

The Emperor's New Clothes?

by Tanya Kennard-Campbell

What is Recovery?

Recovery is a troublesome word to define as it means different things to different people in different contexts.

But for the purpose of this workbook we will refer to the perspectives of Recovery as an outcome and Recovery as a process.

Recovery as an outcome (outside – in)

These perspectives have been called 'Clinical Recovery' or 'Recovery from' and refer to the process of symptom resolution, absence or even cure, a movement from A to B.

This is often a person's first impression when they hear this word used in the context of mental health services. The dominant belief is that there are mental illnesses just like there are physical illnesses and disorders, and Recovery in this sense means a resolution of the disorder marked by symptom elimination.

Clinical Recovery remains an important perspective and goal as advancements are made in discovering physiological and nutritional implications that promise to offer benefits for health.

Numerous longitudinal studies have supported the Recovery movement by providing evidence that clinical Recovery is not only possible but highly probable from the most debilitating symptoms. This evidence has inspired hope in many.

Many mental health professionals remain uncomfortable with the word Recovery, as they believe it may be giving false hope to an unpredictable process, and members of the public are surprised by the word in relation to mental illness due to the common myth that there is no

cure for mental illness.

I recently asked someone who had no personal experience of the world of Mental Health or Mental Health services what Mental Health Recovery means to them. The answer was very insightful and gives us an important perspective to consider.

"Recovery is about regaining all your mental faculties in order to live a normal life. Some people meet me and they'll never know. But if people know something is wrong with you, they will look for it and you may end up behaving like they expect. Whether the things that affect you are with you still or in your past, you still have to live with that. So no, you can't ever Recover from that".

Interestingly, this person does not have a diagnosed Mental Illness, but had experienced what he described as a 'minor social phobia'. This raises the issue that most of us live with some form of challenge at some point in our lives, be that a social phobia, not fitting in with the majority or the loss of a loved one.

These experiences will always be a part of our story or history and this can never be taken away, so from this perspective, Recovery is never clear cut.

In clinical Recovery, it is often seen as a reason to force people to change, (as it is seen as an end place, a having 'got better'), meaning individuals are now 'able' to take on roles not claimed for themselves, such as return to work or no longer needing support or ready for discharge from services.

The difficulty here is that Recovery is defined by others and based on objectively perceived symptom

control, elimination or functional ability. Recovery from this perspective is focused on outcomes, often as perceived or defined by another.

The difficulty with others defining what is successful or effective is that the control and power remains with the person defining the experience.

This has historically been the position of mental health services in retaining the expert role, unintentionally disabling self-determination, self mastery and personal meaning in the process of defining another's Recovery from the outside.

'Whose Recovery' are we talking about in this context?

Recovery as a process (inside – out)

Personal Recovery has very different origins, intent and meanings and is a process that occurs and is defined from the inside. Recovery in this sense has more of a political purpose, a symbolic reclaiming of control over one's life and Recovery. Personal Recovery has emerged from the voices of many who have experienced mental illness and distress and have survived, or indeed thrived despite it.

There are many definitions of Recovery, but this one by the Scottish Recovery Network captures the meaning well.

"Recovery is being able to live a meaningful and satisfying life, as defined by each person, in the presence or absence of symptoms. It is about having control over and input into one's own life. Each individual's Recovery, like his or her experience of mental health problems or illness, is a unique and deeply personal process. It is important to be

clear that there is no right or wrong way to recover”.
Scottish Recovery Network

But the most relevant definition is the one defined by the individual and it bears its true meaning in the moment of definition.

Recovery is not about the absence or eradication of symptoms or about judging one type of approach or treatment as more effective than another. It is about the process that occurs around and within treatment (it's presence or absence). It is not an end place or cure. It is a deeply personal experience of deciding what is important in one's life, finding out how best to achieve this and the choices made to make this a reality.

Recovery is a process led by the individual and comes out of a conscious (or indeed unconscious) decision to 'do differently'. This is a highly creative, and often, initially, quite a clumsy process of learning what works and what doesn't.

One thing is certain in Recovery and that is the control and emphasis continues to come from the individual who is leading the journey and ownership of the journey is sacred. Recovery is about learning, discovering and continuing to grow irrespective of age, gender, culture or ability.

The moment of Recovery

One thing we have learned about the process of Recovery is that for most, there is a moment where Recovery occurs or is initiated. This moment is different for everyone and is stimulated by highly individual things, but what is familiar to all is that this moment creates a fresh insight into people's worlds and for some reason, they no longer see things as they did.

