

Engaging Mental Health Practitioners and Supporters

See www.OnwardMentalHealth.com (Resources) for an array of integrative mental health material including the latest version of this monograph, extracted from our book, *Choices in Recovery*.

Common themes of recovery.

Thousands of people who have faced significant mental health challenges live in recovery today, leading happy and productive lives. When asked their secret, common themes emerge.

Most people described experiencing a personal tipping point, an internal change in perspective, which was both an acknowledgement that recovery was possible, and an acceptance of personal responsibility to diligently work to make it happen.

For some, it was after a mental health crisis as they struggled for answers. For others, it was during a time of reduced stress as they coalesced their inner resolve. For nearly all, it was a moment of realization that gave them strength to walk a path toward wellness.

Another striking similarity is that individuals living in recovery often discovered a unique combination of approaches that worked for them. In fact, looking at the evidence, Dr. Kenneth Duckworth, NAMI's Medical Director notes that psychiatric drugs rarely promote recovery alone. A combination of treatments is often most effective. This is perhaps not surprising given the vast number of potential causes of mental health issues.

This combining of approaches is often called Integrative Mental Health, where the best of conventional psychiatric drug therapy is augmented with a variety of complementary approaches including nutrition, exercise, mindfulness, expanded social interaction, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and more.

The last theme that emerges is that people in recovery often hold two different perspectives: balancing a sense of self-

determination with one of openness and acceptance of support from people around them.

They know they must own their personal recovery, and do so by leveraging the medical expertise, human understanding, and kindness of others. They find, organize, and engage these people into a personal recovery team.

The people of recovery.

Building your personal recovery team is vital. Although we need a strong sense of personal self-determination in the recovery process, we must resist the urge to run solo. Many people can help, either actively or by their encouragement.

Figure 1 identifies a number of these supporters.



Figure 1 – People of Recovery

The inner portion of the diagram depicts personal support. It starts with “You” – the person with mental health issues. This person

must always be the top priority. Your personal network then expands outward, from family, to friends, to your community. These people already know you and care about you and can be strong allies in recovery.

Especially involve people in your personal support network that respect you and are sincerely interested in your well-being. These individuals can provide emotional encouragement and practical assistance as you recover. Also consider the influences of those who live with you since they can have a large impact, either positive or negative, on recovery.

Your professional support network.



The outer portion of Figure 1 shows your professional support team. It includes people with varied roles and areas of specialization. Each is trained to help and serve you.

There is a tendency to regard the psychiatrist as the most important member of the team since they often have the most training and most advanced degree. However, it is best to consider all team members to be peers—with each other and with you. Each brings an important and unique perspective to recovery, with some filling multiple roles. The major people involved in recovery are:

- *Biomedical Practitioners* focus on physical issues that may cause mental health symptoms. They run lab tests looking for thyroid disorders, nutrient imbalances, digestive issues, and much more. They also offer specific therapies to address whatever

issues they find. Many different types of practitioners can fill this role. See the **Integrative Biomedical Practitioner Finder** for more detail (on the *resources* page at www.OnwardMentalHealth.com), and the directories to help you find one.

- *Psychosocial Therapists* focus on a set of recovery approaches based in thought, emotion, and behavior. Psychologists and psychoanalysts offer “talk therapy” and other ways to address past traumas, emotional difficulties, and unhelpful thinking. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is one of the most common psychosocial therapies.
- *Psychiatrists* focus on establishing a clear mental health diagnosis and prescribing treatment (often psychiatric drugs). They may also provide biomedical and/or psychosocial approaches to recovery.
- *Peer Support Specialists* are professionals who have recovered from mental health issues and seek to share their experience to help others. They have a unique lived experience that gives them the expertise and credibility to help others. They offer “I’ve been there” support that is often both pragmatic and inspirational.
- *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Workers* help people function better in society, gain employment and housing, and improve their wellness. The Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (www.uspra.org) is a major U.S. group that trains and supports these workers. Psychiatric Rehabilitation professionals have a variety of titles including case worker, social worker, therapist, and more.
- *Advocacy Groups* offer information, training, and influence. Mental Health America (www.MentalHealthAmerica.net) and The National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.NAMI.org) are the most well-known and established. Mad in America (www.MadinAmerica.com) is an emerging group that is aligned with Integrative Mental Health.

Building your professional support team.

To build your professional team, start first with recommendations from people you trust. If you are out of crisis, look for an integrative biomedical practitioner and a psychotherapist. Both focus on finding and addressing underlying mental health causes. These professionals can recommend a good psychiatrist.

But, do you really need three practitioners? Unfortunately, often the answer is “yes”. Their perspectives and approaches differ; each has unique therapies to offer. Engaging all three helps expand the breadth of options to aid your recovery. The good news is that your private, Medicaid, or Medicare insurance often helps defray at least partial costs for all three.

Your insurance will play a large role in practitioner selection. Going “in-network” reduces your expenses, but limits your choices. Going “out-of-network” gives you more options, at greater cost. Also, many doctors in private practice don't take insurance, which means you will have to pay up front and assume the risk of working with your insurance company for reimbursement. Perhaps the most painful reality is that there simply aren't enough mental health practitioners to satisfy demand.

Within these sizable constraints, be as selective as you can when choosing practitioners. Find people you trust, people with whom you can develop a rapport. Evidence indicates that a strong therapeutic alliance is especially critical for psychosocial therapies.

Make sure the practitioners you choose expect recovery. Research shows that people have better outcomes when they work with practitioners who share optimistic expectations for recovery.

You need to coordinate the efforts of your practitioners to ensure everyone is informed and working together. It is best to document your recovery plan, giving a timeline of the therapies and drugs you have used, as well as the therapies you would like to explore. Tracking symptoms and side effects is also critically important.

Finding the right professional support takes effort and time. Plan in advance in case of a mental health crisis. Hospital rankings may not be a good indicator of patient-perceived quality, so research the best hospitals for mental health services in your area.

Contact your local NAMI affiliate and ask questions. Learn about the assisted/involuntary treatment laws that affect you.

Also, research *Peer Respite* near you. Too often psychiatric care in hospitals is impersonal; patients say they need the staff to treat them with more respect, talk to them, listen to them, and involve them in treatment decisions. *Peer Respite*, though few in number, are an alternative, less-clinical setting.

In the U.S., Community Mental Health organizations bring a variety of mental health professionals together. They typically offer psychiatric drugs, case management, and psychosocial therapies. Access is often limited, but people on Medicaid with severe mental health issues often can gain free services.

The Wellness Continuum

As you build your professional support team, consider the specific sets of therapies each offers. The book, *Choices in Recovery*, offers clear detail on these many therapies, organized into the Wellness Continuum (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Wellness Continuum

Although your situation may be very difficult at times, remain hopeful and remember that many people have recovered. Engaging the right people can help you do the same.