

Belmont Behavioral Health's Recovery Initiative: A bridge from hopelessness to hope

“Recovery” – a term usually associated with substance abuse treatment – has been infused with new meaning at Belmont Behavioral Health. According to Nancy Beck, MA, OTR/L, director of Rehabilitation and Volunteer Services at Belmont, recovery is defined as a process by which people who have struggled for many years with mental illness such as schizophrenia, depression and bipolar disorder, are helped to embrace and visualize goals and dreams. And, more importantly, to believe that those goals and dreams can become a reality.

Recovery=Attitude+Belief

“The Recovery Initiative is both an attitude and a belief,” says Ms. Beck. “It is a vision that spells the difference between seeing patients as people with diseases who will never get better, and seeing people with illnesses who also have capabilities that can be tapped for recovery.” The components of care and recovery, she says, can include appropriate medication, education, and establishing a strong support system of family, peers, and community or faith-based resources.

“There are four basic pillars of recovery,” says Lawrence Real, MD, medical director at Belmont. “They are hope, empowerment, helping people get a sense of responsibility about themselves, and helping people get a sense of meaning in their lives. The nurturing of hope may be the most important.”

Dr. Real says that many former patients are today functioning very well, holding jobs and raising families. “What has impressed me over the years is the tremendous resilience of the human spirit, which we tend to underestimate,” says Dr. Real.

The journey's first step

The road to recovery starts, however, with the first step – admission. Many patients come to Belmont through a crisis response center and then are admitted as inpatients. “We provide a safe, protective and caring environment,” says Ms. Beck. “We try to free people from the stressful life situations that exacerbate their feelings of anguish and self-destruction. We take them out of the situations in which they wanted to die or to hurt someone else.” According to Ms. Beck, what they find at Belmont are comfortable, home-like units and an atmosphere in which they do not feel threatened by staff or other patients.

The value of peer involvement

Another step on the path to recovery at Belmont leads through a variety of innovative steps and opportunities, one of which is peer support and peer involvement in treatment. “We have a motivational speakers program that involves volunteers who are in recovery speaking with inpatients about recovery,” explains Ms. Beck. “Volunteers – former

patients who have developed their own recovery plans and learned to work with their therapists and to use their support system – go through a training process and ultimately help patients dare to hope that their goals and dreams can become reality.”

“Our partnership with people in recovery also includes a newly formed Recovery Advisory Committee,” explains Ms. Beck. “They help us focus on recovery issues.” Included on the committee, which meets every two months, are people in recovery from mental illness and addictions, as well as representatives from outpatient programs and family members. Their feedback and advice are considered valuable components of recovery-focused, high-quality, compassionate patient care.

The successful transition from inpatient to outpatient and then to volunteer, and the success that volunteers have had in helping others, is well documented, says Ms. Beck. For example, “Jack,” who is bipolar and a substance abuser, spent five years homeless, in and out of jail and hospitals. When he came to Belmont, he was by his own admission depressed and suicidal. Having admitted to being powerless over his alcoholism, however, he found sobriety, and with peer and family support found himself on the road to recovery. Now he is helping others by volunteering in the motivational speaker’s program. “We’ve found that patients listen when their peers speak,” says Ms. Beck.

Dr. Real agrees that patients have a powerful impact on each other, and support from their peers can lead to recovery. “Many people come to us thinking that they don’t have much to offer to anyone, only to discover that they have a lot to offer the others on their unit,” he says.

Dr. Real and Ms. Beck also cite the critical importance of the social workers and case managers at Belmont who help patients refine their needs and find what works best for them in terms of aftercare treatment.

Empowerment aids recovery

Along with peer involvement, another path toward the road to recovery is education. “We offer hope and empowerment through a patient-physician partnership,” says Dr. Real. “We provide opportunities for people to learn about their illnesses, because the knowledge they gain empowers them to make choices about treatment options that might work. It empowers them to believe that they can take charge of their lives and get better. People find there is hope and the opportunity for change.”

For Dr. Real, this means empowering people to be both in control of their lives and in charge of their lives, to take on a crisis and through it find an opportunity for change and discover new directions. “Part of recovery is finding meaning in life,” says Dr. Real. “Meaning provides hope.”

One aspect of education and empowerment has been the establishment of the hospital’s computer center in the Freda Sachs Resource Center, where patients can learn more about

their illnesses. Available at the center are articles, films, and recovery stories of families and individuals dealing with mental illness and/or addictions.

It takes a village

The recovery initiative depends heavily on a team approach to treatment. “We have an interdisciplinary team of physicians, nurses, social workers and rehabilitative therapists,” explains Dr. Real. He also cites the value of family support for patients. “Families suffer right along with their loved one, and families want to be helpful,” suggests Dr. Real. “They can often provide valuable information that can help us and the patient.”

Recovery’s four pillars, as noted by Dr. Real, can provide a firm foundation from which patients can emerge from crisis with dignity and a sense of meaning. “Recovery from mental illness is a concept dominating the mental health area nationwide,” concludes Ms. Beck. “Integrating recovery concepts into acute care mental health settings is an initiative that is long overdue.”

Belmont Behavioral Health is one of the largest, most comprehensive behavioral health systems in Philadelphia. For 70 years, Belmont has provided compassionate, quality behavioral health care to people of all ages. To learn more about our services and locations, call 215-877-2000.