

Family to Family



Telling It Like It Is Families and Recovery

Stories and Wisdom from Families when
a Parent has a Mental Illness

One of a series of five booklets

This booklet is part of a series of 5 booklets called, “Telling It Like It Is”. Booklets in the series include:

- 📖 Our Stories
- 📖 Working Things Out as a Family
- 📖 Families and Recovery
- 📖 Children and Parenting
- 📖 Going to Hospital

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Who is in your family?

In these booklets family refers to those people who support each other to help children thrive and grow. Children, mums, dads, grandfathers, aunties, grandmothers, step-mums, sisters, step-dads, uncles, brothers, best friends, partners, cousins, neighbours.

How to use this booklet

Families

This booklet is the result of other families reflecting on the things they would have liked to know about or understand earlier in their journey. There is a lot of information in here and we hope it is arranged so you can choose the parts that interest you most. Some people may read it from cover to cover; others may read little bits from time to time. We hope it will help you talk together as a family about the issues that you are facing and the ways you can support each other. Information is included about when and where to seek help. Not all services providers understand all of the issues you may face so take this booklet along with you to share with them.

Children

This booklet is not designed for children. It is designed to help parents understand what might be happening for children and has ideas about ways to support them. Teenagers might like to read these booklets by themselves or with another family member or friend so you can talk about it together. It could provide an opportunity to have the conversations you have not quite got around to. Remember to ask for help if you need it.

Workers

When this booklet was first put together it was offered to some workers with a mental health background to read. What they told us was that the booklet helped them to understand the issues families face when a member experienced a mental health concern. They thought it would be useful to take with them to provide information and have discussions with family members to explore how the issues affected them. They also thought it would be helpful for group discussions.

Introduction

“I look for the path more than the destination; it reveals itself along the way. The path reveals my destination in a way I never could. I used to fight this process, now I see where it takes me. The process becomes an ingredient, a building block. The process becomes the destination.”

Margaret

Recovery is a concept that has been around for a long time in many societies.

This booklet has been written by a group of consumers and carers, family members and mental health and family workers who support the principles of recovery and believe that people can choose to live a life of recovery.

What is Recovery?

The word “Recovery” in mental health means the process of learning to live with and beyond the difficulties that mental illness brings. For a long time, experts in the field thought that someone with a mental illness was sick for life. We now know this is far from true, and that there are many paths that take us from mental turmoil to health and wholeness.

Recovery has been described 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 the illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one’s life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness.”¹

Some of the things that people have found important in their

¹ Anthony, WA (1993). ‘Recovery from mental illness: The guiding vision of the mental health service system in the 1990’s’ in *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal*, Vol 16, No 4, 11-23.

recovery from mental illness are²:

- ④ having hope
- ④ having knowledge about mental illness, recovery concepts, treatment options
- ④ use of medication and getting good clinical care
- ④ being empowered – feeling in control of your life and taking responsibility for decisions in your life
- ④ being in touch with own spirituality
- ④ being surrounded by people who are supportive and respectful of the recovery journey – friends, family, professionals
- ④ participating in activities that are meaningful to the individual – parenting, work, education, art, volunteering, sport etc.

Recovery is a journey that anyone can travel, with or without medication or professional intervention. Recovery doesn't necessarily mean a person will no longer have symptoms of mental illness; they will never have struggles, never use the mental health system again, take medication or require other support³. What recovery can mean is having control over decisions in one's life, understanding and accepting the mental illness, having a forward thinking approach to life, being proactive in doing things to stay well, having hope and enjoying life⁴. A support network is crucial in recovery, that is, having people around you who believe in you and your potential to recover. But first of all, you must make the choice yourself that you want to live a life of recovery.

Recovery not only occurs for the person with the illness but everyone else in the family too. The family as a whole will have a recovery journey of its own too as relationships are rebuilt and people make meaning of the experience of mental illness.

