

# Recovering Your Mental Health—A Self-Help Guide

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## Foreword

Consumer self-care is becoming an important part of efficient and effective healthcare delivery. By exercising best practices of promoting wellness and preventing illness, informed consumers can dramatically improve outcomes and reduce costs. This strategy has been widely successful in primary healthcare delivery; yet, few efforts have been conducted in the mental health arena. There is clearly a defined need for information and guidance to assist mental health consumers to become better educated in the management of their own care.

This publication, *Recovering Your Mental Health: A Self-Help Guide*, identifies activities and strategies that people may use to help manage their own illnesses and services. This booklet is intended to support and enhance the nationwide focus on self-help for and recovery from mental health problems. It is based on the extensively-reported day-to-day experiences of people with psychiatric symptoms, and how they get well and stay well.

The booklet offers practical steps that people need to keep in mind as they work on their own recovery including: getting good medical care and treatment; ensuring effective medication decision-making and managing; using specific simple, safe, free or inexpensive tools to relieve symptoms; rebuilding and keeping a strong support system; developing and using a comprehensive plan to monitor and respond to symptoms as well as to maintain on-going wellness; and developing a lifestyle that enhances wellness.

It is important for mental health consumers to take part in all aspects of their own care and to have the tools and knowledge to do so. It is our hope that this booklet will provide self-help skills and strategies to assist people with mental health problems to achieve new levels of stability, recovery, and wellness.

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## Introduction

If you have troubling, uncomfortable, or severe emotional or psychiatric symptoms, this booklet contains helpful information on things you can do to help yourself feel better. It is complementary to, and not a replacement for, your professional treatment. Never stop taking medications without careful consideration and without getting the advice of your physician and other supporters. Never abruptly stop any medication. There are protocols which must be followed in stopping or changing medications.

Not all of the ideas in this booklet will work for everyone—use the ones that feel right to you. If something doesn't sound right to you, skip over it. However, try not to dismiss anything before you have considered it.

The term health care provider in this booklet refers to any person or people you have chosen to provide you with health care.

## Taking a Look at Yourself

Have you been told that you have a psychiatric or mental illness like depression, bipolar disorder or manic depression, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, dissociative disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, an eating disorder or an anxiety disorder?

Do any of the following feelings or experiences make you feel miserable or get in the way of doing the things you want to do most or all of the time?

- feeling like your life is hopeless and you are worthless
- wanting to end your life
- thinking you are so great that you are world famous, or that you can do supernatural things
- feeling anxious
- being afraid of common things like going outdoors or indoors, or of being seen in certain places
- feeling like something bad is going to happen and being afraid of everything
- being very “shaky,” nervous, continually upset and irritable
- having a hard time controlling your behavior
- being unable to sit still
- doing things over and over again—finding it very hard to stop doing things like washing your hands, counting everything or collecting things you don’t need
- doing strange or risky things – like wearing winter clothes in the summer and summer clothes in the winter, or driving too fast
- believing unusual things – like that the television or radio are talking to you, or that the smoke alarms or digital clocks in public buildings are taking pictures of you
- saying things over and over that don’t make any sense
- hearing voices in your head
- seeing things you know aren’t really there
- feeling as if everyone is against you or out to get you
- feeling out of touch with the world
- having periods of time go by when you don’t know what has happened or how the time has passed — you don’t remember being there but others say you were
- feeling unconnected to your body
- having an unusually hard time keeping your mind on what you are doing
- a sudden or gradual decrease or increase in your ability to think, focus, make decisions and understand things
- feeling like you want to cut yourself or hurt yourself in another physical way

If you answered “yes” to the first question or answered “yes” to any of these experiences, this booklet is for you. It is designed to offer helpful information and suggest things you can do to feel better.

## Things To Remember

Above all, remember, you are not alone. Many people have feelings or experiences like these at some time in their lives. When such experiences become severe, some people reach out for help and treatment from health care providers. Others try to get through it on their own. Some people don’t tell anyone what they are expe-

riencing because they are afraid people will not understand and will blame them or treat them badly. Other people share what they are experiencing with friends, family members, or co-workers.

