

ROUTES TO RECOVERY



Scottish Recovery Network

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ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Routes to Recovery was developed by the Scottish Recovery Network (SRN) based on interviews with people in recovery from long-term mental health problems. We wrote it to offer information and suggestions for recovery, some of which you may find helpful in your own life.

It is not designed as a step by step guide to recovery. Some of the information may not be relevant to you or you may feel the way we have grouped the information does not match your experience. Recovery is a unique and individual process and the things that help and hinder that process vary from person to person.

The information and ideas described in this booklet came from Scottish Recovery Network's Narrative Research Project. During this project we interviewed 67 people around Scotland who described themselves as in recovery, or recovered, from a long-term mental health problem. This publication does not aim to summarise the Narrative Research findings. It is intended to highlight some of the things that people said that they had been able to do to support their recovery.

We learned an enormous amount about recovery during this project and this booklet is one way we hope to share that learning.



RECOVERY

"WELL CERTAINLY IN MY EXPERIENCE, THE ROUTE TO RECOVERY IS NOT A LINEAR PROCESS AND THAT MAY MEAN GOING OFF IN DIRECTIONS THAT MIGHT NOT LOOK ALL THAT PRODUCTIVE."

ABOUT RECOVERY

We know that people can and do recover from even the most serious and long-term mental health problems. For some people the recovery process can be long, slow and at times difficult but the reality is it can happen. The unique nature of the recovery process can make it hard to define but certain things come up frequently and these help us better understand what recovery means:

- Recovery is about living a satisfying and fulfilling life.
- Recovery is about more than the absence of the symptoms of illness. Some people describe themselves as being in recovery while still experiencing symptoms.
- There can be lots of ups and downs during the recovery process – some people describe it as a journey.
- For this reason people often talk about being in recovery rather than *recovered*.
- Some people consider recovery as being 'back to the way things were' or back to 'normal' but for others recovery is more about discovering a new life or a new way of being.

BUILDING A GOOD BASE FOR RECOVERY

Getting some of the practical aspects of life sorted out can create a safe space from which to start your recovery journey. For some of the people we spoke with this was linked to finding secure housing. For others it was linked to getting access to benefits or managing debts, taking time off work or confronting the past.

“When I got the flat that I am in now, for the first time it was my house and it was my space and I could fill it with my memories and, you know, there wasn’t any baggage there... and it was a place where nobody knew me, nobody knew that I had mental health problems, nobody knew who I was. I was just a person who had moved into this flat...”

Having access to enough money to live comfortably on was important for recovery. For some people on benefits this meant learning “to live on what you need rather than what you want, that’s for sure.”

However, the relationship between benefits and recovery was complex.

“Finances are something that can hinder and help recovery. The safety net of having comprehensive benefits... it does help your recovery, it keeps you stable while you’re ill. You know but for a lot of people they get too comfortable whilst being on benefit and that can maintain their illness. Certainly I would recommend that people who are ill you know they don’t have to have financial hardship while they are recovering you know.”

For some it meant changing habits or coming to terms with things that had happened in the past.

“What’s happened in the past, you can’t do anything about it... you’ve just got to try and put that behind you. But still learn from it, not exclude it totally but learn from it and to try and just think that if you make the effort you will get better and there is a silver lining there somewhere.”

“WHAT’S HAPPENED IN THE PAST, YOU CAN’T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT.... YOU’VE JUST GOT TO TRY AND PUT THAT BEHIND YOU. BUT STILL LEARN FROM IT, NOT EXCLUDE IT TOTALLY BUT LEARN FROM IT AND JUST THINK THAT IF YOU MAKE THE EFFORT YOU WILL GET BETTER AND THERE IS A SILVER LINING THERE SOMEWHERE!!”

RECOVERY IS ABOUT LIVING A SATISFYING + FULFILLING LIFE.

BELIEVING RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE

Many people we spoke with talked about the importance of believing in the possibility of recovery. They described how taking a more hopeful and optimistic approach to their illness created hope, a feeling of self-worth and confidence. It helped them create a new identity as a person who was in recovery.

“I think sometimes, certainly myself, the thing that prevented recovery was that I didn't know anything else. I'd got a mental illness. There's some safety in being ill. Although I hated every minute of it, there was still some security in that.”

It allowed people to relate to their experience of illness in a more optimistic way. Believing you can recover can be the first step to recovery. Or as one person put it “thinking my illness was untreatable was making it untreatable!”

While it's not as simple as saying that if you believe in recovery enough it will happen, from the information we collected having a belief in the possibility of recovery helps a lot.

“I think that parts that have made me stronger were a willingness to get well in the first place, and you have to have that willingness to get well and a hope that you're going to get well.”

