

Recovery Coaching

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Background:

Our interest in developing a recovery based counseling/coaching protocol gained momentum and took on a sense of urgency as we learned more about the subtle nature of well-meaning, yet disempowering traditional systems approaches. One of the strongest prompts was from a circumstance that became evident within our Psychiatric Recovery Centers, which are two countywide crisis alternative programs. We realized that the assessment procedures we were required to use, and even some of our policy guidelines were causing staff to focus on the problems people were presenting instead of each person's strengths and potential.

Problem oriented assessments and therapies are common practices in behavioral health settings, but for the most part, these approaches were set in place before the concept of recovery was recognized as a reality, especially for people who had been diagnosed with serious mental illnesses. This was a direct contradiction to our META mission and vision, "To create opportunities and environments that empower people to recover".

We noticed that as people were brought into the Psychiatric Recovery Centers, our staff, who were following established protocol, were not only immediately inquiring about the problems, but continuing conversations tended to focus primarily on what was wrong. This was not setting the stage for recovery, nor was it "creating opportunities and environments" that we were committed to developing.

The second prompt came from people participating in our recovery education programs who were also engaged in individual therapy. For a few people, individual therapy enhanced their recovery and employment outcomes. For the most part, however, the therapy people received appeared to differ greatly from our recovery based approach. While we were focusing on strengths and the potential for self-determination, they seemed more focused on diagnostic criteria that pointed toward accepting limitations. This contradiction often left people confused and questioning. These issues were similar to the circumstances we were facing in our Psychiatric Recovery Centers – focusing on problems instead of potential which perpetuated feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Early stages of Development

Our early experiences with a recovery approach to counseling/coaching were developed along the lines of an informal EAP model by Lisa St. George, one of our Peer managers. Part of Lisa's assignment was to assist new Peer Support Specialists adjust to their work commitments, but she ran headlong into a dilemma: Peer Support Specialists, acculturated to a problem-oriented therapy approach, came to Lisa expecting her to listen to problems, have low expectations, and not require accountability. Lisa found she needed to orient peers to a recovery-based approach

that focused on personal responsibility and self-determination. She accomplished this by asking them to identify specific areas of growth and kept the focus on empowerment so they could take the initiative. This experience provided an opportunity for us to begin exploring recovery-oriented approaches to counseling and coaching. Lori revisited this concept when she developed a recovery coaching protocol that could be used through our programs.

Recovery Coaching Propels Recovery Pathways

We have had the opportunity to be present and share in the recovery experience with literally thousands of people over the past five years. We started paying attention to what facilitated the “recovery response” and were able to identify five or six distinct pathways that promote recovery. Next, we developed a protocol for training our staff how to use **Recovery Coaching** as a way of putting the **pathways** into action. The five **pathways** are briefly summarized below since they serve as the foundation upon which recovery coaching is based.

Five Recovery Pathway

Introduction

Recovery has been described in many different ways. Our description has evolved over the past five years to a rather simple definition: **“Recovery is remembering who you are and using your strengths to become all that you were meant to be.”** Remembering who one is, as a person, is not as easy as it might sound. Once one receives a diagnosis, it often becomes our primary point of identity. It can become the lens that we see ourselves through. Here’s how one participant described this:

“This new label overshadowed the depth and breadth of who I was as a person. To make matters worse, most of those around me started relating to me as though I’d turned into a diagnosis. In other words, they start seeing only the parts me that weren’t working too well. Guess what? This caused me to only see that part of myself too, and pretty soon I had trouble remembering who I was as a person. The more I settled into the identity, the more I forgot who I really was. Now the good news is – me, the person, the one that’s really me, was still inside me all along, buried under layers of diagnoses, medications, victim stories, hopelessness and helplessness. As I took a closer look, I began to catch glimpses of myself. The longer I could hold the image of my true self in focus, the sooner I was able to step back into my “whole person” identity.”

Attitudinal Prerequisites: Respect and Love

We started paying close attention to our outcomes and were able to identify what moved people closer to recovery and also what got in the way. We also paid attention to what went on inside of us during the process so we could learn from that too. We weren’t surprised to find that our **attitudes** and beliefs about a person and/or their situation had a major impact on our outcomes. Here’s how one of our Peer staff described this:

“Sometimes it’s not easy...Someone comes in and the problems they’re having are too close to home for me...But I look into that face and I know I need to go deep down inside and pull up that love and give it to them.”

Pathway # One: HOPE

The approaches we’ve taken to helping people recover have continued to evolve toward a more **hopeful focus** as we’ve gained experience and expanded our knowledge base. Early on we focused on managing symptoms, and over time we’ve shifted to a focus of wellness, accomplishments and abilities. This has made a big difference in the way we experience people and in the way they experience their potential for recovery. We’ve learned to expand the conversation to “what are you good at? How have you survived? What are your abilities? What are your accomplishments? All these questions cause a person to remember their strengths and abilities and to nurture a growing sense of hopefulness. We still help people learn how to manage symptoms, but we balance this with strong doses of reminding them how far they’ve come, the hope they can have for their future, and the help they can give others.