Sometimes these feelings and experiences are so severe that friends and people around you know you are having them even though you have not told them. No matter what your situation is, these feelings and experiences are very hard to live with. They may keep you from doing what you want to do with your life, what you have to do for yourself and others, and what you find rewarding and enjoyable.

As you begin to work on helping yourself feel better, there are some important things to keep in mind.

1. You will feel better. You will feel happy again. The disturbing experiences and feelings you've had or are having are temporary. This may be hard to believe, but it's true. No one knows how long these symptoms will last.

However, there are lots of things you can do to relieve them and make them go away. You will want help from others, including health care providers, family members, and friends in relieving your symptoms and for ongoing help in staying well.

2. The best time to address these feelings and experiences is now, before they get any worse.
3. These feelings and experiences are not your fault. Remember, you are just as valuable and important as anyone else.
4. When you have these kinds of feelings and experiences, it is hard to think clearly and make good decisions. If possible, don't make any major decisions—like whether to get a job or change jobs, move, or leave a partner or friend—until you feel better. If you have to make some major decisions, especially about getting treatment, ask your friends, family members, and health care providers for help.
5. Spend time with people you know, and work on developing friendships with people who are positive, caring and who like you just the way you are. Sometimes people who have these kinds of feelings and experiences are treated badly by people who don't understand. Try to stay away from people who treat you badly.
6. Listen to the concerns of and feedback from your health care providers, friends, and family members who are trying to be helpful, and work with them to find solutions that feel right to everyone involved.
7. These feelings and experiences do not take away your basic personal rights. You have the right to-
  - ask for what you want, say yes or no, and change your mind.
  - make mistakes.
  - follow your own values, standards and spiritual beliefs.
  - express all of your feelings, both positive or negative, in a responsible manner.
  - be afraid and uncertain.
  - determine what is important to you and to make your own decisions based on what you want and need.
  - have the friends and interests of your choice.
  - be uniquely yourself and allow yourself to change and grow.
  - have your own personal space and time.

- be safe.
  - be playful and frivolous.
  - be treated with dignity, compassion and respect at all times.
  - know the side effects of recommended medications and treatments.
  - refuse medications and treatments that are unacceptable to you.
8. If you are told that the following things are not normal, don't believe it. They are normal. These kinds of things happen to everyone and are part of being human.
- Getting angry when you are provoked
  - Safely expressing emotions when you are happy, sad or excited
  - Forgetting things
  - Feeling tired and discouraged sometimes
  - Wanting to make your own decisions about your treatment and life
9. It's up to you to take responsibility for your behavior and for getting better. You have the right to as much help as you need, but it is crucial that you take charge.

## What To Do If Your Symptoms Are Very Serious

If your symptoms are so severe that you feel hopeless and worthless all the time, or your feelings and experiences feel overwhelming, or if any of the following apply to you, take steps right away to help yourself.

- You feel like life is not worth living anymore.
- You think a lot about dying, have thoughts of suicide, or have planned how to kill yourself.
- You are taking lots of risks that are endangering your life and/or the lives of others.
- You feel like hurting yourself, hurting others, destroying property or committing a crime.

Things you need to do

RIGHT AWAY:

- Arrange an appointment with your doctor, or other health care provider, or with a mental health agency. **If your symptoms make you a danger to yourself or someone else, insist on immediate care and treatment. A family member or friend may need to do this for you if your symptoms are too severe.** If you are taking medicines and you think it would be helpful, ask for a medication check.
- Ask friends or family members to take turns staying with you until you feel better. Then talk, play cards, watch a funny video together, listen to music— do things that keep you from feeling any worse and may give you some relief.
- Do some simple things that you usually enjoy like “getting lost” in a good book, viewing a beautiful picture, playing with your pet or writing in your journal.

You will find more things you might choose to do to help yourself feel better in the section of this booklet entitled: **“Additional Things You Can Do Right Away to Help Yourself Feel Better.”** As you learn what helps you to feel better, and as you take action to help yourself more and more quickly, you will find that you spend more and more time feeling well and less time feeling badly.