²Based on information from www.mhrecovery.com/definition.htm (Accessed 1/5/07)

³ Adapted from Timaru Psychiatric Services 2005, 'Key Worker Training Manual for Providers of Mental Health Services – Building on Strengths'

⁴ Adapted from Timaru Psychiatric Services 2005, 'Key Worker Training Manual for Providers of Mental Health Services – Building on Strengths'

“What stops us from taking the power back? We are responsible for our own treatment as well; we can’t just sit back and let the treatment happen. We tend to make a lot of excuses for not doing things....and there’s the fear about doing something for yourself in case it doesn’t work out. You might have a relapse, but you’re going to pick yourself back up again.”

Pia

What does choosing a life of recovery mean?

The recovery journey looks different for everyone. Some people choose to take the time to go on a journey of self discovery, work through some past issues and learn new ways of thinking about or dealing with emotions, thoughts or situations. Other people work towards ‘getting back into life’ by studying, taking up new interests or returning to old ones, learning new skills, re-entering the workforce, getting fitter or leading a healthier lifestyle. The important thing is that people are reclaiming their life and taking the direction they want.

Some things that can help on the Recovery Journey

- ④ Have conversations with people who lead a life of recovery.
- ④ Find a friend or support service that can help you make the first steps.
- ④ Look after your physical wellbeing – sleeping, eating, exercising.
- ④ Read peoples’ recovery stories in books and on the net.
- ④ Do a WRAP course (Wellness Recovery Action Plan).
- ④ Talk with your family about recovery and give them information so that they can support you throughout your journey.
- ④ Enrol in personal development courses that teach skills such as building self esteem, communication, assertiveness and advocating for yourself.
- ④ Practice all the new skills and build confidence in your abilities.
- ④ Set simple and achievable goals and make plans.

“Art is one of the most healing and healthy activities life has to offer. This can also be true of certain crafts, music, writing, and drama. “

Arthur

Spirituality

For many people, spirituality has been important in their recovery. Spirituality doesn't always mean having a religion or praying to a God – it means the way that we find hope in the dark times, and faith in ourselves and others, despite all the suffering in the world.

“It can be about safe spaces to bear the unbearable - church, meditation groups, art classes, massage, reiki. Spaces which nurture and ask nothing of you, yet provide a place to hear and feel yourself can help the healing journey. Church can be a place to shed anonymous tears.”

Carol

For some people, spending time out in the bush, meditating, walking on the beach, listening to beautiful music, playing with their children, practicing yoga, reading inspirational books, or lighting candles around the house can be spiritual activities that help them to feel centred, in touch with themselves and relaxed.

“Spirituality has importance in everyone's life. However, over commitment to spirituality can sometimes lead to a lack of commitment to life and survival. An example would be if the person does not see they need to work on recovery but rather just put all their faith into a greater force. As the old saying is “God helps those who help themselves”.

Andy

Family Recovery

“It doesn’t matter what wars are inside you, it is your choice to choose who you want to be in life.”

Jamie (14 years old)

Mental illness affects everyone in the family and so there needs to be time for everyone to heal and learn how to move forward again, individually and as a family. However, a family can only start their recovery journey once the person living with the mental illness begins their individual life of recovery. Everyone needs to be on the same page, working towards a common goal and supporting each other in the process; if this is not happening then it might feel like everyone is hitting up against a brick wall.

One of the first steps in family recovery is for everyone to understand what is happening. This may mean learning about mental illness – reading books and websites, talking to people who have experienced it themselves, talking with workers or connecting with organisations who support people and families affected by mental illness. This is called psycho-education and there is a lot of material available that can be useful to people living with the illness, their family and friends, and their children. However, mental illness is a unique experience for everyone involved and it is helpful to talk to each other about what it is like for each person in the family. In particular, if the person with the illness is able to describe their symptoms and how they make him/her feel, the rest of the family may gain some insight into why the person behaves a certain way when they are unwell.