Here is an example of how this looks:

I was sitting one evening in an inpatient unit with a young woman who had been given a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. She was aware that they didn't know what to do with her and they had stopped any active treatment. The team was looking into sending her to a therapeutic retreat where she would have to remain for a six month period with little contact from family and friends. She was feeling hopeless.

“We got to talking and she

shared about how before her illness she had enjoyed her career in teaching and how there were so many things she wanted to change about the way children were educated. She lit up as she talked with passion about the mission she felt she had found in her life. Then quite rapidly her mood sank as she realised that this was no longer possible for her because of her illness. I asked her why she felt she would no longer be able to go back to the career she loved, surely her 'illness' would not be the only thing hindering her?

She said that her psychiatrist had told her that those with personality disorders were unable to hold down high functioning jobs and that her disorder would gradually get better over many years, and perhaps in middle age she would not be so tortured. This was the evidence she had to rule out her dreams.

I asked her to consider for a moment that he was completely wrong in what he had told her (or what she made of what he told her). She initially resisted this concept, saying she had read so much to support this and met others with the same condition who had remained stuck because of it. But finally she considered the possibility.

I asked how different life would look if this wasn't true for her. She immediately saw how different her life would be. She would get back in contact with old university friends who she'd lost contact with because of the shame, she would move to a different area to be close to the schools she wanted to teach in etc, etc, etc. I asked how she would manage her 'flash backs' and low moods, she immediately had an answer to this too. She would seek out a good therapist, as she'd be able to afford one and select the best person for her. She might even set up a support group for herself and others to utilise.

As she was talking, once again her mood rose and she became animated and full of life. Somewhere along the line she realised what had happened, she had seen a new way of viewing her life, even if it was through an 'as if?', she realised that the only difference between these two realities was the belief she placed in it. She saw differently.

When you listen to stories of Recovery and ask the question, can

you remember the moment your Recovery began?, you will hear some very interesting answers. Many people describe an instant or a moment when things changed for them, and if you listen you will hear that this change was because at that moment the person's thinking changed. Recovery happened in an instant.

How we then create a new life out of this new perspective is another story. As we know, Recovery is highly individual, yet there are some overlapping principles and essential elements that appear common to most experiencing this for themselves. These essential elements will be explored further.

A process

Recovery is experienced as a process or journey and many talk about a process of healing from the 'significant event', be that mental distress, loss, trauma, abuse or the secondary effects such as stigma, discrimination, isolation and poverty.

Recovery is an ever changing process of learning new ways of being and finding new ways of living in spite of life's unpredictable hiccups that sometimes seem set to make or break us. This is not a graceful process, there is nothing beautiful or divine about it, this comes later, on reflection. It is a clumsy, fumbling ongoing encounter with our seeming lack of insight and objectivity. Of course it is often an extremely painful process to experience and to watch.

This is not a process you would readily invite, but for some of us, it seems as though we have no choice, as we are plunged into the water and learn how to swim in the process. Sadly, we know this is a process we can truly only experience alone, but the love and care of those around us give us the courage and breath to continue.

As David puts it 'Recovery is a journey of discovery, the thing you learn most about is yourself' (From New Zealand Recovery plan booklet). Recovery is the process in and around the mental distress, the things we learn along the way about us, our processes, our loved ones, the world and our internal sense of meaning and purpose.

Of course what we come back with from these encounters are deeply powerful insights, lessons

and gifts that guide us through our lives with an unchallengeable wisdom.

One does not have to experience mental illness/distress to experience Recovery. Just when we thought we'd figured it all out and have become comfortable with our new realities, life goes and changes again.

You can see why this can frustrate! Don't we all want a little respite? A little security in knowing that life can be simple? Perhaps one of the lessons we learn is that life and our Recovery is constantly shifting, changing and growing.

During a workshop I ran recently, after doing an exercise aimed at exploring the personal nature of Recovery, a staff member commented "isn't this just like the process of life?" I laughed and said she'd revealed the secret that others couldn't quite see yet. Like the Emperor's new clothes! A useful insight. Recovery (as with life) is a full contact sport.

Hope

“Where there's breath there is life, and where there is life there is hope.”
Words of a local Macmillian nurse

Hope is an essential spark that lights the flame of potential and possibility. Individuals on this journey become highly sensitive to its presence or absence. The fear, stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness compounds and accentuates the distress felt during the process of being touched by it.

This is no ordinary illness. There are very few who do not hold powerful negative beliefs about mental illness, its experience and prognosis, these beliefs often being nurtured internally for many years.