## Getting Health Care

If you possibly can, see a doctor or another health care provider you like and trust. He or she can help you find out if the way you are feeling is caused by a medical illness, such as a thyroid problem or diabetes. In addition, your health care provider is often your best source of referral for other kinds of help. The sooner you get help, the sooner you will feel better.

It's always easier to go to the doctor if you take along a good friend. Your friend can help you remember what the doctor suggests, and could take notes if you want notes taken.

When you go to see your health care provider, take a complete listing of all medicines and anything else you may be doing to help yourself feel better, and a list of unusual, uncomfortable or painful physical or emotional symptoms—even if they don't seem important to you. Also describe any difficult issues in your life—both things that are going on now and things that have happened in the past—that may be affecting the way you feel. This will help the doctor give you the best possible advice on what you can do to help yourself.

## Your Health Care Rights

Your doctor or health care provider is doing a service, just like the person who installs your telephone or fixes your car. The only difference is they have experience and expertise in dealing with health issues. Your doctor or other health care provider should:

- listen carefully to everything you say and answer your questions.
- be hopeful and encouraging.
- plan your treatment based on what you want and need.
- teach you how to help yourself.
- know about and be willing to try new or different ways of helping you feel better.
- be willing to talk with other health care professionals, your family members, and friends, about your problems and what can be done about them, if you want them to.

**In addition to the personal rights described earlier, your health care rights also include the right to-**

- decide for yourself which treatments are acceptable to you and which are not.
- a second opinion without being penalized.
- change health care providers—although this right may be limited by some health care plans.
- have the person or people of your choice be with you when you are seeing your doctor or other health care provider.

## Using Medications

Your physician may suggest one or more medications to help you feel better. Using these medications should be your decision, but first, you need answers to some important questions. To get those answers, you might ask your doctor or pharmacist, check a book about medications at the library, or search a reliable information source on the Internet. Double check with your health care provider before making a final decision.

- What are the common name, product name, product category, and suggested dosage level of this medicine?

- What does the physician expect the medication to do? How long will it take to do that? How well has this medicine worked for other people?
- What are the possible long- and short-term side effects of taking this medicine? Is there any way to reduce the risk of experiencing these side effects?
- What, if any, restrictions (like driving or avoiding certain foods) need to be considered when using this medicine?
- How are medicine levels in the blood checked? What tests will be needed before taking this medicine and while taking the medicine?
- How do I know if the dose should be changed or the medicine stopped?
- How much does it cost? Are there any programs that would help me cover some or all of the costs of the medications? Is there a less expensive medication that I could use instead? Can generics or non-brand name medications be substituted for any the doctor suggests?
- Are there any medications or supplements that I shouldn't take at the same time as these? What about over-the-counter medications?

If your symptoms are so bad that you are having trouble understanding this information, ask a family member or friend to learn about the medication and to help you decide whether this is the right course of treatment for you.

In deciding whether to take a medication or have a certain treatment, you might ask yourself whether the benefits of the medication outweigh the risks. You might also decide that you will take it for a trial period and then re-evaluate.

If you decide to use one or more medicines, you must manage them very carefully to get the best possible results and to avoid serious problems. To do this:

- use the medicines exactly as the doctor and pharmacist have suggested.
- report any side effects to your doctor, and keep notes for yourself about what you experience, when you experience it, and what the doctor's response is.
- tell your doctor about any times that you have not been able to take your medicine for any reason so the doctor can tell you what to do—do not double the next dose unless the doctor tells you to.
- avoid the use of alcohol or illegal drugs. (If you are addicted to them, ask your doctor for help.)
- pay close attention to lifestyle issues that cannot be corrected by medications, such as stress, chaos, poor diet (including excessive use of sugar, salt, caffeine, smoking), lack of exercise, light and rest. If these are problems for you, you will need to address these issues at some time in order to feel really well. But take it one step at a time

## Additional Things You Can Do Right Away to Help Yourself Feel Better

There are many simple, safe, inexpensive, or free things you can do to help yourself feel better. The most common ones are listed here. You may think of other things you have done to help yourself feel better.

