

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Support And Family Education



Session Sixteen – Empowering Your Loved One on the Journey of Recovery

Materials Needed:

[Handout CC: Character Strengths](#)

[Handout DD: My Perception of My Family Member's Current Functioning](#)

[Handout EE: Log of Mental Health Treatment](#)

You may have heard the term *recovery* mentioned in the mental health arena in the past few years. What does it mean?

According to the National Consensus Statement on Mental Health Recovery (created by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Mental Health Services), recovery is:

“A journey of healing and transformation enabling a person with a mental health problem to live a meaningful life in a community of his or her choice while striving to achieve his or her full potential.”



Discussion Questions:

- What does that mean to you?
- How do you feel your loved one is progressing on his/her journey of recovery?

This session focuses on three ways you can support your veteran's recovery, namely:

1. Noticing and celebrating his/her strengths
2. Setting short-term goals and working together
3. Facilitating teamwork among the veteran, professionals, and family

I. Identifying and celebrating your loved one's strengths

Historically, the mental health field has spent a lot of energy focusing on people's problems, symptoms, and difficulties. Entire diagnostic systems have been created to describe, diagnose and treat emotional problems. Until recently, the arena of personal strengths and character has been relatively neglected. Paying attention to someone's talents and positive qualities can help him/her get the most out of treatment and improve his/her sense of self-worth.

The old saying, "You find what you look for," applies here. If you're irritated or annoyed with your family member, it's easy to find fault, isn't it? What are the consequences of this focus on problems/failures? Unfortunately, all too often they are relationship conflict, low self-esteem, and decreased willingness to try new things.

However, when we pay attention to and celebrate others' strengths, relationships can blossom; and people can take pride in themselves and their accomplishments. Just as with parenting, we encourage you to "catch your family member being good," and ignore the small issues that aren't worth the conflict.

A new movement in mental health termed *Positive Psychology* (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2006) has turned our focus to "that which is good" in people...let's do that now.

Activity:

1. Please take out a sheet of paper and make a list of at least five qualities or strengths of your loved one. (*Facilitator may choose to distribute [Handout CC: Character Strengths to help participants reflect on these qualities in veteran](#)*).
2. Next, describe a situation or example that demonstrates each of the strengths.
3. How do you feel when you see these qualities/behaviors in your veteran?
4. How often do you tell him/her that you notice these qualities? What these strengths mean to you?
5. As homework, we encourage you to "catch" your loved one demonstrating at least one of these qualities/strengths this week, and to compliment him/her on that specific situation. It's important to learn how to be an enthusiastic encourager. We predict that your family member will really like it, and it will probably feel good for you to do as well.

Not sure what/how to say it? Here are some suggestions:

To recognize his/her sense of humor, you could say:

- "Even in stressful situations, you always keep me laughing. I appreciate that."
- "You have such a gift at telling funny jokes."

To celebrate your family member's efforts or progress, you may wish to say:

- "I'm really proud of you for (fill in the blank)."
- "Way to go - look at how much you got done."
- "Looks like you put a lot of work into that."

- "It took a lot of courage for you to do that (specify what he/she did)."

To express your appreciation, the following phrases may be useful:

- "Thanks – that helped a lot."
- "I really appreciated your help; it made my job a lot easier."
- "We really needed help, and you had just what we needed to get the job done. Thanks."

If your family member is demonstrating courage by trying something new, you may consider simple comments such as:

- "You can handle it."
- "I know you'll do fine."
- "You'll make it through."

Modified from Dick and Betsy Greer, Family Reference Book of AMI-Van Nuys
<http://www.schizophrenia.com/family/60tip.html>

II. Setting realistic goals

Sometimes consumers struggle with a sense of purpose. As seen in the above definition of recovery, it's important for all people to have a sense of meaning in their lives. This struggle can be compounded when consumers are unable to work outside the home; many become isolated and spend much of their time sleeping, watching television, or playing on the computer. They wonder what they are contributing to the family or their community. These negative thoughts can increase their level of depression and decrease their motivation to make positive changes.

As a family member you can be extremely helpful by talking with your veteran about short-term goals. For example, perhaps he/she has always wanted to get involved with photography or has thought about joining a church or wants more friends.

When considering possible goals, select goals that have a good chance of success and offer a sense of hope. For example, if your loved one hates public speaking, you probably wouldn't encourage him/her to volunteer as a speaker for the NAMI In Our Own Voice program (a wonderful program in which consumers provide workshops to share their personal stories about living with mental illness to teach others about recovery). However, you might encourage him/her to consider volunteering at the local animal shelter, which would be less anxiety provoking and could provide pleasant opportunities for playing with animals.

