

SHORT GUIDE TO PERSONAL RECOVERY IN MENTAL HEALTH



[GET STARTED](#)

INTRODUCTION

In [‘A Short Guide to Psychiatric Diagnosis’](#), we explain how a diagnosis is made, its uses and limitations. The purpose is to help people who have personal contact with the mental health system – perhaps for the first time – understand what is being said and to encourage them to ask questions and initiate a discussion with professionals when they are unclear about or unhappy with what is being offered.

This ‘Guide to Personal Recovery in Mental Health’ follows on from [‘A Short Guide to Psychiatric Diagnosis’](#) and describes ways of thinking about, managing and overcoming mental ill health. These ideas have been developed by people with lived experience of mental ill health, and many people across the world have found them helpful.





Receiving a diagnosis for mental ill health can bring a sense of relief, but it can also be a lonely and stigmatising experience. It affects people's relationships, their sense of who they are, their self-confidence, sense of purpose and is often accompanied by loss of hope for the future.

RECOVERY IS ABOUT FINDING WAYS OF DEALING WITH THESE ISSUES AND LEADING A GOOD LIFE; ONE THAT IS DEFINED BY THE PERSON THEMSELVES, WITH OR WITHOUT WHAT PROFESSIONALS CALL SYMPTOMS.

Recovery is a personal experience – different for each individual, but it is also about relationships and learning from others. There is no magic formula. This paper has been co-produced by people with lived experience from Ireland, and in sharing their ideas, they are not being prescriptive but rather offering a starting point for others to start their own journey and make their own discoveries.

WHAT IS RECOVERY IN MENTAL HEALTH?

It is important to differentiate between personal recovery and recovery in the sense used by doctors – sometimes called clinical recovery.

Clinical recovery is a psychiatric term involving the alleviation of symptoms, restoration of social functioning and a return to what is considered “normal”.

Personal recovery, on the other hand, is an idea that has emerged from the expertise of people with lived experience of mental ill health. William Anthony (1993) described recovery 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 within the limitations caused by illness.’

FROM NOW ON, WHEN WE USE THE TERM RECOVERY, IT WILL BE IN THIS SENSE OF THE WORD RATHER THAN THE MEDICAL SENSE, THOUGH FOR ANY INDIVIDUAL PERSON THEY NEED NOT BE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE.

It is, however, important to note that not everyone in recovery will relate to the concept of mental ill health.

Recovery is for anyone who has experienced psychological distress, trauma, stigma or any other challenge to mental health and well-being. For some people, recovery will go hand-in-hand with successful methods they have found to overcome their mental ill health. That means that some people are able to live a more satisfying, meaningful and active life as the problems are resolved. For other people, however, recovery has a slightly different meaning. Despite still experiencing mental ill health, with support, they find ways of living lives that are full of hope, purpose, value, and joy. Personal recovery, therefore, means discovering meaning and purpose in life whether or not you are experiencing mental ill health.

Recovery is often described as a journey and with any journey, there is planning, preparation, roadmaps, signposts, pit stops and roadblocks. Recovery has also been likened to a process of discovery, wherein the individual discovers new strengths and insight of rediscovery, whereby the individual reclaims aspects of

themselves which they thought they had lost. Recovery is nurtured between people through healing and positive relationships. These can be supportive peers or professional relationships, family connections or close friendships.

What works well is people working together in partnership towards a common goal, sharing knowledge, expertise and learning from each other.



What are we recovering from?

Initially your focus may be on feeling better and understanding what has happened to you, the impact of which can be felt in every area of your life.

