

What You Need to Know...



Making the Journey of Recovery

“The journey of recovery is through choice and action.”

— Andrea Hercha-Schmook, recovered from paranoid schizophrenia, schizoid affective disorder, and manic depression, Anchorage, Alaska.

The journey of recovery is not always simple. It varies from person to person and presents many challenges. But there is more reason than ever to choose it. While everyone must find his or her own way, here are some good suggestions on how to get started.

Arrange for treatment, counseling and support

You’ll want to find a doctor, mental health professional or peer counselor who you can relate to and who can relate to you. Although easier said than done, this is where your primary care physician, caseworker, family, faith community and local mental health organizations can be a big help. Some (but not enough) communities have programs to assist you in your recovery from mental illness. Besides arranging for treatment, they can help you locate educational, employment, housing, transportation and social opportunities.

The recovery plan you develop with your doctor may include therapy and medications. Whether you need to take medication, how long you need to take it and how well you respond to it depend on many things, including the particular type of illness you have.

What does recovery mean?

Recovery is all about getting a life again.

In the past, mental illness often meant a lifetime of pain, but now recovery is possible and has become almost commonplace. Many years of research into mental health and illness have improved our understanding of mental disorders and the treatments and services that aid in recovery. More and more people are getting educated about these illnesses, seeking treatment and getting well. We now see these people achieving the same things in life as everyone else: a good home, fulfilling work, increased opportunities to learn and grow and loving relationships. Many of them are talking about it, sharing their experiences to reduce stigma and paving the way for others to pursue their own recovery.

Recovery starts with small steps as you rebuild your hope and confidence. Moving from feeling powerless to feeling in charge of your life takes time. But as you progress, you’ll be able to set and reach your goals. Then, anything becomes possible.

Reach out to others for support

Accept all the help you can get from supportive friends and family if you’re feeling overwhelmed by your thoughts or problems in your life. You are not alone. You don’t need to suffer in silence or go through these times by yourself. When you reach out, you’ll be surprised how willing some people are to support you in seeking help and getting better. Other people who are dealing with or who have recovered from mental illnesses can give you especially meaningful guidance.

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Get educated about your illness

Educating yourself about your illness and available treatments is one of the most important steps you'll ever take. It will make you a responsible and active participant in your treatment and recovery. There's lots of information out there. Use all your resources to find it. That might include your doctors, the library, the Internet and local mental health groups, just to name a few.

Take good care of yourself

You are responsible for you. So don't forget to take care of yourself. Everyone feels better when they eat right and get enough sleep and exercise. Self-care includes keeping your medical appointments, dressing neatly, doing things you enjoy and surrounding yourself with positive, loving people. For many people, participating in faith-based activities gives them the strength and hope to keep working toward recovery.

Staying positive and hopeful is also an important part of recovery. It can be hard at times to deal with the symptoms of your illness. But, don't give up until you find the right mix of treatments, supports and services that work well for you. Finding others who believe in you will also help you along.

Set goals for your future

Setting goals for your treatment and life will help you move forward in your recovery. For some people, "remission," or the complete elimination of symptoms, is a real possibility. For others, learning to manage their illnesses and lessening the impact of their symptoms are positive targets to aim for.

As you start to gain control over your illness, also try to set goals for your life. These goals may include taking a class or returning to school full-time; getting a paying job; and living in your own apartment or sharing a place. Community organizations and peer counselors can help to show you how. Use every opportunity to ask about training and job opportunities. While discrimination against people with mental illness remains a barrier to employment in many workplaces, many other businesses have training and employment opportunities designed especially for those recovering from mental illness. In fact, people who have recovered say that meaningful work, including volunteer jobs, is one of the biggest aids to their getting and staying well.

YOUR recovery

All of us are unique. What works for one person may not work for another. But one thing is true for everyone: The more you know about your illness and treatment choices, the more ready you'll be to make the decisions that are right for you. You can control your illness and your life. With the help of friends, family, health professionals and support groups, you can recovery.

Recovery opens the door to the rest of your life! It's up to you to get started on your journey of recovery. Your future is waiting.

For more information, call Mental Health America of Wisconsin at (414) 276-3122, or visit our web site at www.mhawisconsin.org.

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Words of hope from real people

“In 1989, I first started hearing voices, which led to several hospitalizations. A year later, I lost everything and was living in a board-and-care group home. The facility closed and my guardian moved me into a hotel. I obeyed my voices and left all my belongings and moved into the streets. I lived on the streets from 1990 – 1991. The shelter wouldn’t have me because I would talk all the time.

During one of my attempts to get in the public hospital, I connected with a man who ran a board-and-care facility. I stayed there long enough from my guardian to come and get me. He placed me in a hospital where they gave me medication that worked. I became involved with a consumer-run project that gives people with serious mental illnesses a chance to be active participants in their communities. I have been better every since, and I am on a mission to make life better for other consumers.”

— Bill Compton is now program director at Project Return: The Next Step, Los Angeles, California.

“I became clinically depressed during my sophomore year in college. My parents divorced, and there were a lot of changes in my life. I thought I was handling it all well, because I have always been strong and independent, but I began to notice gradual changes in myself. I was becoming tired all the time, irritable and more stressed. I lost my motivation to participate in activities that interested me before. I wasn’t hungry, my stomach hurt and I cried easily. I became alarmed. ‘What is happening to me? Is this how I’m going to be forever?’ Fortunately, I shared my concern with a friend, who looked at me, smiled and said, ‘That sounds a lot like what happened to me.’ She shared her story of depression and gave me information on how to get better.”

— Leah Darby represented Kansas in the 1999 Miss America Pageant. She travels the country speaking out about depression and mental illness.

“We all want and need to feel loved and to feel like we belong in society. We need safety, and we need reasons for living. When our hopes and dreams in life become disrupted, we suffer. Recovery from mental illness is not easy – it’s about finding what works best in helping us regain a meaningful role in society, rebuilding supportive relationships and returning to productive and fulfilling lives.”

— Brian Cooper is a mental health advocate in recovery in Alexandria, Virginia.

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