William Anthony, 1993)
- "Recovery is a process, a way of life, an attitude, and a way of approaching the day's challenges. It is not a perfectly linear process. At times our course is erratic and we falter, slide back, regroup and start again....The need is to meet the challenge of the disability and to reestablish a new and valued sense of integrity and purpose within and beyond the limits of the disability; the aspiration is to live, work, and love in a community in which one makes a significant contribution." (Deegan, 1988)

- Recovery involves viewing psychiatric disorders as only one aspect of a person who otherwise has assets, strengths, interests, aspirations, and the desire and ability to continue to be in control of his or her own life.

What it isn't and how it differs from other types of "recovery":

- Recovery is not a "cure" or an "end result" but a process or journey
- Recovery in addiction and in mental health are two distinct, but at times parallel and at times overlapping, paths
- Given the high rate at which addiction and mental illness co-occur, an individual may be involved in either, or both, of these paths at the same time
- Recovery from an addiction involves some degree of abstinence; it requires a change in the person's condition from being controlled by the addiction to the addiction being under at least some degree of the person's control. While vulnerability to relapse remains a core element of addiction recovery, a person who continues to use cannot be viewed as in recovery.
- Mental health recovery borrows from the disability rights movement in arguing that recovery remains possible even while a person's condition may not change. A person with paraplegia does not have to regain his or her mobility in order to have a satisfying life. Being in recovery similarly cannot require a cure or remission of one's psychiatric disorder or a return to a pre-existing state of health. Rather, it involves a redefinition of one's illness as only one aspect of a multi-dimensional person who is capable of identifying, choosing, and pursuing personally meaningful aspirations despite continuing to suffer the effects and side effects of the illness.

Why it is important:

- Consumers and families are energized by the message of hope and self-determination
- Shifts responsibility for deriving maximum benefit from health care providers to the consumer while continuing to utilize the professional's knowledge and skill set
- Fosters partnerships and collaborations between providers and consumers
- Encourages a system to think in terms of having "power with" or "creating power together" rather than having "power and control over" the people we work with
- A paternalistic system (opposite of recovery) often creates unnecessary dependency and learned helplessness