- Tell a good friend or family member how you feel. Talking with someone else who has had similar experiences and feelings is very helpful because they can best understand how you feel. First ask them if they have some time to listen to you. Ask them not to interrupt with any advice, criticism, or judgments. Tell them that after you get done talking you would like to discuss what to do about the situation, but that first you need to talk with no interruptions to help yourself feel better.
- If you have a mental health provider you feel comfortable with, tell her or him how you are feeling and ask for advice and support. If you don't have a health care provider and would like to see someone professionally, contact your local mental health agency. (The phone number can be found in the yellow pages of your phone book under Mental Health Services. Alternatively, contact resources identified in the back of this booklet.) Sliding scale fees and free services are often available.
- Spend time with people you enjoy—people who make you feel good about yourself. Avoid people who aren't supportive. Do not allow yourself to be hurt physically or emotionally in any way. If you are being beaten, sexually abused, screamed at, or are suffering other forms of abuse, ask your health care provider or a crisis counselor to help you figure out how you can get away from whoever is abusing you or how you can make the other person stop abusing you.
- Ask a family member or friend to take over some or all of the things you need to do for several days—like taking care of children, household chores and work-related tasks—so you have time to do the things you need to take care of yourself.
- Learn about what you are experiencing. This will allow you to make good decisions about all parts of your life, like: your treatment; how and where you are going to live; who you are going to live with; how you will get and spend money; your close relationships; and parenting issues. To do this, read pamphlets you may find in your doctor's office or health care facility; review related books, articles, video and audio tapes (the library is often a good source of these resources); talk to others who have had similar experiences and to health care professionals; search the Internet; and attend support groups, workshops or lectures. If you are having such a hard time that you cannot do this, ask a family member or friend to do it with you or for you. This may be hard for you if you don't normally ask anyone for favors. Try to understand that others are often glad to do something for you if they know it is going to help.
- Get some exercise. Any movement, even slow movement, will help you feel better—climb the stairs, take a walk, sweep the floor. Don't overdo it though.
- If possible, spend at least one-half hour outdoors every day, even if it is cloudy or rainy. Let as much light into your home or work place as possible—roll up the shades, turn on the lights.
- Eat healthy food. Limit your use of sugar, caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate, soda) alcohol, and heavily salted foods. If you don't feel like cooking, ask a family member or friend to cook for you, order take out, or have a healthy frozen dinner.



- Every day, do something you really enjoy, something that makes you feel good—like working in your garden, watching a funny video, playing with your pet, buying yourself a treat like a new CD or a magazine, reading a good book, or watching a ball game. It may be a simple, free activity, such as watching the moon rise, smelling flowers, or walking barefoot in the grass. It may be a creative activity like working on a knitting, crocheting, or woodworking project, painting a picture, or playing a musical instrument. Keep the things you need for these activities on hand so they will be available when you need them. It might be useful to make a list of things you enjoy, and keep adding to it all the time.

Then refer to the list when you are feeling so badly that you can't remember things you enjoy.

- Relax! Sit down in a comfortable chair, loosen any tight clothing and take several deep breaths. Starting with your toes, focus your attention on each part of your body and let it relax. When you have relaxed your whole body, notice how you feel. Then, focus your attention for a few minutes on a favorite scene, like a warm day in spring or a walk at the ocean, before returning to your other activities.

If you are having trouble sleeping, try some of the following suggestions.

- Listen to soothing music after you lie down.
- Eat foods high in calcium, like dairy products and leafy green vegetables, or take a calcium supplement.
- Avoid alcohol—it will help you get to sleep but may cause you to awaken early.
- Avoid sleeping late in the morning and taking long naps during the day.
- Before going to bed:
  - avoid heavy meals, strenuous activity, caffeine, and nicotine
  - read a calming book
  - take a warm bath
  - drink a glass of warm milk, eat some turkey and/or drink a cup of chamomile tea.