Pathway # two: CHOICE

Another way to help people remember who they are is to give them **choices**. As people make choices, they get glimpses of who they are “Oh, I’m a person who likes to work evening shifts; sleep in; make pies; tell jokes” As the choices stack up, a reflection of the person making the choices comes into view, and they can begin to see who they are. Offering choices is one of the most effective antidotes for learned helplessness and hopelessness. We have had some amazing outcomes by encouraging people to make choices, and if they make mistakes, we help them reframe it as an opportunity to learn to choose better options.

Pathway #Three: EMPOWERMENT

Since it’s the person’s job to recover, they need to be **empowered** to do so. When a person seems to be resisting the efforts of others to help them recover, they are often seen as “uncooperative or unmotivated” and may even be labeled as “non-compliant or resistant”. Resistance is a way people try to get their power back. We have discovered a number of ways to “go with” the person’s resistance in order to increase their power – the power they need to recover.

Pathway # Four: RECOVERY ENVIRONMENT:

Another key aspect of recovery is developing and maintaining a **recovery environment**. This provides a context for recovery expectations and a safe place for people to take risks and grow. Diversity is celebrated and personal differences are valued as unique and wonderful ways to learn more about the world. This includes providing opportunities for people to have meaningful and valued roles and employment.

Pathway # Five: SPIRITUALITY:

Spirituality is a topic that is often avoided in counseling protocol. However, we've heard over and over again from people in recovery that **spirituality** plays a key role in their ability to recover. We value it as a strength that can be developed and maintained to support each person's own personal recovery journey. We have identified ways to promote the development of spiritual strengths that are applicable to any choice of doctrine or religious preference.

Recovery Counseling/Coaching Protocol:

Recovery counseling/coaching provides a framework for putting the **five recovery pathways** into action. While the process draws on some established "best practice" approaches to interviewing, coaching, and counseling, there are some distinctive aspects that make it unique. A primary characteristic is the dialogue, which is sequenced to first build self-esteem and self-determination. The sequence begins by building on the person's strengths and focuses on empowerment before identifying barriers or problems. Then, since relationship is key in any counseling/coaching relationship, our recovery approach focuses on the person, instead of the problems they are presenting. This develops a relational foundation that supports the person in identifying and solving the problems that are interfering with their level of motivation, goals, etc... There is also a concentrated focus on empowering the person in order to develop the momentum necessary to move into recovery. Each session includes a dynamic planning phase where the person takes the lead to identify next steps and a sense of overall direction. Risks and outcomes are held in mutual partnership between the person and the coach with the person taking the lead to put the plan into action. The presenting problems are always framed in the context of the person's strengths and the action plan. Special attention is given to building resilience. Each session is concluded with a mutual assessment of the process, progress, and both the coach and the person's participation. This final step allows for feedback that provides learning and development for both the person and the coach.

The exact steps for the recovery coaching process follow this general sequence:

1. **Clearing**: The coach goes through a brief process of attitudinal clearing that prepares them to engage the participant in a process that is genuine, respectful and loving.
2. **Connecting**: This part of the process focuses on engagement and builds relationship in the interest of establishing a healing partnership.
3. **Empowerment**: This step includes reinforcing self-efficacy through validation, magnifying accomplishments and strengths which provide energy and motivation necessary for taking further steps. The person is recognized as the "expert" in their life. A key aspect of this step includes identifying meaningful roles the person can play that have value for others.

4. **Planning**: This step brings the person's hopes and dreams into focus and provides a hopeful context, giving perspective to the present difficulties. Choice and self-determination are critical aspects. Risks are assessed and outcomes are shared in partnership between the coach and the person.
5. **Problem**: This step looks at what could get in the way of the plan being successfully carried out (the problems) and may identify alternate routes and solutions.
6. **Resilience Building**: This step identifies and reframes potential obstacles "If you hit a bump in the road, it's just a bump, not a mudslide."
7. **Accountability**: This final step is a mutual assessment of the "meeting" that includes an informal feedback process for the counselor, the person, and the process, and identifies any changes that could stretch the growth process further.

Finally, one of the attractive aspects of Recovery Coaching is that it can easily be adapted to a variety of levels of intervention. Professional counselors as well as Peers or paraprofessionals, family members or other supporters can use it successfully. It is also relatively easy to train and is "learner friendly". It can be used by open agreement with a person, or conducted along the lines of a counseling session. See the Recovery Coaching grid for further details.