

Recovery is...

By James Wooldridge

I've spent the last seven years talking about recovery and training others in what it means to me but not until I was asked to comment as part of this project, have I really considered what recovery is.

It is more than merely a word. It represents something different to every individual and is more of an approach, ethos or way of living. It is not a model.

Recovery is founded on hope. Not the 'hope-I-win-the-lottery' kind of hope but the belief that life can and will be better. Stories of recovery are vital to spreading the message that life can be lived alongside symptoms of mental distress and can inspire others to explore their own journey. Maybe recovery is better described as 'discovery' or 're-discovery' as we learn new ways of living that go beyond coping, managing or surviving. For me recovery is about thriving and moving towards my goals and dreams for a meaningful and personally fulfilling life. I am aware that I may experience setbacks and may even face future hospital admissions, but I will endeavour to make the most of the opportunities I have been given.

I am fortunate to live in a beautiful part of the world and I feel closest to recovery when I am walking my precious dog, Ella, in the woods near my home. A word that isn't often mentioned in recovery and one that I confess to not using much in my talks, is love. When I first saw the title of this project I immediately recalled the 'Love is...' cartoons that were very popular when I was growing up. I'm convinced that knowing you are loved and being able to express love for others is an important part of recovery. Love comes in many forms, be it love for a partner, a parent, a child, a pet or God. A common thread through many recovery stories is faith and how people have made sense of their experiences with a strong belief in God or accepting that there is a Higher Power.

I mentioned earlier the word 'journey' and how many people talk of their recovery in terms of a journey. For me a journey conjures up thoughts of holidays or visiting relatives in far flung places. I personally think my journey is more accurately described as a 'quest'. That's not to say I'm a Frodo Baggins kind of character but a quest generates thoughts of adventure, hurdles to overcome, raging rivers to cross and mountains to climb. Also, from quest we derive the word question and throughout my life I have constantly been asking questions of myself. I have never claimed to hear 'voices' but these questions like; 'Why am I here?', 'What am I doing?' and 'Where am I going?' have never been far from my thoughts.

As well as hope, recovery is about choice, acceptance and responsibility. I choose how I react to my diagnosis and how I engage with people who look after me when I am unwell. In recent years I have accepted that these people have my best interests at heart and ultimately want what I want: to get back on with living my life. It took a long time to reach this acceptance as I was trained as a soldier and spent years not trusting my care providers which led to many instances of absconding and reacting angrily to staff. It wasn't until a relapse led to a serious crime that I realised my attitude had to change. It was whilst in secure services in 2004 that I first heard about recovery and made a conscious decision to work alongside and in partnership with staff. Just a few years after leaving that hospital I was driving myself back through the gates as a recovery trainer. This was a personal moment of triumph and I was gradually taking on the responsibility of being a self-employed recovery speaker and trainer, firmly believing that I could make a good living using my hard-won experience to help others. Six years later I am still self-employed and loving the work I do despite having been hospitalised three times in the past four years. I now view relapses as 'research' and although I appreciate the strain these put on my marriage, each time I emerge stronger and wiser.

So there it is, a little slice of what recovery is to me.