



People can – and do – recover from mental illness and addiction

September is Recovery Month

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

It can be easy to think mental illness and addiction are conditions that last a lifetime. To believe that once someone has a mental illness or addictive disease, he or she will carry that burden forever. Unfortunately, part of that burden is the stigma and labels that continue to be associated with these illnesses. But attitudes are changing, and so is what we know.

As research continues to uncover more insights into the causes and progression of mental illness and addiction, we have learned these diseases are not the result of poor choices, character flaws or individual behaviors. Rather, they emerge from a variety of factors outside the control of the individuals who have them

This is an especially important distinction for addiction, once thought to be the consequence of bad morals or lack of willpower. The National Institute for Drug Abuse today recognizes addiction not only as a chronic disease but a mental illness.

That's why we no longer label people as "mentally ill" or "an addict" – but instead, a person with mental illness or a person with addictive disease. Such language is more than an attempt at political correctness. Rather, it reflects one of the most critical research insights into these diseases: that we might no longer think of mental illness or addiction as lifetime afflictions because people can recover from them.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration designates each September as Recovery Month, calling recovery the single most important goal of the mental health services delivery system. Unlike a traditional treatment model that focuses on treating what's "wrong," the recovery model is person-centered and builds on an individual's strengths.

Some may ask, however, because mental illness is chronic disease, is it really possible to recover? For instance, we don't expect an individual with diabetes to actually recover from that disease, but to learn to live with it.

It's a good question. If not treated and managed properly, diabetes can be a debilitating and life-threatening disease. But when a person with diabetes receives quality treatment, the right medication and ongoing support, he or she can learn to manage the symptoms, reduce the risk of hospitalization and live a full and active life. In other words, the disease does not interfere with the person's daily functioning and independence.

So it is with recovery from mental illness and addiction. It is a process – inspired by hope, for which the individual takes responsibility, is empowered with treatment and support, and through which he or she regains independence to live the best possible life.

For evidence that recovery works, look around you. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that one in five adults will have a mental illness in his or her lifetime, one in four in any given year. That means you very likely know someone who has mental illness.

But you also very likely know someone who has recovered from mental illness or addiction – and you have no idea of the struggles he or she endured in the past because today the individual is working, contributing and living a fulfilling life.

That's the point. Mental illness and addiction no longer have to last a lifetime, but recovery most certainly can.