Many people described the importance of having people around you who believe in you and your potential. These could be family, carers, friends, spouses or partners, support workers, professionals and so on. For some people the long term support and faith of others through good and bad times helped them develop a belief that they could recover.

“Other people believing in me was quite vital, 'cos I didn't believe in myself.”

“Couldn't do it without her. Not that I'd ever tell her that. She believes in me, it doesn't matter what I say, what I do, she believes in me. Nobody (has) ever done that for me before. They always wanted to change me or change something... she just likes me the way I am, which is nice.”

Another way that people developed a belief in their own potential for recovery was to see or hear other people who were in recovery. Learning from other's experience allowed people to develop better coping and recovery strategies and helped them to realise they were not alone in their experience.

“Actually it was one of the girls I know... She went up ...and was telling her story and I realised that I wasn't an isolated case that recovered, other people do.”

Many people also talked about how helpful it was to meet other people who experienced mental health problems. This peer support gave them an understanding as well as hints and tips for recovery.

“The most help I got was from the other people in the ward who had gone through similar experiences. And this does generally go on when you are sectioned. The nurses, they're great but you find, or I find (you asked for my personal experience) the best people that helped me were other people that had been through psychosis, had some little pointers, were grounded, that's the thing.”

BEING IN CONTROL OF YOUR OWN RECOVERY

It can be hard to take control of your recovery and there can be lots of things that get in the way. Many of the people we spoke with told us that taking responsibility and finding a way to take the lead in their own recovery was important.

“...go with the feelings that you have, and believe in yourself. Listen to other people obviously, but the decisions have to come from you. Then hopefully your life is going to be long, so what’s a couple of years in getting yourself sorted out?”

“I have taken ownership of my illness and I take responsibility for what I do and do not do. I don’t let it control me. And it is an ‘it’. It’s not the whole of my life; it’s just part of my life now.”

People who work in services can help this process by offering choices and sharing decisions.

Feeling more in control encouraged people to try new things out and “to do things even if they may go wrong.” They also recognised that everyone makes mistakes and bad choices and that this is okay. People felt it was important to be allowed to “take a calculated risk with something and go for it.”

Some people talked about a realisation that they were letting symptoms control their lives and affect people around them.

“Me..., that’s what’s changed. Me..., it was a control thing... There was an unconscious release of control on my part. (For twenty years) I let other people control what I was doing and what I wasn’t doing. I let the symptoms of my illness become the centre of my universe, and the symptoms of my illness aren’t the centre of my universe.”

Some people talked about situations where they felt they had to take action, for example around caring for children, or in relation to reduced income, as important drivers for recovery.

“I seemed to be able to sort of raise my game and overcome anxieties... Come hell or high water, I was going to do it for the kids.”

People talked about the importance of learning when to push things and when to take it easy.

“In terms of pace, just being able to do a bit at a time and then draw back a bit and have some space and some time to kind of assimilate things and not feel pushed has been very important.”

Learning about mental health problems helped some people manage their recovery more effectively.

“I’ve started to learn a wee bit about mental health... I’ve started to sort of gain knowledge about it and I think that’s helped my recovery, because I really didn’t know anything about it until I became ill.”

Taking care of overall health gave a sense of wellbeing. One person talked about the importance of getting ‘back to basics.’

“you have to get a good night’s sleep, eat properly; I think nutrition is important. Exercise, hobbies and friends... Yes, exercise definitely helps.”

PEOPLE TALK ABOUT
BEING IN RECOVERY
RATHER THAN BEING
'RECOVERED'.

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LOOKING FOR THE POSITIVES IN LIFE

We often tend to be more aware of our weaknesses and problems than we are of our strengths and abilities. Everyone has strengths and being aware of what they are can help maintain wellbeing.

Some people told us about the strength they had gained through living with mental health problems.

"I do feel I'm a stronger person for having the experiences that I've had. I do think I've benefited as an individual, from the entire, what would you call it? Experience."

When we talk about mental health problems we tend to focus on the negatives and forget that people develop skills and abilities by coping and getting by.

"Every problem and every hiccup was necessary for me to arrive at where I am today. The experience was required to give me the tools and knowledge to keep going."

Having an optimistic outlook and celebrating achievements also helps to maintain wellbeing.

"I think it is hard to praise yourself, but that was one thing that I was learning all the time during my recovery that you have to praise yourself for overcoming the challenges you are facing."

Some people found that having a dream was important for their recovery, something to believe in and to work towards.

“Have a vision of where you want to be and try and find ways of getting there.”

“Don’t let people tell you who you are, what you are, what you can be. You can be whatever the hell you want... if you want to be a kite maker, if you want to be a teacher, if you want to be a singer. Nothing should ever stop you from being what you want to be... don’t ever let anyone tell you. It’s not their life it’s your life.”

