

Why We Are Not Recovered (Yet)

Written by Jonathan Koley

Part One: We Can't Quite Define It

For years now, the behavioral health field has been talking about recovery. Everybody agrees that we need it, consumers deserve it, and more recovery is better all-around. But somehow, all of that talk and optimism hasn't translated into actual recovery for the people who need it. The reality is that for too many consumers recovery still feels impossible today. Ideally, the opportunity to experience meaningful recovery would be available to everyone living with behavioral health challenges and our whole behavioral health system would be recovery-focused; but we just aren't there yet. First we have some barriers to address. In this series, we will discuss a few of those barriers, starting with one simple question:

What is recovery?

This seems like a fairly basic question, but once you start to really explore it things can get complicated pretty quickly. Ask five different people to define recovery and you will get five different responses. Why? Because each person's understanding of recovery is influenced by his or her worldview.

To understand the concept of worldview we can use the metaphor of a pair of eyeglasses. Each lens in a pair of glasses redirects light in a way that alters the wearer's perception. In fact, a person wearing glasses never sees light in its original form because it is reshaped as it passes through the lens. Worldview works much the same way, but instead of light it is *life* that is being reshaped. We all have a mental lens that shapes the way we see the world. It is made of the beliefs, values, and experiences we have acquired throughout our lives. Everything we experience is filtered through it, and it is this filtered information that forms our worldview. Because each person is unique, each person's worldview is unique as well. This is why, when we ask a person to define recovery in their own terms, we get differing responses each time.

However, worldview is not shaped just by our mental lens. Just like a pair of eyeglasses, our mental lens can only interpret what it is presented with, meaning that a person has to be presented with some type of information before worldview is affected. This adds a whole new layer of complexity to our attempts to define recovery, because information about recovery comes to us from any number of different sources.

To use a real life example: I have personally taken in information about recovery through books, trainings, academic research, media, total strangers, professional healthcare providers, family members, websites, stories of people living in recovery, 12-step groups, peer support, and most importantly my own lived experience as a person in recovery. Each of those sources has something different to teach me and I continue to learn more every day. Take all of that information, filter it through my mental lens, and what comes out is an understanding of recovery that is both unique and personal to me. Considering that level of complexity, it would be easy to conclude that identifying a single, commonly shared definition of recovery is impossible. Perhaps it is, I really don't know, but that has not stopped people from trying.

In recent years, a rapidly increasing number of consumers, providers, and whole systems (including federal and state governments) have come to understand that recovery is possible. Since the 1990's the growing consensus has been that recovery is what we should be aiming for; that our approach to behavioral healthcare should be focused on supporting recovery as the best possible goal. However, that consensus is only useful to the degree that it can be translated into action.

For our behavioral health system to achieve this goal of universal recovery, we have to know what recovery *is* and, at least to some degree, agree on a definition. Don't get me wrong here; every individual has the right to define his or her own recovery as s/he chooses. However, when we move beyond the individual level and start talking about healthcare providers, government agencies, and funding organizations, having consistent definitions becomes really important. If the people making decisions about services and funding don't agree on what recovery is, promoting and supporting it becomes much, much more difficult.

In response to this need, a variety of definitions and approaches to recovery have been proposed by different groups and organizations. These definitions vary significantly, usually depending upon the experiences and attitudes of those who write them. Many are based upon a combination of scientific research and professional consensus, often with some input provided by individuals who have their own lived experience of recovery. I have included a few examples below:

- SAMHSA, the federal government's lead agency focused on substance abuse and mental health, defines recovery as **"a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential."**

The SAMHSA definition goes into much more detail than I have room for here. I highly recommend exploring it further. For more on the SAMHSA definition, [click here](#) or go to:

<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//PEP12-RECDEF/PEP12-RECDEF.pdf>

- In another prominent example, The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health stated the following in a 2003 report:

Recovery refers to the process in which people are able to live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities. For some individuals, recovery is the ability to live a fulfilling and productive life despite a disability. For others, recovery implies the reduction or complete remission of symptoms. Science has shown that having hope plays an integral role in an individual's recovery.

- For a more simple definition, we can look to the Merriam Webster Dictionary:

: the act or process of becoming healthy after an illness or injury : the act or process of recovering

: the act or process of returning to a normal state after a period of difficulty

- A panel of experts brought together by the Betty Ford Institute stated that **"recovery from substance dependence is a voluntarily maintained lifestyle characterized by sobriety, personal health, and citizenship."**
- Patricia E. Deegan, a well-known writer on recovery and consumer activist has been quoted as saying that:

Recovery is a process, a way of life, an attitude, and a way of approaching the day's challenges...The need is to meet the challenge of the disability and to re-establish a new and valued sense of integrity and purpose within and beyond the limits of the disability; the aspiration is to live, work and love in a community in which one makes a significant contribution."

Obviously, the above examples only represent a small portion of existing definitions. However, they do represent some of the most prominent ones. Unsurprisingly, they are not totally in agreement about what recovery is, but they contain several important themes found within most recovery definitions.

Most definitions identify recovery as a journey and touch upon hope, personal strengths, health, holistic growth, meaningful activity, support, and choice. However, there is still a great deal of variation among recovery definitions in terms of both content and focus. For example, some definitions are very focused on abstinence from alcohol and drug use, while others do not discuss substance use at all. Many definitions emphasize personal growth; others focus more on reduced symptoms or productivity. Recovery definitions can also be controversial based upon the language they use – as we see above, one definition may refer to "disability" where others avoid using any words which the authors may see as stigmatizing or clinical.

Of course, there is much more to recovery than I have discussed here. I have only touched upon a few key features of recovery definitions, and some of the challenges we face in creating those definitions. What I would like to know now is what *you* think about it. Is a single definition even possible? If we *could* agree on a single definition, would that be a good thing or are we better off without one? What definition do you like best? Let us know your thoughts by emailing me at consumeraffairs@regionsix.com.

In the second segment of this series, I will focus on another challenge we face on our path to recovery as a system. Next we will try to look past the definitions and look at what recovery is as *an experience*.

Be well, everybody.

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