

Recovering from an eating disorder

Eating disorders are fast becoming one of the most common mental health problems to affect people in the UK, with some studies estimating that as many as one quarter of high risk groups may struggle with some form of disordered eating.¹

Many of these cases will resolve over time, and won't ever be severe enough to require treatment. But what about those people who do become caught up in a serious eating disorder? As more and more people develop problems with their eating, what is the reality of recovery like for them in their future?

A long and winding road

I had struggled against anorexia for a long time before I started to work on recovery. I'd have loved to have been free of it much earlier, but the fear I felt kept me from ever being able to look at recovery realistically. Sometimes I would try to eat better and not to worry about what I ate, but I would always end up back where I started. Starting to give up the eating disorder was the hardest thing I ever did. I guess I didn't know for sure what lay ahead of me – whether I would make it to be truly free or whether I was destined to spend a lifetime hating myself and wishing I could be thinner. In my head, recovery was about returning to where I had been before the eating disorder developed, rather than about going somewhere new – and better.

Now I have been recovered for such a long time I wish I could go back and tell myself years earlier that it was this great – and this worth it. Standing up to those fears and challenging what I thought about myself and the world was really hard, but now I feel like I am truly alive. In fact I think I am better off than a lot of my friends who have never had eating disorders but worry about what they eat and what they look like and so on. I am so happy with myself and who I am now – I've turned completely around from where I was ten years ago. *Alison*

Is true recovery possible?

This is a question that many people ask about eating disorders. Often sufferers are told that true recovery is very rarely possible, and that the best they should hope for is to get to a stage where their condition has stabilised and they are able to eat well enough to remain basically healthy. The mindset of an eating disorder is perhaps the strongest and

most distressing aspect, and often means that sufferers live with a constant thoughts running through their head about what they have eaten, will eat, won't eat, and whether they might put on weight as a result. Therefore any version of recovery which means a sufferer retains this pattern of obsessive and anxious thinking is in fact not true recovery.

True recovery is possible. However, it is true that it can be elusive, particularly under the treatment regimes most will encounter, where perhaps as many as three quarters of sufferers relapse within a year of finishing in-patient treatment.²

The most important thing to understand about recovery is that it is about much more than simply dealing with someone's weight. Someone suffering with anorexia who is admitted to hospital for re-feeding and then released some months later at a healthy weight is unlikely to be truly recovered. Recovery involves psychological and social as well as physical change. Treatment centres which address eating disorders holistically therefore have much better long term recovery rates.

Recovery is

- The act, process, duration, or an instance of recovering... (implies a change, from BAD to BETTER!)
- A return to a normal condition (so a return to NORMAL eating)
- Something gained or restored in recovering (so recovery = GAIN not PAIN!)

References

1. From a readership survey in *Bliss magazine*, 15 November 2004
2. *Lay et al, 2002, Characteristics of inpatient weight gain in adolescent anorexia nervosa: relation to speed of relapse and re-admission. European eating disorders review 10, 1, 22-40*



What is recovery?

The answer to this question may seem obvious to you if you are caring for someone struggling against an eating disorder. But think a little about what exactly you mean by the term 'recovery'. Recovery is about much more than simply what someone eats. Furthermore, the question of what 'recovery' means is critical for someone who is caught up within an eating disorder. It may be something that they approach with real trepidation or fear. Bad experiences of previous treatment regimes may also have given people an incorrect idea of what recovery is.

One of the hardest things about working towards recovery is fighting against the fear that you may never get there and that you will always be caught in the misery of an eating disorder mindset.

It is vital to know where you are aiming, as this makes it much less likely that you will struggle with recovery and therefore risk relapse. Helping someone to know what recovery really is about gives hope, whereas an eating disorder only plants despair.

If you are still struggling with an eating disorder yourself, and you haven't yet thought about what recovery is, or if you are supporting someone else, join us in thinking about this question. Stop reading this, go and get a pen and some paper, and have a go at writing your own list of what recovery is (or will be). What is included in recovery? Also think about what definitely isn't part of recovery. When you have finished, have a look at a list which was put together by a group of recovered sufferers at a weekend conference:

Recovery is:

