

The Benefits of Healthy Recovery Groups

By Jane Mountain, MD

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In this fourth and last article on recovery groups, we examine the benefits of healthy recovery groups. Recovery groups can have a major impact in helping a person live well with bipolar disorder. They provide opportunities for learning and for being part of a unique, supporting community. Recovery group members quickly learn that helping others reinforces one's own progress and empowers people to go forward in seeking wellness. For recovery group leaders, providing the structure for members to help others is perhaps the greatest benefit of recovery groups.

Using Educational Opportunities

Learning occurs on many levels. It can be fast or slow, painful or fun. Learning by leaps and bounds involves exposure to basic knowledge about bipolar disorder. A group experience allows you to access the knowledge base of guest speakers and of everyone in the group.

Becoming expert in living with bipolar disorder helps you succeed. Such expertise helps you utilize the benefits of treatment

and community resources. With it, you can become a creative user of tools that will help you address challenges of living with bipolar disorder. A practical knowledge base about bipolar disorder helps you enhance your ability to identify and strengthen your unique qualities.

In the first article of this series three essential values of recovery were introduced. Now is a good time to review them.

1. Recovery is possible
2. Recovery skills can be learned
3. Often recovery skills are best taught by those who have integrated them into daily life

In seeking mental wellness, we do not always follow the same path, but seeing the road map of other's experience can help us choose our route and make sure we are headed in the right direction.

Being Part of a Community

Every community has distinguishing characteristics. For recovery groups the unique message is that we are not alone in experiencing the challenges of bipolar disorder. Healthy groups empower individuals to tackle challenges that accompany bipo-

lar disorder by teaching recovery skills. They invite members to join with others who have entered the process of recovery.

Do you remember the definition of recovery from the first article in this series? *"Recovery is the process of actively seeking mental wellness in the context of experiencing bipolar disorder"* (Mountain, 2003).

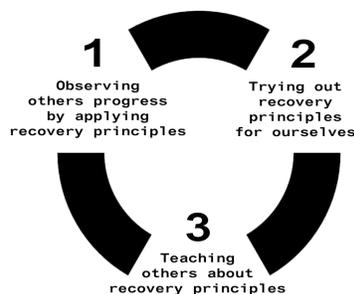
Strong and rapid growth in any process requires feedback from others. In a safe environment, provided by a recovery group, feedback from others can help you to see yourself more objectively. Having this view can readily reinforce your strengths even when you are frustrated and discouraged. It can also help you develop a realistic picture of who you really are when you are riding the waves of mania.

The message of group members who see strengths and progress toward recovery provides an alternative to the message of depression that screams lies about inadequacy. Seeing your progress through the eyes of others who have walked in your shoes is an antidote to the message you may be hearing from society that emphasizes an illness you experience rather than recognizing your unique gifts and personality.

In a recovery group setting, the success of other members nurtures hope. Watching others hit a low or a peak and then come back to stability gives perspective about our own walk with bipolar disorder. This give-and-take brings a better understanding about what living with bipolar disorder is all about.

Helping Others

Finding opportunities to help others may well be the most important benefit of being part of a recovery group. Helping others reinforces our own strengths and our progress toward wellness, and teaching others what we have learned causes us to reflect on our own progress. The steps shown in the diagram below illustrates how the dynamic of applying recovery principles brings the recovery process full circle.



This dynamic process can be fostered in any recovery group. It begins by establishing a safe place where all are asked, “What are you doing to take care of yourself?” This is followed by giving encouragement and by active problem solving.

Part of this process is insuring leaders are receiving as much support as others in the group. If you are a group leader, there may be times when you feel as though you are only giving support without receiving it. You can address this at the appropriate time during each meeting by stating that it is your turn to share and get support and letting others know in your conversations that you value their support. Failing to teach this principle leads to leadership burnout. More importantly, it bypasses a means to allow all members of

the group to become active in helping others.

When leaders are not supported, it reinforces the perception that recovery is an ideal that a few leaders have reached rather than a process that is obtainable by all. Group members are helped when they learn they have a valuable contribution to make—even to identified leaders of the group.

Healthy Recovery Groups Offer Benefits

Three essential benefits of a healthy recovery group are:

1. The facilitation of education about bipolar disorder with the goal that group members become experts about bipolar disorder.
2. The creation of a safe community in which members are not alone in meeting the challenge to live well with bipolar disorder.
3. The presentation of opportunities for members to help others in order to reinforce the recovery process and to see recovery as an obtainable goal.

For more about recovery and bipolar, return to the homepage at www.beyondbipolar.com.

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Website Resources

American Psychiatric Association, www.psych.org

American Psychological Association, www.apa.org

Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, www.cabf.org

International Society for Bipolar Disorders, www.isbd.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, www.nami.org

Depression and Bipolar Support, Alliance www.dbsalliance.org

Stanley Medical Research Institute, www.stanleyresearch.org