



September is National Recovery Month

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

What do you think of when you hear the word recovery?

If you had pneumonia, recovery may mean being able to go back to work, enjoying the activities you did before you were sick, and no longer being fatigued or in bed. If you broke a leg in an accident, recovery may mean your cast has been removed, physical therapy has been completed and you are able walk or run as you did before. In these examples, recovery means returning to the state of health and daily functioning you had before.

For individuals with mental illness or addictive disease, recovery is very similar – but also very different. It is similar because mental illness and addiction recovery means regaining health and daily functioning. But it is different because mental illness and addiction are often chronic conditions, meaning they must be managed through a combination of therapy, medication and other supports.

But perhaps a more important distinction is that mental illness and addiction recovery is focused on moving forward. Indeed, for an individual with mental illness, life before recovery may have meant feeling worthless and depressed, or perhaps hearing voices, experiencing extreme paranoia, or wanting to hurt oneself or others.

Likewise, an individual with addiction may have spent the majority of his or her time seeking and being under the influence of drugs or alcohol – and has lost jobs, friends, family or a place to live.

Understandably, individuals working to recover from mental illness or addiction usually don't want to go back to how things were 'before.' Instead, they want to learn to manage their illnesses in ways that allow them to be healthy and function as independently as possible. This is why you rarely hear individuals with mental illness or addiction say they are 'recovered,' but rather are living in recovery.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines recovery as a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives and strive to reach their full potential. As part of this process, SAMHSA has identified four key aspects of a life in recovery:

- Health: overcoming or managing one's disease(s) or symptoms and making informed, healthy choices that support physical and emotional well-being;
- Home: having a stable and safe place to live;

- Purpose: engaging in meaningful daily activities (such as a job, school, recreation, family), and having the independence and resources to participate;
- Community: having relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love and hope

Finally, SAMHSA says, hope – the belief that these challenges and conditions can be overcome – is the foundation of recovery.

What's notable about this definition is, first, recovery is recognized as a process. Just as recovering from a serious injury or physical illness may require weeks or months – or in some cases, years – mental health and addiction recovery takes time and requires many different interventions and supports.

Second, being able to live in recovery not only means treating the mental or addictive disease, but also addressing those aspects of daily life that support physical health, stability, independence and community engagement. Recovery is holistic and involves every aspect of an individual's life.

What's most important to know about recovery is that it is always possible. People can and do recover from mental illness, addiction or both, and live healthy, independent and productive lives in recovery.

If you're struggling with mental illness or addiction, don't wait to get help. The sooner you begin treatment, the sooner you can find hope and recovery.