Ask a person to imagine being diagnosed with Schizophrenia, or for someone they love going through this and no doubt you will see a flicker of fear run past their eyes. This fear is the disabler, the thing with real power, but alas is often overlooked, or dismissed as not being as important as other pressing issues. But tackle this one and you'll invite in its opponent – Hope.

Hope is talked about a lot in

Recovery and its power should not be underestimated. It is like the light in a darkened room, no matter how small it is you can see it and feel its warmth, take its guiding direction and passionately nurture and protect it, because it is something sacred and pure and made only for you.

The biggest fear for me as a clinician is not working with someone who has no hope but working with someone for whom I have no hope. You can feel, smell and hear fear whispering in the room, it is truly one of the worst experiences, your fear mixed in tight with the despair of another. Not a happy combination, but a very powerful one.

This is where true team work comes in. There will always be someone who holds some hope for this client, no matter how small, it has the power to bring life and light back into the room.

There have been very few clients that I have been unable to connect to and feel hope for, but I remember one girl who I just could not connect with. I did everything to try and find something about her that I could build a relationship with, but there seemed to be absolutely nothing. This meant that I felt irritated by her pain, felt disgust for her behaviours and angry with her refusal to see the cleverness of my suggestions. I beat myself up endlessly about this girl and the way I felt about her, it was eating me up, making me an impostor in my role and a very sad kind of human.

I remember one particular day standing with her in A & E, while she was having sharp objects removed from her body, thinking all kinds of contemptuous thoughts, when a student nurse came over to relieve me. She walked in with tears in her eyes and swept over to her, put her arms around her and set her off crying in relief.

This moment was like electricity, it gave me one hell of a wake up call. The student nurse showed genuine care and compassion (hope) which triggered off a flame of positive feeling in the room, an emotion that felt close to a healing spirit.

I left that room ashamed, but knew what I needed to do. I refused to work with that young girl again until I got my compassion back, the best thing I could ever have done for her.

Three years later I came across her in my work with the crisis team. We connected.

Leah is a young woman who was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, one of the most offensive diagnoses in terms of staff attitudes.

I got on really well with Leah and nursed her through many a crisis, including ones where self harm was involved.

What I saw in Leah was a bright, warm, intelligent young woman with so much to love about her. She was tortured, being deeply affected by some reality only she could see. She could not lift her head to see other perspectives, especially positive ones about herself.

What I saw in her, what so many others saw too, was her health, potential and possibilities. She would lose her hope so often (not surprising considering what she believed about herself) and no matter how hard she tried to prove herself unloveable or hopeless, I (and others) kept gazing back, never losing sight of all her goodness.

I think it really wound her up, because she saw it reflected in our eyes and she could feel it was real, so she had a choice, believe what she saw reflected in our eyes or believe her own feelings? I know which one paid off in the end.

Leah ended up being a part of the Recovery movement in New Zealand and has now qualified as a nurse. No more self harm and no more diagnosis. Oh, we must have got it wrong because people can't recover so young from that diagnosis. Laughable or outrageous? Either way, this is her own success story as described by Leah:

"My Recovery journey has been what seems a long one with many ups and downs along the way. I don't expect to ever live without my illness but I have learned to live with it and accept myself for who I am. The most important element in my Recovery has been hope. When I lost hope I was lucky enough to have mental health workers who held my hope for me while I couldn't. They held that hope and believed enough in me to get me out of that dark space. For that I am truly grateful".
NZ Recovery plan booklet

Now this is a story of Recovery, a crooked process, fighting the odds, fighting a system so strong it has the power to take your rights away, with an arrogance that astounds. Leah fought for the right to good support, for good psychological therapies. She was offered one type of therapy and asked to sign a contract committing to what in essence was behavioural modification. There was no 'walking with her journey' or choice here. And when she no longer self harmed or experienced crises and had reclaimed her health, she was told that she should never have had the diagnosis in the first place. An attempt at validating unacceptable behaviour in a system that should know better?

Personal meaning and understanding

Periods of distress or pain often lead us into a search for the meaning in it all. This search leads us into the depths of our soul in search of the answers. Once touched by the wisdom of our own souls, we will never be the same again.

This process is deeply sacred and of such importance to our sense of self that others' attempts to influence and control it brings a sense of violation and disrespect.

The meaning we make of our lives and our experiences move with us as our lives change and adapt. Wisdom one day can become old news another. When we become hooked on the current conclusions and let them define us, we lose sight of the bigger picture.

Recovery from mental distress or illness involves the process of healing following diagnosis or distress.