One person described how they measured their recovery in terms of how far they had come – this gave them a sense of achievement.

“I find it helpful not to measure my recovery by where I’m trying to get to, because I always feel I fall short. But if I look at that in terms of where I’ve come from, then that’s a more helpful frame to measure things.”

People didn’t suggest that simply having a positive outlook would lead to recovery. They recognised that recovery can be a long and complex process but felt that taking an optimistic outlook helped.

**‘A NEW WAY
OF BEING’**

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“I think it is hard to praise yourself, but that was one thing that I was learning all at this during my recovery that you have to praise yourself for overcoming the challenges you are facing.”

FINDING THE RIGHT SUPPORT AND TREATMENT

Recovery is a unique and individual process. The things that help or support one person may not work for another. Many people told us that finding the right mix of help and support was important to their recovery. This means that getting good quality advice and information is very important.

“Well the main thing, initially... especially on diagnosis, was learning about the illness... I tended to attend self help groups,.. and I suppose I just found it helpful that, surprise surprise, I’m not the only one with manic depression...”

Finding right the mix of support and treatment helped people in their recovery.

“I got a psychologist for the first time, and started cognitive behavioural therapy. And the combination of that and the day support and the individual support I got from a voluntary sector organisation. I think that’s what did it.”

“Talking therapies are no good without my medication, I need both. Helping people understand that what might suit one person might not suit another...”

For many of the people we spoke with getting medication right was crucial in supporting their recovery.

“There had been a slight change in my medicine and the tension episodes stopped and it was like sort of being reborn, it really was.”

Unfortunately some of the people we spoke with experienced problems with their medication, like side effects. Others felt uncomfortable with taking medication or felt like they had to. Many said that they would ideally like to live with minimal or no medication but recognised it had a role in supporting recovery.

“I don’t feel as if the medication was the big thing that helped. I feel that it was all the hard work that I did, but the medication must have been doing something, it must have done its job as well...”

Many of the people we spoke with were positive about their experience of talking or psychological therapies, like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or counselling.

“They started me with counselling. And that was a great place to start because I started realising why things had happened in my life and what way I coped with them, what way I didn’t cope with them and what I was prepared to put up with, what I was not prepared to put up with and how I was going to sort of fit in with my family, things like that. We sort of explored issues from the past and the present and that’s where I started to think.”

Sometimes these therapies were not always immediately effective.

“I went through a lot of therapy, cognitive therapy, behavioural therapy... I wasn’t actually able to put it into practise because I was at too low a level, and it’s only in the last couple of years when I have been thinking about where I was going and what I’m doing that I can actually use those skills, now to help me to be where I am. So... in hindsight it has been very very useful.”

The unique nature of recovery means that supports need to be designed to fit people’s needs and not the other way round.

“Their approach was just amazingly different. They were actually offering it (CBT) to you, they weren’t saying: ‘Well what do you think you need’, because you don’t know... (They were) putting things in front of you and saying, ‘We think this could be beneficial, what do you think,’ and that made a big difference. They gave you a bit of choice.”

SOME PEOPLE
DESCRIBE IT AS
A JOURNEY.

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KEEPING BUSY AND FINDING MEANING AND PURPOSE

We all need meaning and purpose in our lives. Many of the people we spoke with found this by doing things with their time. Some people talked about the need to 'give back'. Rightly or wrongly people described a sense of having taken from others as a result of their mental health problems.

"...that's the hardest thing about having mental illness, is feeling that you're constantly taking, that people are always giving to you, that people are supporting you, whereas partly recovery has been actually looking at ways that I can actually give back to the people that I care about and to the people that I want to help. And actually just to give back rather than to constantly take... gives me self respect."

For some people, being in paid employment made a powerful statement about their value in society.

"It's gave me back my own self-esteem, the ability for me to stand up, work and provide for my wife and I, and in our generation I think that's quite an important thing."

Having a supportive and understanding employer helped.

"My boss has been incredibly supportive, been fantastic, absolutely fantastic all the way through... (She allowed me to) go back on a plan staged return to work programme. I'm very, very lucky; I have an understanding employer..."

There were dangers in the wrong types of work. For example some people described the negative impact that working in unsupportive environments had on their recovery.

“My experience with my employer was... they sent you for medicals, which I found quite terrifying, going for the tests, you know... there was like no element of confidentiality whatsoever... it was almost as if, ‘we think you’re at it’ you know?’ there’s nothing wrong with you..., they automatically disbelieve rather than believe you.”

Others felt that ‘nine to five’ would never be for them.

“Recovery has shown me now that perhaps I just have to look at the bigger picture a wee bit, about ‘right, OK, traditionally work in the sense of nine to five will never be me’ because I just can’t fit within those guidelines.”

