

ViewPoint

Discovery is the new recovery, argues Julie Repper



One of the difficulties with the notion of recovery is that the word lends itself to so many different interpretations. Literally, it means restoration, retrieval, recapture. In the health care context it is generally understood to describe restoration of previous function, retrieval of previous life and expectations.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that although the service users who introduced the notion of recovery to mental health services referred to rebuilding a meaningful life despite - even enriched by - ongoing symptoms, mental health professionals consider it to mean something more like 'cure' - the eradication of symptoms. Over the past few years there have been numerous papers in professional journals that discuss recovery in terms of the effect of various drugs and interventions on symptoms and service use. Recovery has been defined by criteria like 'full symptom remission, full or part time work/education, independent living without supervision by informal carers, having friends with whom activities can be shared - sustained for a period of two years'.¹ You can't help wondering what proportion of the whole population would be considered 'recovered' by these standards.

The problem with these professional understandings of recovery is that they just don't reflect the experiences of people who have mental health problems. There simply is no way back to how you were before those problems began; even if symptoms recede, the experience changes you, your view of life, and - perhaps most significantly - the way others treat you and their expectations of you. And there is so much to recover from.

Apart from the symptoms - which may be distressing, disabling and difficult to manage - there's the way those symptoms have been treated, including the side effects of medication and the stigma associated with contact with mental health services; the negative attitudes and prognoses of professionals whose primary concern is the relief of symptoms; the prejudice in a society where people with mental health problems are seen as either dangerous or incompetent; and the resulting social exclusion - the lack of opportunities to engage in valued roles and activities.

Recovery is the process of moving forward from all this, of rebuilding a satisfying and meaningful life with mental health problems, of finding new meaning and purpose in your life. But perhaps this is more accurately described as a personal journey of *discovery*. *Discovery* is about:

- discovering ways of understanding what has happened to you, explanations that make sense to you and take into account your experiences, your beliefs and your life
- discovering that you own this understanding - others might have some ideas that are helpful, but you really are the expert in your own story
- discovering that you are more than your illness - entering mental health services quickly erodes your identity and you can soon see yourself as nothing other than a mental patient, with little hope for the future

- discovering that there is a meaningful future, that there are ways of living a satisfying and meaningful life even with the limitations caused by illness
- discovering what helps and doing more of it; discovering what is difficult and what makes things more difficult; discovering what is possible, and what is not - at least for now
- discovering that you don't need to rely on mental health services for all the answers. They might have strategies, drugs, interventions that help, but friends, family and, importantly, other people who share your experiences can be helpful. So can religion or spirituality, literature, exercise - there are many different things that you can try to help you in both managing your mental health problems and rebuilding a meaningful life
- discovering that you do not always need to be on the receiving end of help; you can use your experiences to help others. Mental health problems are not totally negative. Many people have described ways in which what has happened to them has been a source of growth and development
- discovering that there is no end to this journey - it does not stop when your symptoms become manageable. Services might deem you recovered but you have the rest of your life to think about.

Two qualities appear to be crucial in making this journey: hope and opportunity. Without hope - if people are unable to see the possibility of a decent future for themselves - then they are unlikely even to embark on the journey of discovery. Without opportunity - if people are denied access to the things they value and that give their lives meaning - then the journey becomes futile.

This is a long way from focusing on diagnoses, symptoms, interventions, treatments and therapies. They have an important role, but they can never embrace the fullness of a meaningful life in which people with mental health problems are truly valued.

* Liberman R, Kopelowicz L. Editorial: Recovery from schizophrenia: a challenge for the 21st century. *International Review of Psychiatry* 2002; 14: 245-255.

Repper, Julie. 'View Point. Discovery is the new recovery, argues Julie Repper'. *"Mental Health Today"*
Feb 2006, 47

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