

Recovery Champions: A Personal View on Making Recovery Happen

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Rethink Mental Illness

Having a mental health problem can be a frightening, isolating, and even terrifying experience. Seeing things and hearing voices can be disturbing and carry with them stigma and exclusion from ordinary human relationships, employment, and even simple things that are taken for granted like socializing, going out, or making friends. One person I knew in hospital saw people covered in snakes, while another saw people on fire. I myself have heard threatening and taunting voices, saying: “You wait until you see what I’m going to do to you!”

Too often, people can withdraw into themselves and be cut off from others, even from close family members and carers. This is not helped when seeing things and hearing voices are labeled as “hallucinations” to be dismissed and ignored. Having a mental health problem also has “negative symptoms” such as tiredness, loss of emotion, and apathy. This is not helped by the undesirable side effects of many antipsychotic drugs, which may cause tremors, tiredness, uncontrollable shaking, dribbling, apathy, and weight gain. I can say from personal experience that these side effects are often humiliating, embarrassing, and painful. People with mental illness can withdraw into themselves and become passive, a shell, a shadow of their former self, and almost zombielike. People can end up just going through the motions of life in an empty and hollow way.

According to Ron Coleman and Karen Taylor, who have run the Recovery Champions course in places as diverse as Scotland, Australia, Italy, and Palestine, making recovery happen is about learning to live again and not just exist as a shadow in some sort of half-life. Rather than running away from the pain and difficulty of living with a mental health problem and withdrawing from life, people are positively encouraged to discuss their voices and difficult experiences. People’s voices and experiences are treated as real (at least to the individual experiencing

them), so this means they are treated as valid and meaningful. Rather than ignoring and dismissing hearing voices, a recovery coach talks to the person about hearing voices (what the voice says, if it is male or female, whether it advises or is commanding, its age, and whether it is positive or negative). In other words, the voice is mapped so that it can be better understood.

Rather than giving up with life and the pain and difficulty of living with a mental health problem, people are encouraged to make a 1 year plan of their dream (as well as their nightmares as barriers), which could be traveling, writing a book, or getting a dream job. They then work backwards with a recovery coach from 9 months to 6 months to 3 months and finally 72 hours, so that they have a pathway and map to achieve their 1 year dream. This shifts what can be a negative experience into a positive one, where dreams, aspirations, and a good future are anticipated and planned. Drama and art therapy are also run by recovery coaches to engage people’s feelings of being accepted and valued as a person (and not just someone with a psychiatric label of mental illness).

During the Recovery Champions course, people are asked to answer the question: “Who am I?” This helps people to tell their own story and personal journey in life as well as in mental health. But perhaps just as importantly it allows people to share their experiences, rediscover their emotions, and prepare for new journeys. People realize that they are not alone. It is instead a shared journey where we can all support each other toward the goal of recovery and a better life.

Ron and Karen also run a very friendly and excellent recovery house on the beautiful Isle of Lewis in Scotland, which is free and relies on donations.

For further information visit: <http://www.workingtorecovery.co.uk/>