In setting these goals, it's important to have small, measurable steps that demonstrate progress. For example, if your husband wants to take up photography as a hobby, you could together brainstorm steps such as: (*ask the participants to brainstorm a list such as this*):

1. Checking out library books on photography and equipment
2. Going to a store to look at cameras
3. Talking to others who know about photography

4. Exploring online options for purchasing a camera
5. Considering your budget and/or saving money for a camera
6. Calling the VA hospital or local community center to explore local photography classes
7. Asking your friends if they have a camera you could borrow

As your veteran takes these small steps, it's essential that you celebrate each accomplishment. Remember to acknowledge the effort involved, regardless of the outcome. For example, perhaps he/she called the local VA hospital to ask about classes but wasn't able to get any information because the therapeutic recreation department was closed for the day. You'd still want to praise him/her for making the call and define a plan for the next step.

Similarly, creating a regular schedule/routine can make a big difference in your loved one's life. Encouraging him/her to volunteer in some capacity or consider a regular exercise schedule can provide much-needed structure. As we tell veterans, "The bed is not your friend when you're depressed!" Helping your loved one create a weekly calendar with scheduled activities can give him/her something to look forward to as well.

In encouraging your loved one to move toward goals and create a regular routine, an encouraging approach works best. However, it's often a fine balance between providing encouragement and nagging! Remember that your loved one is "in the driver's seat" in his/her recovery.

III. Communicating with providers

The third topic in today's session about supporting your loved one on the journey of recovery pertains to creating and maintaining strong, open relationships with mental health providers. This ability is truly a skill, and having good working relationships can be very beneficial – for your veteran and yourself.

As a family member, you are a very valuable part of the treatment team. The information you have about the consumer's functioning is important to providers. Although you may struggle with access to doctors and experience frustration regarding issues of confidentiality, professionals can benefit from your observations of your loved one. You obviously have much more contact with him/her than the providers do. Therefore, you can notice "red flags" and communicate this information earlier.

Note to facilitator: Depending on needs of participants, you may wish to review the "red flag" information from Session 8, "Creating a Low-Stress Environment and Minimizing Crises."

- A. Here are some suggestions on how to effectively interact with professionals:
 1. Remember that providers are extremely busy. Be brief and concise. Avoid overwhelming them with details or long stories.
 2. Sometimes both consumers and families forget what they want to tell or ask the doctor, and they may feel rushed during brief appointments. Therefore, it's important to be prepared. Bring in a list of specific questions.

?

Discussion Question: What are some typical questions you might want to ask?

Possible questions might include:

- What is the diagnosis?
 - What is likely to happen in the future?
 - What is this medication for? How will it help?
 - What possible side-effects should we be aware of?
 - Who should we contact if we're concerned about something regarding his/her emotional well-being?
 - Who do we call in case of an emergency (both during the workday and after hours)?
 - What other treatment options are available?
3. Bring a pad of paper so you can take notes when the provider shares important information. Feel free to ask him/her to write down specific information such as the diagnosis and medications. You may also ask for informational pamphlets/handouts/websites regarding your loved one's illness and treatment options.
 4. Be prepared to give the provider an update on the consumer's functioning.

Distribute Handout DD: My Perception of My Family Member's Current Functioning.

This form is a potential tool to aid in communicating with the provider. If organizing your concerns before the appointment is helpful, you can work with your loved one to review his/her functioning in several domains. If you cannot be present at the appointment, you may choose to send this form to the doctor before your loved one's appointment.

Distribute Handout EE: Log of Mental Health Treatment.

As episodes of mental illness can be cyclical and consumers may take many different medications over the course of the illness, the psychiatric history can become extensive and complicated. Consumers are encouraged to keep records of their treatment experiences and medication regimen. However, this task can be overwhelming; and consumers may be unable to keep an accurate log. Therefore, you may choose to keep a log of the symptoms you observe, the efficacy and side-effects of various medications, his/her hospitalizations, etc. Be sure to include any over-the-counter medications and/or herbal supplements (e.g., St. John's Wort) he/she is taking.

5. If your family member agrees, you may wish to have him/her sign a release-of-information form allowing the provider to speak openly with you. If your family member refuses, you can still convey your concerns to the doctors (e.g., calling them on the telephone, leaving a message, writing a letter). Most providers really want to hear your perspective and observations, as your input can be very helpful in providing the best care for your family member. However, the doctor cannot tell you any specific information about your loved one without a signed release.