- Freedom – from shame/guilt, from obsessive thoughts, from the need to achieve
- Confidence
- Eating and food are no longer an issue
- Balance – sometimes eating too much, sometimes too little, but not thrown back into eating disorder
- Being different
- Letting go/finding a new identity
- Being able to enjoy food as a pleasure
- Opportunity
- Wider perspective
- Building up self-esteem and self-acceptance
- Able to eat 'nice' foods without fear of losing control
- Dignity
- Restoring perspective
- No fear
- Relief
- Challenge
- Being able to see yourself as you really are
- Moving on
- More fun
- No substituted shackle – it's having no shackles!
- Looking to the future
- Letting go of the illness
- Freedom from being trapped
- Accepting yourself
- Not being too hard on yourself
- Peace of mind
- Not being alone
- Accepting the things you cannot change
- Letting go of the past
- Having new thoughts – not staying trapped or static
- Being able to give enough to yourself and as a result the best of yourself to others
- Admittance
- Being honest and true to yourself and others
- Change
- Being selfless
- Doing the right things
- Not taking things out on yourself when things go wrong
- Feeling you deserve recovery
- Dealing with problems in a more positive way

Recovery is not:

- Diets all the time
- Being chained to something else
- Just gaining weight
- Papering over the cracks
- Constant denial/keeping busy so you don't feel bad
- Magic wand (it isn't instant relief)
- Never having any problems ever again
- Denial
- Isolation
- Dishonesty
- Living in and dwelling on the past
- Ignoring your 'inner self'
- Revisiting previous habits
- Living a lie
- Harbours bitterness
- Turning anger in on yourself
- Guilt
- Starvation
- Depending too much on others
- Losing responsibility
- Fear
- Restriction
- A hamster wheel of activity

Did you get many of the same things as this group did? Some people find it really hard to think of recovery as a positive thing. They cannot get away from the fear that recovery means feeling as bad as they do with the eating disorder, but also being fat. For them recovery feels like losing the only good thing they have.

But this list was made by people who were living the reality of true recovery and their experience shows that recovery really is about gain, not pain! Yes, recovery involves dealing with sometimes painful issues from your past, and difficult emotions – but it is about finally being free from them!

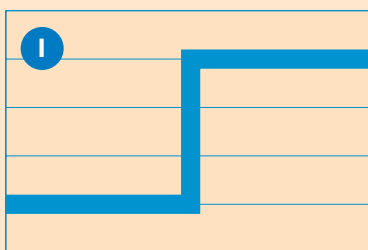
Experiencing the road to recovery

Recovering from my eating disorder was a bit of a journey into the unknown. I didn't really know what to expect. One of the hardest things I think was those moments when life does get difficult with even normal activities. At first I was so excited by how everything was finally changing for the better, and by all I was achieving. But then there came a time when there wasn't as much that was new to achieve – or nothing as easy anyway. Constantly having to be willing to challenge who I was and

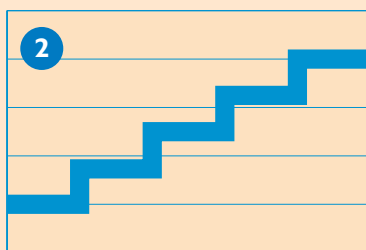
how I reacted was really hard. If I ever got low or upset, or fed up, or if anything went wrong, I used to be really scared that it was some kind of 'sign' that I was doomed to never get over this completely. I think some of those times were made much harder by my own tendency to go off the deep end the minute the 'rosy' feelings went away. I didn't know what was normal and I didn't know anyone else who had recovered to ask.

Ruth

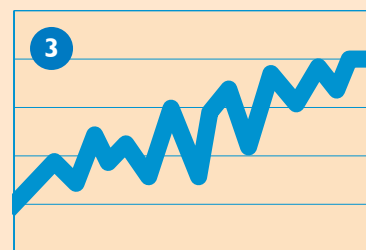
Look at these diagrams which show three versions of what most people think recovery will be like:



The first graph shows a common misconception – often from people caring for those suffering. It shows a sudden leap from being ill to being well. This change is relatively fast, very consistent and once the change has been made, the person is stable in recovery.



The second chart has the same feature of representing a change for the better – but this time the change takes place more gradually – with periods where things are stable followed by small improvements until true recovery is reached.



However, neither the first or second lines are a realistic portrayal of most people's experience of recovery. In fact, recovery is generally like the third graph. It involves ups and downs over a period of time, where the general theme is an improvement – but at times it may feel like things are getting worse rather than better.

Recovery from a parent's perspective

"It took us a lot of faith to believe in recovery when the illness seemed to defy all hope of it ever happening. The consultant told us that recovery would take at least eighteen months, if not two or three years, which came as a huge shock for us. But there was no choice except supporting our daughter through the horrors of anorexia, her depression, at times aggressive behaviour and the pain of seeing her lose so much weight. We knew we had to show her how much we loved her and that listening to her talk about her problems would help her, and help us understand things better from her point of view. We learnt about the illness from her and from a variety of sources, which reassured us and gave us hope.