For a family living a life of recovery, it is important that everyone is working together to move forward. After all, the greatest support network can be each other and there are many strengths within every family that can be drawn upon. Each person in the family has something to offer such as good listening skills, a grounded perspective, humour, giving good hugs, or willingness to forgive.

What can I do?

So this ‘recovery journey’ can look good on paper, but we all question what we can do to make it happen. Each of us has a different role that we can play. There are many ways you can support the person with the mental illness on their recovery journey.

What Families can do that helps Recovery	What Families sometimes do that hinder Recovery
Listen to and support the person.	Avoid the person.
Treat the person as a human being who happens to experience mental illness.	See the person as a ‘diagnosis’.
Accept mental health issues and believe the person can recover. Hold hope.	Stay in feelings of hopelessness and despair.
Foster interdependence within the family.	Foster dependence and helplessness due to over-responsibility and involvement.
Give the person choices and ‘let go’ - it is his/her journey.	Control the person’s decisions.
Build on strengths.	Focus on problems.
Support risk-taking and freedom to fail.	Be over-protective due to fear and guilt.
Have crisis and other recovery focussed plans in place in the event the person becomes unwell.	Coerce and force treatment.
Take care of yourself.	Let mental health issues consume your life.

(Adapted from www.familymentalhealthrecovery.org)

⁵ K. Baker and P. McGowan, ‘Mental Health Recovery: What is the Role of Families?’. Presentation given on 18 March 2006. Retrieved 29/5/07 from www.familymentalhealthrecovery.org

What Children Can Do

Children can also support their parent's recovery journey. Often they are the inspiration for parents to keep going through the hard times. Depending on the age of the child they may be able to do things, such as:

- give their mum/dad a hug before going to bed each night
- make a cup of tea / coffee in the morning
- draw them pictures
- suggest family activities, outings, walks

Older children can:

- find out about their mum or dad's mental illness. Ask them about how it affects them. Ask them what things they need help with or how they can help or what things they like.
- learn to recognise the signs.
- have a plan for what to do when certain things happen
 - go to friend's house....
 - listen to music or go for a walk.
 - maintain your focus on living and enjoying your own life.

What Children Can't Do

- Be totally responsible for parent's welfare.
- Make your parent behave in a certain way; for example, force them to take their medication.
- Solve all their parent's problems or feel they ought to.
- Lessen the impact of the illness by pretending that it is not there.

Challenges in Recovery

Sometimes there are challenges to individual and family recovery. Some things to look out for are:

- ④ Getting stuck in a rut of being sick or caring for someone who is sick and finding it hard to visualise what a life of recovery would look like for yourself or your family. This is not to say that the effects of mental illness can not be extremely disabling at times and that people need extra support. What it is saying is that sometimes it is easy to lose hope or direction for the future and that you may have to work hard to retain that.
- ④ Getting back the relationship before mental illness came into the picture. What did you used to talk about and do together? Sometimes mental illness seems to take all our energy and thoughts and it is easy to forget that you all like mountain biking or swimming at the beach and that you used to like watching movies together. Try and make time to do these things again.

“Laughter is a great healer and praying together can bond family members more closely.”

Arthur

- ④ Mental illness can sometimes put a lot of pressure on family relationships; there may be a breakdown in trust, a sense of letting each other down or feelings such as guilt, anger and grief. It takes time to rebuild relationships when there has been so much hurt and it involves spending time together, talking about what has been happening as well as supporting each other to seek help outside of the family if needed. This may include talking to extended family members, close friends or a counsellor.
- ④ There may be differing ideas about the way forward. For example, each person in the family may have an opinion about how the mental illness needs to be treated; medication, counselling or hospital or a combination of them all. This

Making Plans

Part of the recovery process is understanding your own feelings, behaviours and body so that you can pick up when things aren't quite right or when you may be becoming unwell. Having plans in place for the times when things aren't going well can help slow down a situation and avoid crisis. A program called Wellness Recovery Action Plans (WRAP) was designed by a woman living with mental illness in which she has created a framework for thinking about wellness and what to do when things aren't going well. Check out her website www.mentalhealthrecovery.com for some more information. WRAP courses are run in Perth too – find out more by phoning Ruah Community Services on 9227 7012.

