



Mental Health Matters: Education for Recovery

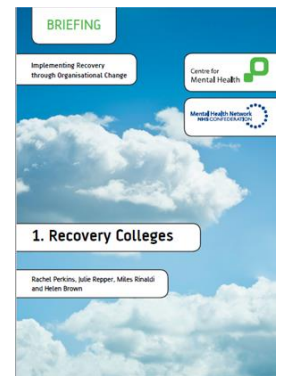
Is it possible to learn how to get well and stay well?

The short and hopeful answer is a resounding 'yes' and there has been a long history of people facing major mental health challenges doing just that. The last 50 years have seen a huge growth of peer and mutual support groups of all kinds. These often arose from the pioneering sometime heroic examples of individuals whose experience provided inspiration and leadership in self-help and recovery approaches. Some of these have become widely accessible across the country such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Bipolar UK (previously the Manic Depressive Fellowship), Rethink (previously National Schizophrenia Fellowship) and MIND. Others were more localised contacts such as the self-harm, hearing voices and paranoia networks ... now widely accessible online.

It is notable that all of these were set up by those with personal experience and it was their experience-based expertise and the companionship of peer support that provided a practical and effective guide for others seeking to learn how to get well and stay well.

But ... what does 'learning to get well' mean?

If you have a health challenge that can be completely overcome, if 'cure' is possible – then great. But according the King's Fund there are now around 15 Million people in England with long term conditions, that's 1:4 of the population. It is therefore very common for people to live with persisting health conditions and disabilities for which there is (currently) no cure. BUT, that doesn't mean they cannot find a path towards recovery.



Recent years have seen a creative and hopeful re-vision in understanding 'Recovery' as a *journey of discovery* in how to live and how to live well with a long term condition. It has substantially been people in recovery who held out such hope of recovery for others. They knew it was possible because they were living it. They had found that it was possible to recover a life you value and a way of living as a full and fulfilled person even if difficult experiences (symptoms or disabilities) continued. This carried a vision that it was possible to learn how to get well and stay well even with persisting challenges. This is the path of personal recovery, a path of healing even if not 'cure', a path open to all and for which peers are best equipped to teach and guide one another.

Making Recovery a Reality – in the NHS, in Devon

2008 saw the beginning of a remarkable project that drew on this personal lived-experience perspective as a major developmental influence in NHS services. This was initially hosted by the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health who published 'Making Recovery a Reality' and laid the ground for what in 2011 became ImROC, a national service development programme and Devon was one of six initial pilot sites. These connections resulted in senior health managers from Devon visiting the first Recovery Colleges in Nottingham and London, which inspired Devon to open its own NHS Recovery College, as the 'Devon Recovery Learning Community', 2 years later.



Recovery Colleges are now present in some form in nearly every NHS mental health service in the UK but it's a core principle that as adult educational settings, people refer themselves and attend as students, not patients. Another key principle is that all courses draw on a combination of personal and professional experience and are thus 'co-created' and co-delivered, often in partnership with other supportive community groups interested in promoting recovery.

So ... what, in general, is best to learn – what works?

A good question but, in general, no one knows ... yet. This whole movement is only 10 years old in the UK and has been driven more by enthusiasm and opportunity than careful planning or evidence. Each Recovery College is very different, reflecting local circumstances and leadership. Current national research, which includes Devon, is seeking to understand what would be an ideal curriculum? What is most useful to learn? But it's not likely to come up with useful generalisations, at least not in detail. How could you decide if it was better for people to do bakery, anger management or abseiling? The best answer may be, 'ask them', as enabling people to make their own choices that will support them in their own recovery seems to be a key issue.



15. Recovery Colleges
10 Years On
Rachel Perkins, Sara Meddings, Sue Williams
and Julie Repper
with contributions from Jane Reinson, Joanne Sommer,
Sharon Gilfoyle and Toni King

ImROC say recovery is based on three principles, Hope, Opportunity and Choice (agency) and the Recovery Colleges seek to embody just that. So the answer to the question of 'what works' is essentially a reflective exercise, 'What have you found, *in your experience*, works best for you' ... and then do more of that.

Working together to open pathways to Recovery.

Although Recovery Colleges are almost all led and hosted by local NHS Mental Health Trusts, they often work in partnership with many other community organisations. Devon is richer in this collaborative spirit than most. The DRLC began mid 2013 with just two partners, Exeter College and Rethink and prior to lockdown that had grown to working closely with 25 partner organisations to deliver around 100 free courses across Devon.

In addition to courses focused on learning about various mental health conditions (diagnoses) and how to make best use of therapy and treatments, there are many self-help skills taught by peers who are using them. Courses also reflect the need to not only recover from a problem but to recovery to a life you value and want to live. Contributors included the National Parks Authorities, galleries and museums, creative studios, opportunities for nature connections, horsemanship for health, cold water swimming (brrrrrr) and various

outdoor activities in support of becoming 'Wild Things' and many others (see <https://devonrlc.co.uk/our-partners-and-co-production/>). This is a very impressive collaboration which offers introductions, opportunities and bridges for positive connections with community living for any that wish to use them.

Like all of us the Devon Recovery Learning Community has made changes and developed its online offer during lockdown but it is also now in the process of opening up again to in-person courses.

The DRLC is a very welcoming place, so we'll let it introduce itself at <https://devonrlc.co.uk/> for information, access and applications.



So – can I, can you, can we, learn how to get well and stay well? ... Yes, certainly, it takes time, small and sometimes big steps and acceptance of lots of ups and downs, but there are many supportive opportunities, and you will find many others also taking steps towards recovery. You can take up things by yourself but you'll also be welcome to join a community of learners across Devon. You just need to make the connection and give it a go.

Take care, and with all good wishes

Glenn, Kate and Sophie

For BradTog MHM

Ps. All references are available on request