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Recovery may also involve gaining an understanding or dealing with:

STIGMA

Stigma (including self-stigma) and discrimination

MEDICATIONS

Taking new medications that may have side effects

DIAGNOSIS

The impact of a diagnosis which may drain hope and eclipse more positive identities

SERVICES

The effects of being offered services that may fail to see your uniqueness, strengths and potential and which may limit recovery to a medical understanding only

MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

A mental health system that is slow to adopt an approach of shared responsibility and positive risk taking



PRINCIPLES OF RECOVERY

A literature review by Leamy et al (2011) found five complementary processes that people said were instrumental to recovery. These are:



CONNECTEDNESS

This describes the sense of being positively connected to other people. This can occur through peer support or within the community. A sense of connectedness can also be fostered through positive healing relationships with health professionals.



HOPE

The importance of hope in recovery cannot be understated. There can be no change without the belief that a better life is both possible and achievable. This can often require a leap of faith and belief that recovery is possible.



IDENTITY

This refers to the maintenance or construction of a positive sense of self. It necessitates a rejection of stigma and stigmatising beliefs. It challenges us to see beyond the identity of service user.



MEANING

We all find meaning and purpose in different ways so this can be deeply personal. For some it may overlap with their sense of connectedness, for others it may relate to their faith. Many find it when they begin to feel recognised as a valued and valuable piece of our common tapestry.



EMPOWERMENT

This refers to one's belief in one's own capacity to take the wheel in recovery. Supporters can also empower us by emphasising choice, autonomy and strength. We can empower ourselves by fostering what is known as a growth mindset - the belief that abilities are developed through dedication and hard work. This mindset is associated with a love of learning, growth and resilience.

STARTING THE RECOVERY JOURNEY

All journeys begin with research and planning, and there is a great deal of information available in libraries and on the web. Some useful resources recommended by others on the journey are listed at the end. You may also find that there are groups of people in your country or even your locality who are already exploring and formulating what recovery means for them. However, it is one thing to read about something and quite another to take the plunge and do something. Try a few simple questions:

1. WHAT WOULD PERSONAL RECOVERY LOOK LIKE AND FEEL LIKE FOR ME?
2. WHO DO I TRUST ENOUGH TALK TO ABOUT THIS?
3. WHAT HAVE I FOUND HELPFUL IN THE PAST?
4. WHAT HAS NOT BEEN HELPFUL?
5. WHAT ONE THING COULD I ACTUALLY DO THAT WOULD MAKE MY LIFE A BIT BETTER?



Out of the answers to these questions might emerge the beginning of a plan for personal recovery and some ideas about finding a network of people who would be able and willing to share the journey and to support you.

How do I talk to others about what has happened?

First ask yourself “what do I need or want to tell others about what has happened to me?” This is a personal choice.

Make sure you are comfortable with your own story before telling it to others. Writing down your personal story is a good way to begin, before telling it to another person. You must choose when to share your story, what to share and with whom. Practise this with a person you trust and until you are comfortable with. Listening to recovery stories and experiences may help you in telling your story.

Will I get better ?

People do get better and do recover. We are all different and experience our mental health challenges in an individual way. What does “better” mean to you? Better means different things to different people. It could be, no longer having a diagnosis, no longer experiencing the challenges associated with your mental health or it could be feeling better living with mental health challenges.

How long does it take to recover ?

There is no defined time and everyone's recovery journey is individual and personal. It is a journey and not a destination. Like life, recovery is not a straight path. Setbacks can and do happen. What's important is that you stay focused, believe in yourself and work together with your family, friends, supporters and care providers to help you on the way.

Who is involved in recovery?

Recovery is everyone's business, but it is unique to each individual, family, group and mental health service. A common part of recovery is the presence of people who believe in your potential to recover. These are people who are there for you and understand you. It will be helpful to have more than one source of support as everyone has lots of different needs.



As a family member, professional, or supporter, what can I do?

The person you are supporting may be going through a unique process where old attitudes, meanings, goals, skills and roles are changing. This is an important journey for them. This change can be challenging for family and supporters. It is important to try to create room for these changes. This may mean you need to make some adjustments too. It can be easy to yearn for the 'way things were' but try to avoid asking that of the person you are supporting. This can be very difficult and painful for the person you care about as they are re-building a life that may look a little different.