Healing, I believe, is the word we are looking for here. Healing from mental distress/illness is not as simple as healing your physical wounds (your poor battered neurochemistry), it's about healing your poor battered self and soul.

The meaning we make of our experiences is of vital importance to our sense of direction and purpose. Drawing on the important lessons and insights gained from our experiences arms us with a sense of our own resilience and strength and invites us to continue the process of becoming who we are.

"For me, part of my Recovery

included realising that this feeling would eventually pass and fighting against it prolonged the experience. I found that my depression would come uninvited and left a bad taste in my mouth. But over time I realised that my body would override what I thought was important at the time and kind of 'pulled the plug' on me. When this happened, there was actually nothing I needed to do to get me out of this state. Knowing that my deeper self often knew better than me helped me find meaning in these times. When I let the process take me and stopped trying to control it, I found I ended up in the right place eventually, even though it didn't go at my pace or fit with my schedule!

"In this process, I kind of, relinquish conscious or ego control and trust my higher self to take care of me and know what is in my best interests. I've learnt to be comfortable with my discomfort, even though I do initially go into battle and try to be the one in control".
Anonymous

Spirituality is often seen as a natural part of finding meaning in our Recovery:

"When everything seems so pointless and full of pain, I have to find some kind of comfort if I am to survive. Although I accept the illness, I also need hope. Every time I have had an episode of illness in my life, I have been on some kind of spiritual journey by the time it's over. In the long term, through these experiences, I see myself becoming more and more whole. In fact, I see myself as a mentally healthy person, who is sometimes ill".

Julie Leibrich, *The Recovery Book*, 'Norwich Mind'

Support

Support is essential in Recovery and we only need to reflect on our own times of need to realise how important this is to our experience.

Support can come in the form of people and relationships, but also in terms of supports such as medication, talking or complementary therapies, religious or spiritual beliefs and practices and hobbies etc.

'Having just one person who believed in me' was most commonly rated the essential element when asked 'what helps' in Dr Courtney Harding's research with people with long term conditions (1987).

Often when we are lost in our distress we lose the perspective and insight that would be available to us when we are in touch with our Well-being

As highlighted in Leah's story, that one person has the power to bring hope into our lives.

Julian Bareham talks about how important support is in the Whole Life DVD by saying:

"The one thing that really helped beyond anything was Mack, my biggest support. He was an ordinary man I met in a pub, when I was talking about things nobody understood..... Mack has a sense of humour and that is what got me better, he gave me back my sense of humour and I thank him an awful lot for that".

Julian Bareham, *Service User/Philosopher*, taken from the Whole Life DVD

Another aspect of support is highlighted in Leah's story. Often when we are lost in our distress we lose the perspective and insight that would be available to us when we are in touch with our Well-being.

This is where gifted, compassionate, loving/caring support and insight from others can show us what it is we are missing in this process. The timely insight of others on our process can often provide us with this 'aha' moment of insight and clarity that accelerates our learning. Others can often see more objectively what it is we can't because we are so 'lost in the moment' of our process. This is where we shout 'this is my process!' and defend it to the hilt. But gentle clarity from others shakes us to the core. This is where support is blessed.

How often do the words of others, when delivered with love or compassion, give us the missing dimension needed to make sense of it all and urge us forward to our own timely conclusions? It's kind of nice to know you're not alone in this

experience, that this is a common side effect of being creative, insightful, and human!

This is where peer support is so valuable to those whose experiences aren't common to us all and where mental health workers are unable to relate this to 'common human experience'. The support and advice given from someone who has similar experiences comes with so much more power and meaning.

I was told this story recently as a means of highlighting our role as supporters.

You meet a man who is isolated from his friends because he believes people are laughing at him and acting strangely around him.

Now you know that inside he has everything he needs to stop people laughing at him, but he just doesn't realise it. At moments he comes close to seeing the answer to his problem, but always just misses the point of insight.

What is your role here? Do you let him work it out for himself? Because eventually he will or do you do the most helpful thing and tell him the reason people are laughing at him is because he has food on his face.

We're all in the soup together with food on our faces.

Acceptance

Acceptance is the painful process involved in making sense of one's experiences. When mental distress, trauma or loss enters our lives it is rarely invited. The initial process is to fight and struggle to protect oneself from its effects. Common cries include 'It's not fair', 'Why me?', 'It's not my fault' and 'I'm not strong enough'.

As time moves on, we are left with the choice of accepting

For some, accepting a diagnosis of mental illness is unacceptable as it means accepting all the fears, myths and stigma associated with it

what has happened and moving on, or living a life of pain, resentment and anger.