The WRAP principles can be adapted for families too; by recognising when things aren't working, having crisis plans in place and knowing how to look after yourselves.

Having a Support Network

Support networks are the people who look out for you, stick by you during the hard times, celebrate the good times, and help out when needed. They may be people such as your family, friends, and neighbours. Different people have different roles, you may call on your best friend to drive you to an important appointment but you may talk to your mum about how you are feeling. Some families also count their support worker, GP, or the mental health nurse as part of their more formal support network.

Talking About It

“Talking about it is great.....I have learnt the hard way to discuss mental illness in the appropriate place at the appropriate time.”

Anon

Sometimes people in families where there is a parent living with a mental illness find it hard to talk about their experience with friends or extended family because they feel like nobody understands or they feel embarrassed or that people will be judgemental. This is called stigma. It is partly the way we see ourselves and partly the way we think other people see us. It comes about because of the poor level of understanding in our communities about mental health and mental illness, mixed up with some very old ideas about psychiatric hospitals and straight jackets! Many people have stories to tell about being treated 'differently' or with less respect for their views and opinions once they disclosed that they experience mental illness. Either way it is not sensible to place ourselves in a vulnerable position if we're not sure that it is emotionally safe to do so. It's also very difficult to discuss a mental illness, the signs and symptoms, how we manage them and our recovery journey with others if we're not able to explain it all to ourselves and our partners.

“Stigma sorts out real friends from “associates”.

Tony

Linking up with other families with similar issues can be one way of building up your support network and sharing ideas for the recovery journey. Start with finding out what your local mental health and carer organisations have to offer as they often run support groups in local areas. Community Centres, Women's Health Services and local Neighbourhood Houses also facilitate courses and groups. If there is not much available in your area, consider setting up your own group; talk to people you already know and any services that may be supportive.

It often takes a while to make sense of how the illness has affected everyone in the family. It is helpful to share stories with others so we begin to develop a picture, not only of what is 'normal' under these circumstances but also of what is 'helpful' to our recovery journey. Sometimes we might find ourselves tempted to blame everything that goes 'wrong' in the family on the presence of a mental illness or the person experiencing the

illness. Talking together and sharing with others helps us to keep that in perspective too. For example, your 6 year old getting into trouble at school may have nothing to do with parental mental illness or it may be somehow related. We need some practice in sifting things through and problem solving together as a family to work some of things out.

“I found I also felt ashamed about the things I could not do after developing a mental illness. I have since learnt that there are a lot of other opportunities that have presented themselves that I had not contemplated.”

Anon

“Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.”

Recovering my identity was the first part of the recovery processes. Years of living in a family impacted by the trauma of intergenerational mental illness robs one of one's identity. When you have no identity you have nothing to recover. You have no awareness; you do not know what is happening or how you feel. So first of all you have to go on a bear hunt to find out who you are.

The perceived opinions of others, their values and attitudes about mental illness can have profound and harmful effect on one's recovery. Don't try to meet other people's expectations of you, and what they believe in. “I should be doing this”, in the hopes that this will make others feel better about you because you have a mental illness.

Recovery is Self-Worth, Self-Acceptance Personal-Acceptance.

All family members are impacted by these issues, which then impact on family recovery. It is experiences like these, that unless they are worked through and talked about as a family can erode and hinder family recovery and can even cause family breakdown.

Some of the most challenging issues in recovery are sometimes not considered as important, for example, being able to cook a meal or an absence of symptoms. However there are other more insidious and very corrosive barriers emphasising difference. These are stigma, discrimination, and social poverty. Socially constructed barriers imposed on people and their families who live with mental illness by society and institutions often hinder recovery for families. Social poverty in the form of the lack of mental health services to assist you and your family to recover from mental illness and of course there are personal barriers. “

Margaret

In Conclusion.....

