



'Institutionalizing' Recovery in Mental Health Care—http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mona-shattell/mental-health-asylums-_b_6780058.html

The Campaign for Recover in Mental Health Care—<http://www.mentalhealthrecoverynow.org/>

Issue 40

focus

What is the Focus?

The *Focus* newsletter highlights important issues in mental health, providing timely information on a range of topics, including work-force development, supported education, organizational development and sustainability, peer-to-peer services, youth transition and system transformation. Have a suggestion for a topic? Let us know!



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Recovery is Breaking Through

To people that live and work in the mental health field, the concept of recovery is a familiar one. While there is debate within the community regarding the factors that contribute to various mental health conditions, it is generally well known that **people with mental health conditions can and do recover.**

Unfortunately, this is less often the case among the general public, where mental health conditions are more often regarded as chronic illnesses with intractable biological causes. There is a perception that a mental health diagnosis permanently defines an individual, limiting their ability to function and negatively impacting their overall quality of life. Whereas people with lived experience of mental health recovery grasp the role of trauma and the potential of those with mental health needs to live full, rewarding lives by engaging in recovery, the perception among the general public tends more toward a vision of those with mental health diagnoses as “sick,” with little chance to work, have families, or participate in society in other meaningful ways.

While the concept of recovery has more and more become a permanent fixture in the mental health world, it has yet to gain similar traction among the general public. However, the process of introducing the larger population to mental health recovery is happening now, with different groups working on multiple fronts to move recovery into the mainstream. The consequences of these efforts have the potential to determine the shape of the mental health system for years to come.

The Official Word

People that are not familiar with recovery, or not well-versed in the experiences of people with mental health needs, naturally look to authoritative sources for

information on the topic. On a national level, one leading voice of authority comes from the federal government. An individual that goes out seeking information on mental health, perhaps out of a concern for a family member or curiosity about their own health, will likely turn to the internet. Were they to search for “mental health,” the top result would lead them to **the government’s one-stop mental health portal, [MentalHealth.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.gov)**, where they would find their first exposure to the concept of recovery.

MentalHealth.gov is a combined effort of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov), [FindYouthInfo.gov](https://www.findyouthinfo.gov), [MedlinePlus](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) and [National Institutes of Health](https://www.nih.gov), the [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](https://www.nimh.nih.gov) and the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](https://www.samhsa.gov). It is the first result that appears when one searches “mental health” online, and represents the government’s cross-agency approach to the issue.

It’s significant that the concept of recovery occupies a central position in the site’s core information on mental health. Under the heading “Basics” on the MentalHealth.gov homepage, one can find a tab called “Recovery is Possible.” It provides a definition of recovery, including a discussion of the four dimensions of recovery (health, home, purpose and community), and information on how to develop a written recovery plan. Placing this recovery-themed information so prominently highlights the message that recovery is central to a basic understanding of mental health.

Among its list of mental health myths, the site also includes “Once a friend or family member develops mental health problems, he or she will never recover.” By emphasizing hope and recovery as part of its official messaging about mental health, the federal government makes clear that recovery should be considered a mainstream concept. It seems clear that **the message being promoted across multiple federal agencies, including those associated with the medical profession, is that recovery is a central part of the approach to mental health.**

Recovery as an Outcome Measure

Recovery is also gaining legitimacy in the provider community, as more professionals begin to focus on overall positive outcomes instead of diagnoses and courses of treatment, and come to realize that **a recovery model, based in possibility, can lend a fuller, more hopeful picture than a disease model, rooted in concepts of illness.** One example of this shift can be found in a new assessment tool that has been developed in Scotland, called the I.ROC – the Individual Recovery Outcomes Counter. As reported at [medicalxpress.com](https://www.medicalxpress.com) the innovation in this tool “lies in the fact that it measures recovery, rather than symptoms and level of illness – the focus of most existing questionnaires.”

The I.ROC tool works by asking participants to respond to 12 simple questions on areas that impact health and wellbeing. They focus on their sense of purpose, hope for the future, strength of their social network and other global determinants of mental health. By returning to perform the I.ROC assessment every three months, participants are able to create a visualization of their progress in recovery on each of the 12 measures. The tool charts changes, and graphically displays the individual’s growth in recovery over time.

Robin Ion, Head of the Division of Mental Health Nursing at Abertay University, who was involved in implementing the use of the I.ROC assessment shares what makes it different from other tools.

“In the past, and in many existing mental health services, there was a focus on cure and not recovery.

“The biological model focusses almost exclusively on treating mental health problems with medication, and there is very little attention given to helping the person to develop strategies for coping with what they are experiencing and to live a good life with or without these experiences.

“But living a meaningful and fulfilling life in spite of mental distress is what recovery is all about – and this is what I.ROC helps people to achieve.”

Generally speaking, in the US there is a growing trend toward assessing the success of various treatment strategies on the basis of their outcomes. One of the underlying principles of healthcare reform has been that by paying for outcomes, instead of paying for services, the entire system can get better results at equal or lesser cost. **With the introduction of recovery as a patient-centered outcome, and the development of tools to effectively measure it, the shift from an illness model to a recovery model becomes simpler.** When providers are motivated to produce better outcomes, and asked to measure those outcomes reliably, the likelihood of basing outcome data on a recovery model becomes much more likely, and recovery gains traction as a mainstream concept in the provider community.

The Role of Advocates

Meanwhile, **efforts to reexamine and reform the country's mental health system are on the national legislative agenda**, and advocates continue to press for the inclusion of recovery principles as part of any system-wide changes.

Perhaps the most noteworthy of these efforts is the recent creation of a public campaign called "Recovery Now!" The purpose of this campaign is to advocate for community-based, recovery-oriented approaches to mental health. It offers an alternative to re-institutionalization, assisted outpatient treatment, and other approaches embedded in the disease model of mental health.

In the [press release announcing its creation](#), the organization describes its purpose: "*Recovery Now!* brings a needed focus on recovery into the national conversation about the mental health care. The campaign will identify and promote proven approaches to end cycles of preventable relapses, hospitalizations, incarceration, and homelessness; advance concrete strategies to prevent and address mental health crisis; and will advocate for greater availability of comprehensive community-based services that promote wellness and recovery through the integration of mental health, addiction and medical care."

Should Congress pass legislation to reform the nation's mental health system, the impact of that legislation is sure to be felt for decades. While recovery has been gaining traction, and moved from the fringe to the center of the mental health conversation, there is still a real possibility that those gains can be lost. There have been recent calls to bring back institutional care, as in the much-discussed ["Bring Back the Asylum" article published in The Journal of the American Medical Association](#), or the recent [New York Times opinion piece, "The Modern Asylum."](#)

With wholesale reform of the mental health system on the national legislative agenda, and debate on the issue crossing over into the mainstream media, this is a critical moment for the development of recovery. Will there be a return to institutionalization? Will a strictly medical approach be codified in law? Or will our nation develop a robust recovery-based system, with community-based resources? Hopefully people with lived experience, advocates and others that have seen the life-affirming positive impact of recovery will be heard in this moment, and work together to make sure that legislators, providers and the medical community see recovery as the way forward.



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The CAFÉ TA Center
519 N. Gadsden St.
Tallahassee, FL 32301
855-CAFÉ-TAC (223-3822)
www.CAFETACENTER.net

