

Personal recovery could be key to preventing long term mental illness

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Definitions of what recovery means to people at risk of mental illness should extend beyond symptom remission into broader areas of life and well-being.

According to researchers at the University of Birmingham, 'personal [recovery](#)'—defined as a person's capacity to live a full meaningful life in a community of one's choosing despite the limitations imposed by illness—can be experienced by people at risk of developing serious mental health problems.

The researchers argue that by identifying broader elements of recovery from emerging mental health problems, clinical services can widen the scope of interventions to support people at risk beyond preventing the onset of illness and supporting functional outcomes.

In a new study [published](#) in *Psychiatric Services*, the team reviewed published research to explore young people's experiences of personal recovery. Studies included in the review focused on participants identified as being at risk of developing schizophrenia, bipolar, and major depressive disorders.

Three important elements of recovery were described by people involved within the studies: developing a better understanding of their mental health challenges and finding ways to manage them; establishing purpose and meaning in life; and receiving support from people and services. Alongside this, finding ways to overcome stigma around emerging mental health difficulties, and finding ways to fight stigma on a societal level, were additional key elements of personal recovery.

By increasing awareness of these broader elements of recovery, the researchers hope to provide a framework for clinicians that will improve care for people at risk.

Lead author, Dr. Gerald Jordan, explained, "Prevention of mental illness in early intervention services has become an important goal in psychiatry worldwide, but there are broader recovery needs that people feel should be addressed.

"Supporting these broader recovery needs may promote greater well-being and perhaps in turn prevent mental health problems from developing."

The early-stage difficulties from which participants sought to recover were similar to those experienced by people with established mental health problems. They included subthreshold symptoms, trauma, broader emotional, existential, and cognitive problems, relationship difficulties, and discrimination.

Among the key aspects the team identified as being important were better connecting service users to peer [support groups](#) and encouraging spiritual and religious support mechanisms among individuals with preexisting spiritual or religious beliefs.

Dr. Jordan added, "In order to support personal recovery among people at risk of developing mental health problems, our first step should be, as a society, to move towards an acknowledgment that individual experiences that are outside the norm are deserving of tolerance and empathy. If we can achieve this, we can start to move towards a society in which people with different experiences can discuss these more openly and be able to find meaningful ways of managing them."

More information: Gerald Jordan et al, Personal Recovery Among People at Risk for Developing Serious Mental Health Problems: A Qualitative Systematic Review, *Psychiatric Services* (2024). [DOI: 10.1176/appi.ps.20230133](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.20230133)

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