Recovery can mean different things to different people. It is a journey that can lead to new experiences and opportunities. It is something that can not be undertaken in isolation, and support networks are important. For many people, the greatest supports are their family, their partner, parents, siblings, children, extended family and close friends.

We know from our experience that the path the recovery journey takes is meandering and sometimes there are obstacles in the way. However, we also know that the path takes us forward and that we learn things on our way that help us and our families.

Good luck on your recovery journey

Recovery Information and Resources

National Empowerment Centre Inc	www.power2u.org
Mental Health Recovery	www.mhrecovery.com
Family Outreach and Response Program	www.familymentalhealthrecovery.org
Wellness Recovery Action Plans (WRAP)	www.mentalhealthrecovery.com
Auseinet Recovery Toolkit	http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/toolkit/index.php

For Children & Young People

Coping You Are Not Alone	http://www.mhasp.org/coping
Young Carers	http://www.youngcarers.net.au

Action to Take in Your Own or Your Family's Recovery

Need Information and Assistance?

Start with your GP. They can be a great source of information and are able to link in with some specialist counselling and other services through Medicare.

Hospitals, Community Health Centres, Mental Health Clinics, Centrelink and the Education Department all have social workers or psychologists who can provide information and support or advise you about appropriate services.

In An Emergency (24 hr)

Mental Health Emergency Response Line	1300 555 788
Peel/Mandurah	1800 676 822
Country WA (Rural Link)	1800 552 002
Crisis Care	9223 1111
	1800 199 008

Need Support?

Women's Information Service	6217 8230 1800 199 174
ARAFMI Mental Health Carers & Friends Association Incorporated	www.arafmi.asn.au 9427 7100/1800 811 747
Carers WA	1300 227 377 www.carerswa.asn.au www.youngcarers.net.au
Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre	1800 052 052
Wanslea Family Services	9245 2441 www.wanslea.asn.au
Women's Health Care House	922 8122 www.whs.org.au
Clan Indigo Project	9498 2829 www.clanwa.com.au
Youth Focus	9361 4222 www.youthfocus.com.au
Yorgum Aboriginal Family Counselling Service	9218 9477 www.yorgum.org.au

Someone To Talk To? (24 hr Help Lines)

Carer Counselling Line	1800 007 332
Family Help Line	1800 643 000
Kids Help Line	1800 551 800 www.kidshelp.com.au
Mens Line	1300 789 978 www.menslineaus.org.au
Parenting Line	1800 654 432

Want Some More Information?

Children of Parents with Mental Illness Resource Centre	www.copmi.net.au
Office of Mental Health	www.mental.health.wa.gov.au 9222 4099
SANE	www.sane.org.au 1800 187 263
Seniors Telephone Information Service	1800 671 233

Not Getting What You Need?

Health Consumers Council	9221 3422 1800 620 780
Mental Health Law Centre	3928 8266 1800 620 285
Office of Chief Psychiatrist www.chiefpsychiatrist.health.wa.gov.au/publications/index.cfm	9222 4462
Council of Official Visitors	9226 3266 1800 999 057

Family to Family

Raising a family is both a joy and a struggle at the best of times. Having a mental illness in the family adds pressure.

The Family to Family booklets arises from a group of family members reflecting on their journey when a parent experiences a mental illness. They have found that services usually offer support to only a 'part' of the family: Consumers, Carers or Children. A Family To Family Reference Group that included the whole family was created and from that this series of booklets evolved.

The Family to Family Reference Group believes that their families would have managed better, learnt from each other, and found better ways of supporting each other if they had an opportunity to spend time with each other exploring how everyone is affected by the presence of a mental illness.

This series of booklets have been written as a partnership between these families and organisations:



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The information and advice provided is made available in good faith and derived from sources believed to be reliable and accurate at the time of printing.