Many of the people we spoke with were involved in volunteering and they spoke positively about its flexibility. It also helped give people a structure to their lives and provided the chance to meet people.

“I suppose doing the voluntary work three times a week gives me a sense of belonging and all that mixing with the public having interaction with your colleagues and I suppose it makes you feel good about yourself doing voluntary work.”

Some people had been able to use volunteering as a step towards paid work.

“It started me out into work. It made me get out in the morning more; structured my day, that kind of thing. I’ve done many voluntary jobs before I took my extra hours on...so the whole thing has just helped gradually.”

Many of the people we spoke could be described as mental health activists.

“I’ve got into various groups, as an advocate and a representative for service users, and I found that extremely beneficial, made you feel less isolated and that you can help others.”

For others getting involved in education provided stimulation and a chance to meet new people. It could also give an incredible sense of achievement.

“You graduate in your gown and I stood and I was about to go up on the stage I felt as though I had really recovered and I never singled out a moment of my life, but I did feel particularly proud of myself that day..., I was proud and pleased and happy and triumphant.”

Many of the people we spoke with were very creative. Arts and creativity gave them a voice at different stages in their recovery.

“Because you can’t communicate when you’re ill, you haven’t got a voice, you don’t know what to say, you can’t say what you’re feeling, I found that writing it down got it all out.”

“I get a lot out of creating and actually being able to give, to give to people something that I’ve actually spent time on, and that’s something that I can do when I’m well.”

For some of the people we spoke with spirituality and religion aided their recovery.

“When I have difficulties I haven’t got somebody to turn to, I have God to turn to, and I think that’s very helpful.”

For some people seeing their recovery as “a spiritual ongoing journey.” helped them make sense of their experiences.

IT'S A PERSONAL THING

This publication provides a summary of some of the things we learned during the Narrative Research Project. It is not possible to report all of the findings here and what we have written may not reflect your experience. Our hope is that it helps you on your own Route to Recovery.

“One of the things I’ve realised is that if something doesn’t work out initially, it doesn’t mean it’s not going to work out. It’s a case of you’ve got to persevere, that you’ve got to keep trying, that if you don’t reach one goal it doesn’t mean you’re not going to reach the next, and you just have to think a bit wider...”

“It is – it’s a personal thing. You can’t say to someone do this, do that, and do the next thing and you’ll be fine... you have to take ownership – you have to want to move on.”

RECOVERY IS MORE
THAN THE ABSENCE
OF SYMPTOMS.

“I THINK THERE IS A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING THAT RECOVERY CAN TAKE PLACE OVER A LONG PERIOD OF TIME, SO THE FACT THAT HOWEVER MUCH FURTHER DOWN THE LINE A PERIOD OF BEING SYMPTOMATIC OCCURRED IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT I WASN'T RECOVERING.”

"One of the things I've realised is that if something doesn't work out initially, it doesn't mean it's not going to work out. It's a case of you've got to persevere, that you've got to keep trying, that if you don't reach one goal it doesn't mean you're not going to reach the next, and you just have to think a bit wider..."

THERE CAN BE
A LOT OF
UPS + DOWNS.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

If you are interested in reading more about the project the full research report is available on request from the Scottish Recovery Network.

You might also be interested in a booklet called 'Journeys of Recovery' which includes twelve of the recovery stories gathered as part of the project. These stories are also available in audio formats.

Please feel free to contact us if you are interested in learning more about this project or the other work of the Scottish Recovery Network.

GETTING HELP AND SUPPORT

The Scottish Recovery network is not able offer direct assistance. For help and support please try one on the following.

Breathing Space

A free and confidential phonenumber service aimed particularly at young men.

Phone: **0800 83 85 87**

Email: **info@breathingspacescotland.co.uk**

The Samaritans

Available 24 hours a day to provide confidential, emotional support.

Phone: **08457 90 90 90**

Email: **jo@samaritans.org**

Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH)

Information on a wide range of mental health issues including treatments, services, benefits and legal advice.

Phone: **0141 568 7000**

Email: **info@samh.org.uk**

National Schizophrenia Fellowship (Scotland)

Information for those affected by schizophrenia and allied mental health problems.

Phone: **0131 557 8969**

Email: **info@nsfscot.org.uk**

Bipolar Fellowship Scotland

Provides information, support and advice for people with Bipolar Disorder/Manic Depression and their carers. Promotes self-help throughout Scotland.

Phone: **0141 560 2050**

Email: **info@bipolarscotland.org.uk**

Depression Alliance Scotland

Provide information, support and understanding about depression. Campaign to raise public awareness of depression.

Phone: **0131 467 3050**

Email: **info@dascot.org**



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