Keep your life as simple as possible. If it doesn't really need to be done, don't do it. Learn that it is alright to say "no" if you can't or don't want to do something, but don't avoid responsibilities like taking good care of yourself and your children. Get help with these responsibilities if you need it.

Work on changing your negative thoughts to positive ones. Everyone has negative thoughts that they have learned, usually when they were young. When you are feeling badly, these negative thoughts can make you feel worse. For instance, if you find yourself thinking, "I will never feel better," try saying, "I feel fine," instead. Other common negative thoughts and positive responses:

Negative thought	Positive response
No one likes me.	Many people like me.
I am worthless.	I am a valuable person.
I'm a loser.	I'm a winner.
I can't do anything right.	I do many things right.

Repeat the positive responses over and over.

**Every time you have a negative thought, replace it with a positive one.**

## Things To Do When You Are Feeling Better To Keep Yourself Well

When you are feeling better, make plans using the ideas in the previous section that will help you keep yourself well. Include simple lists:

- to remind yourself of things you need to do every day – like getting a half hour of exercise and eating three healthy meals;
- to remind yourself of those things that you may not need to do every day, but if you miss them they will cause stress in your life, like bathing, buying food, paying bills or cleaning your home;
- of events or situations that may make you feel worse if they come up, like a fight with a family member, health care provider, or social worker, getting a big bill, or loss of your job. Then list things to do (relax, talk to a friend, play your guitar) if these things happen so you won't start feeling bad;
- of early warning signs that indicate you are starting to feel worse – like always feeling tired, sleeping too much, overeating, dropping things and losing things. Then list things to do (get more rest, take some time off, arrange an appointment with your health care provider, cut back on caffeine) to help yourself feel better;
- of signs that things are getting much worse, such as feeling very depressed, not being able to get out of bed in the morning or feeling negative about everything. Then list things to do that will help you feel better quickly (get someone to stay with you, spend extra time doing things you enjoy, contact your doctor);
- of information that can be used by others if you become unable to take care of yourself or keep yourself safe, such as signs that indicate you need their help, who you want to help you (give copies of this list to each of these people), the names of your doctor, or other mental health professional and pharmacist, all prescriptions and over-the-counter medications, things that others can do to help you feel better or keep you safe, and things you do not want others to do or that might make you feel worse.

### **In conclusion:**

**Don't try to do everything or make all the changes suggested in this booklet all at once. You can incorporate them into your life gradually. As you do, you will notice that you will feel better and better.**

## Further Resources

### **Consumer Organization and Networking Technical Assistance Center**

(CONTAC)

P.O. Box 11000

Charleston, WV 25339

1 (888) 825-TECH (8324)

(304) 346-9992 (fax)

Web site: [www.contac.org](http://www.contac.org)

### **Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)**

(formerly the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association)

730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501

Chicago, IL 60610-3526

(800) 826-3632

Web site: [www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)

**National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)**

(Special Support Center)  
Colonial Place Three  
2107 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201-3042  
(703) 524-7600  
Web site: [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

**National Empowerment Center**

599 Canal Street, 5 East  
Lawrence, MA 01840  
1-800-power2u  
(800)TDD-POWER (TDD)  
(978)681-6426 (fax)  
Web site: [www.power2u.org](http://www.power2u.org)

**National Mental Health Association (NMHA)**

(Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center)  
2001 N. Beauregard Street - 12th Floor  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
(800) 969-NMHA or 6642  
Web site: [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

**National Mental Health Consumers'**

Self-Help Clearinghouse  
1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1207  
Philadelphia, PA 19107  
1 (800) 553-4539 (voice)  
(215) 636-6312 (fax)  
e-mail: [info@mhsselfhelp.org](mailto:info@mhsselfhelp.org)  
Web site: [www.mhsselfhelp.org](http://www.mhsselfhelp.org)

**SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center**

P.O. Box 42557  
Washington, D.C. 20015  
1 (800) 789-2647 (voice)  
Web site: [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

Center for Mental Health Services  
Web site: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

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