

RECOVERY

from Serious Mental Illnesses

What is recovery?

Many people using the health care system are in the process of recovery: for some it's healing from surgery to walk without pain and return to work; for some it's getting past the effects of chronic asthma and being able to join in activities again; for some it's beating cancer and watching a son or daughter graduate from high school.

For roughly 8 million Americans who live with a serious mental illness* and their families, recovery means living life to its fullest, having relationships, being part of a community, holding down a job, going to school. Recovery means living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life, with or without the limitations of a psychiatric disability.¹

Is recovery possible?

While the way in which recovery happens may be different for each person depending on the nature of the issues he or she is struggling with, research on advances in mental health demonstrate that recovery from serious mental illnesses (for example, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and others) is a real possibility.

In the past, people with serious mental illnesses often were told they would probably get worse over time and lose much of what was important to them, such as their jobs and friends. Contrary to this myth, people with psychiatric disabilities can recover. For example, data from around the world show that more than 50% of those struggling with schizophrenia over several decades, significantly improve or even recover.²

People living with a serious mental illness work as managers, professionals or anything they have an interest and talent for.³ They go back to high school, college or other types of education.⁴

* A serious mental illness is a mental, behavioral, or emotional difficulty that lasts 2 years or longer and limits a person's capacity to function in important roles such as worker, student, family member or community resident.

What is recovery like for someone living with a serious psychiatric disability?

Recovery from a mental illness involves more than recovery from the illness itself. People with mental illness may have to recover from the discrimination they have incorporated into their very being, from lack of recent opportunities for self-determination, from the negative side effects of unemployment, and from crushed dreams.⁵

The recovery journey often happens in phases. At first, the person may be in shock, denying that anything has changed or happened. The person may go through grief, despair and depression, as the meaning of his or her situation sinks in. Over time this often gives way to periods of anger and then acceptance. Finally, hope, coping and a sense of empowerment develop as the individual's recovery strengthens.⁶

In recovery, people reclaim their sense of self, their connectedness to others, their power over their own lives, the roles they value, their hope for themselves.⁷

Recovery for people living with a serious mental illness is a journey that involves a network of supports. These supports may include self-help groups, families, and friends. They may also include the use of medications and supportive therapy along with rehabilitation to develop needed skills and supports.

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Resources

Part of recovery includes increasing knowledge and control. Here are some organizations that can provide more facts about the topics discussed and/or connections to local resources.

- Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, www.bu.edu/cpr
- NAMI: National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 800-950-NAMI (6264), www.nami.org
- National Empowerment Center, 800-POWER2U or 800-769-3728, www.power2u.org
- The National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse, 800-553-4539, www.mhselfhelp.org
- National Mental Health Association, 800-969-NMHA (6642), www.nmha.org

¹ Spaniol, L., Koehler, M., & Hutchinson, D. (1994). *Recovery workbook: Practical coping and empowerment strategies for people with psychiatric disability*. Boston: Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University.

² Davidson, L., Harding, C., & Spaniol, L., (Eds.). (2005). *Recovery from severe mental illness: Research evidence and implications for practice*. Boston: Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University.

³ Russinova, Z. (2005). People with schizophrenia employed as professionals and managers: Initial evidence and exploration. *Schizophrenia Research*, 76, 123-125.

⁴ Mowbray, C., Brown, K.S., Sullivan-Soydan, A., & Furlong-Norman, K. (2002). *Supported education and psychiatric rehabilitation: Models and methods*. Baltimore: MD, The International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services.

^{5, 7} Anthony, W. A., Cohen, M. R., Farkas, M. D. & Gagne, C. (2002). *Psychiatric Rehabilitation*. Boston: Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University.

⁶ Spaniol, L., Wewiorski, N. J., Gagne, C., & Anthony, W. A. (2002b). The process of recovery from schizophrenia. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 14(4), 327-336.



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