Recovery involves the first choice. Accepting what has happened gives you the release to then do

something about the present and future as a consequence. When we remain stuck in the past, we lose sight of what we may have right now.

But accepting what has happened is a challenging thing to do. It involves first acknowledging what has happened and this is not something we choose easily.

"Acceptance was a big part of my Recovery. Initially it was something clearly wrong, but I didn't want to accept that, because by accepting there was something wrong meant I had to then acknowledge my feelings of failure and that I really needed to take action to turn this around. It seemed safer initially to deny what was going on, because then I could hope that it would 'work itself out' or go away. Of course it didn't. By the time I finally acknowledged what it was I was experiencing and then naming it, I was in quite a state.

"What really helped me was when I could finally 'name' this thing I was experiencing and then take the risk of asking for help and support from those around me. I was lucky that my supports challenged my feelings of failure and inadequacy to the extent that I realised they were right. Then I could move on and actually do something about it, take action and discover the things that helped me recover".
Anonymous

In terms of mental illness, we need to be mindful of what it is we are asking people to accept. For some, accepting a diagnosis of mental illness is unacceptable as it means accepting all the fears, myths and stigma associated with it. This offers some explanation for why so many avoid mental health services. They are not willing to accept mental health services' view on what their experience means.

This is where clarifying a person's belief, world view and frameworks is important in helping a person find meaning. The importance here is to work with the person's framework, be that spiritual, social or medical, and not impose your views onto them.

Acceptance is the first step in

taking personal responsibility for one's Well-being and by asking someone to accept something they have no control over runs the risk of obliterating hope and creating passivity and dependency.

One common myth in mental illness is that it is like a physical condition and as such needs expert or specialist diagnosis and handling and that complying with prescribed treatment options is expected. However, what role does the individual play and what kind of control do they have over a process that is physically determined?

Acceptance that this experience is something we have no control over is a potentially scary thing and we should be mindful of the devastating effects of this. But accepting an experience within our own systems of meaning gives us our control back and a sense that there is something we can do about it.

"As my suffering mounted, I soon realised that there were two ways in which I could respond to my situation; either react with bitterness, or transform the suffering into a creative force. I choose the latter".

Martin Luther King, *Art of Recovery: A Pocket Guide*, by S. Heyes & S. Tate

We all experience decisions in our lives, we all experience the realities of acting or not acting. We know that some opportunities present themselves only once and what we make of them becomes the story of our lives and our ability to live with ourselves as a result.

We don't have to be happy about change, but we can accept that it is an inevitable part of our lives. Once we've figured this one out on a deep level it gives us freedom.

Personal responsibility

Once we have accepted what we have here and now and begin to believe we have control over our future, we can take personal responsibility for our lives, Well-being and Recovery.

Recovery is an active process and the action is generated from the individual who leads the process. Knowing that you are responsible for your life, happiness and fulfilment is an essential part of growing up and growing into our skins as humans.

Self management is a vital part in personal responsibility as you learn to realise the control and influence you have over your health, Well-being and Recovery

If we allow others to define what is important to us, then we are no longer leading our own lives. However, this is so common in those who have had long-term contact with mental health services and systems. Believing you can and do have control over your health and the ability to reclaim control over your life powers this process.

Recovery does not involve passively accepting what is offered, but taking an active part in deciding what it is you want, how you are going to achieve this and going out and doing it.

Self management is a vital part in personal responsibility as you learn to realise the control and influence you have over your health, Well-being and Recovery.

Education

Education and information are important elements that affect a person's decision to choose the road of Recovery.

The information available to us internally, as well as what is offered by others, gives us the vital evidence needed to support our decisions.

If the information offered is timely, clear and offers us different perspectives and is delivered with authority, it can be of tremendous benefit to our sense of control.

Knowing what it is we are dealing with, gives us a process of finding out what this means and what we can do to influence the outcome or experience. Fear of the unknown is a huge disabler and information helps us become clearer about what it is we are dealing with as demonstrated in the following quote:

"I didn't realise there was so much to this. When I started looking, I found so many different perspectives on this, some were really interesting and provided me with a new way of looking at things".

With the development of the internet, there has been a proliferation of useful websites

that offer a wider range of perspectives and information.

Recovery starts here

Recovery starts somewhere but fundamentally it starts with believing it is possible for you or your client/loved ones.

Recovery involves a journey of discovery and a deepening understanding of who we are, what we are capable of and the freewill to make this a reality.

For further Recovery exercises, please see:

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- Personal Recovery and Change process..... 72
- Recovery and Spirituality..... 73