Recovery meant far more than just having her weight restored, but by then she was able to think more clearly. No one could tell her she looked 'well' or 'better' because she thought that meant 'fat.' Being able to fit back into school was an enormous achievement for her, as was passing her GCSE exams. She had a lot of support from us, from her GP, her consultant and her counsellor, as well as from friends and teachers. We helped her look towards the future and to see all the good about herself and what life could offer.

Looking back we can see that her recovery was a process, a series of forward and sometimes backward steps, but ones that all added up to real progress." *Jane*

It took a lot of time and effort reassuring her and encouraging her. She took up some new hobbies, including karate for a short period, which helped her release some of the anger she felt. She stuck to the prescribed diet, which was a bit rigid, but gradually added in new foods and became more relaxed about trying different things and eating out with friends as time went by - really living life again.

Looking back we can see that her recovery was a process, a series of forward and sometimes backward steps, but ones that all added up to real progress."

Jane

Recovery – climbing the mountain!

You may find the analogy of climbing a mountain helpful when you think about the recovery process:

- You start full of ambition and anticipation but also a bit unsure. Perhaps you wonder if you will ever really make it – and the summit seems a long, long way away.
- You might be put off or un-nerved by things you see or read about recovery – saying it is not possible, or really, really hard.
- So you set off up the path. At first you might feel like you are not getting much higher, even though you are working so hard – there still seems so much of the mountain to climb.
- At times bad weather and other things going on around you can make your climb difficult – the best thing to do in those conditions is to try to keep smiling, remember why you are climbing and keep going!
- Sometimes as you carry on climbing, the path stops going uphill. It might even go downhill for a while. This is hard because it feels like the last thing you want to do – use up energy going down not up! But it is all part of the path.
- Sometimes the climb gets really hard and you just need to rest for a while. At those times it is a really good idea to turn around and look behind you at how far you have come. Often the view is much better than you think!
- In the end you will get there – and the view is definitely worth the climb!

Two steps forward, one step back

Recovery for me is very much a ‘two steps forward, one step back’ process, but the important thing is that I am finally heading in the right direction, and freedom is where my aim lies. Sometimes it is too hard to keep my eyes on where I am heading and I can slip back into the old thought patterns and the old way of life. So far if I slip off and lose focus for a while I have managed to get back on track slowly. I’ve got a long way to go, but I can always hold on to the fact that the light is there and freedom can ultimately be mine. I’m learning that it is ok to have bad days; it doesn’t necessarily mean everything’s a disaster. Those are the days I have to tell myself it’s going to get better - tomorrow will be better.

I still obsess over food, but it is gradually getting less and controlling me less. I am starting to go out more to places where there will be food, spending more time with my friends and family and missing out on a little less.

There are definitely two sides to recovery. Yes, it is terrifying, it really is - I’m not denying that; learning to eat, risking being kind to yourself? It’s overwhelming and I have days where I just don’t know what to do.

The other side though is that it is worth it. It is the best move you can make, the most important and life-changing decision. Recovery involves taking risks; it takes courage and determination. But as you get better, these things also grow so that you are able to cope with the next stage. I’ve come a long way already and, although I feel there is a long way to go and it’s still really hard, I know in my life now there is much more that is positive. Life is better and improving. Recovery means freedom, liberation, being at peace with yourself.

As you recover you start to feel real happiness - better than any you can get from starving or losing weight because it is real - and it’s amazing as you start feeling it.

Maddy

Extra help

Support groups

Anorexia & Bulimia Care

(www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk) – a Christian charity helping all those who suffer because of eating disorders.
Tel: 01934 710679

Email: mail@anorexiabulimiacare.co.uk

Helpline for those concerned about younger teens and children:
01934 710645

Beat

(www.b-eat.co.uk) – offering information and help on all aspects of eating disorders.

Tel: 0845 634 1414

Email: help@b-eat.co.uk

Helpline for young people:
0845 634 7650

Email: fyp@b-eat.co.uk

Bookshelf

Eating Disorders: The Path to Recovery by Dr Kate Middleton (2007). Lion Publishing. ISBN: 9780 7459 52789

Beyond Chaotic Eating by Helena Wilkinson (1993), Zondervan. ISBN: 0551027509

Care for a loved one with an Eating Disorder – The New Maudsley Way by Janet Treasure, Grainne Smith and Anna Crane, Routledge. ISBN: 9780415431583

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