This may be an area you need external support with. Try to remember that you too are on a journey of recovery with the person you care for. It may not be exactly the path you envisioned or expected but recovery is possible for both of you. Do your own research. Maybe there are others near you in the same position. Most importantly, look after yourself.





EDUCATE YOURSELF

Educate yourself on mental health, recovery, recovery colleges, peer educators, treatments and self-care. Look up the resources at the end of this guide.



KEEP LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN

Keep lines of communication open with the person you are supporting even when that is difficult. Many family members and carers are afraid to say the wrong thing. The person who means so much to you is still there.



ASK PERMISSION

Ask permission from the person you are supporting to speak with key workers and other mental health professionals if you are worried about them.



SEEK OUT A FAMILY PEER SUPPORT WORKER

This is a family member or carer with lived experience of supporting an individual who has had mental ill health. They can provide you with information, emotional support and practical tips on navigating services.



TAKE BREAKS

Take breaks when you can and try to do so without feeling guilty. It is not selfish to do this. It is essential.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Here are some ideas about where to begin your research and planning.

This first group of suggestions are accounts of recovery by people who identify as users and/or survivors of mental health services. Where full texts or videos are available for free online a link has been provided. Otherwise try a library:

- Watts M & Higgins A 2017 Narratives of Recovery from Mental Illness The role of peer support Routledge Press Oxford and New York
- Coleman R (2004) Recovery: an Alien Concept P&P Press Fife
- Deegan P (1995) [Coping with Recovery as a Journey of the Heart](#)
- [Planting a Tree](#), Wilma Boevink (in Dutch with English subtitles)

The next group are from people, networks and organisations who offer support and resources based in different countries:

- Advancing Recovery in Ireland. Health Service Executive (2017) [A national framework for recovery in mental health: A national framework for mental health service providers to support the delivery of a quality, person centred service](#)
- Mental Health Recovery (2018) [WRAP: Wellness recovery action plan: Renewing your wellness your way](#)
- Scottish Recovery Network (2019) [Resources](#)
- Visit the “[Recovery Research Network](#)” with 875 members from 35 countries
- Visit [Mary O’Hagan web site](#), ex-user of psychiatry and former Mental Health Commissioner in New Zealand and consultant

- See the “[Destination Recovery](#)” programme from the Mental Health Advocacy Coalition of New Zealand
- Guía de Derechos en Salud Mental. [No hay recuperación sin derechos](#).
- Web page explaining recovery with Spanish translated Sainsbury Center [documents on recovery](#)
- Web page with [documents on personal recovery](#)
- Web page with [documentation directed to empowerment](#)
- <https://asylummagazine.org/2018/09/recovery-in-the-bin-20-key-principles/>
- Mental Health “Recovery” Study Working Group (2009). [Mental Health “Recovery”: Users and Refusers](#), Toronto, Wellesley Institute
- Costa, L., Voronka, J., Landry, D., Reid, J., Mcfarlane, B., Reville, D., Church, K. (2012). [“Recovering our Stories”: A Small Act of Resistance](#), *Studies in Social Justice*, Toronto, Vol. 6, n° 1, 85-101.

Finally not everyone with lived experience is uncritical of the “colonisation” of the term ‘recovery’ by mainstream mental health services – seeing it as a repackaging of old ways of social control, disempowerment and abuse of human rights:

**WE HOPE THAT THIS
SHORT GUIDE PROVIDES
YOU WITH INFORMATION
TO START YOU ON YOUR
RECOVERY JOURNEY.**

ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE (MHE)

With 70+ organisations in 30 countries, MHE is the largest independent network working to advocate for positive mental health and wellbeing and to protect the rights of people with mental ill-health. We continuously champion social inclusion, deinstitutionalisation and respect for the human rights of people with psychosocial disabilities. We raise awareness to end mental health stigma throughout Europe.

For more information, please see:



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