

## **Book Review**

### **Narratives of recovery from mental illness: The role of peer support**

**By Mike Watts and Agnes Higgins <sup>1</sup>**

It's not often that I come across a book that has resonated with me on such a profound scale but this is one of them. *Narratives of recovery from mental illness: The role of peer support* is part of a growing body of evidence-based research that is challenging the prevailing bio-medical approach that currently dominates the mental health system especially within the field of psychiatry. Using a narrative based approach, the authors Mike Watts and Agnes Higgins, interviewed 26 people with lived experience of mental distress about their recovery journey to illustrate the transformative power of peer support.

Those interviewed were all members of GROW, a mutual support group, that advocates the importance of social interaction that encourages people to become active agents in taking back control of their lives, through peer support, rather than just leaving it to health care professionals with their reliance on medication. Those interviewed included people with a wide-range of diagnosis, including schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder and depression.

Mike Watts is a Research Fellow at Trinity College Dublin, and Agnes Higgins is Professor of Mental Health at the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Trinity College Dublin. They facilitated the research by giving those interviewed the opportunity to tell their stories from a personal perspective demonstrating the power of co-production, thus reflecting the growing call for a more person-centred social approach to recovery. Their findings suggest there's too much emphasis on the clinical approach to recovery and not enough focus on personal recovery and the importance of social inclusion. They conclude that social factors are too important to be over-looked and ignored.

Relying solely on the medical model in the mental health system ignores the many social factors and adverse life experiences, such as bullying, sexual and physical abuse, divorce and bereavement that can have a negative impact on people's mental health. Highlighting social intervention through peer support and mutual empowerment the authors demonstrate that people who had experienced mental distress were able to recover and build the emotional resilience needed to cope with adversity and other challenges life throws at us.

While the researchers suggest that the traditional approach of using medication may be necessary in the early stages of some people's recovery, their finding illustrate that recovery can also be attained through every day social interactions, primarily through the use of peer support and social inclusion, with much better results. The authors have provided us with an alternative way of looking at the prevailing medical framework of mental health, therefore demonstrating the need to consider other pathways towards recovery and wellbeing.

Many of those interviewed in the study explained how they found their experiences with the medical profession a very debilitating and disempowering experience. For example, 'Tom'

described an encounter with his doctor when he was nineteen. He had just questioned why the medication had failed to alleviate his symptoms when the doctor looked at him very gloomily and said: 'Well you'll be on medication for life. I don't think you'll ever hold down full time work. Friendships will be difficult but you'll make friendships within the hospital'. He added that he would 'never drive or have a girlfriend.' (p65). It was only when 'Tom' came across GROW with its emphasis on mutual support and social interaction that he was empowered to take control and the path towards recovery and wellbeing, thus proving his doctor wrong.

The emerging recovery story is taking hold across the western world and it is one that is 'illuminating some of the limitations of the prevailing medical story and one which commentators such as UK clinical psychologist Mike Slade et al. (2012) believe has "come of age", (p18).

In a chapter entitled: Recovery through mutual help, the authors discuss the eight processes identified in the study which testified to the value of peer support for those recovering from mental illness. These included an empathetic and compassionate social network, becoming hopeful, reconnecting with the self and others, positive risk-taking, and a re-authoring of a more positive identity which eventually led to a re-enchantment with life.

As someone who is undergoing the recovery process with many years lived experience of mental distress I have no doubt that this book demonstrates a profound, deep understanding of the person-centred recovery process. It will in my opinion become a seminal read that puts forth evidenced-based research about the transformative power of peer support that challenges the medical model.

The authors, Agnes Higgins and Mike Watts, along with the 26 co-authors, have produced a piece of work that will be a source of hope and inspiration for people with lived experience of mental illness and emotional distress, as it was for me.

Eugene Egan

***(1) Narratives of recovery from mental illness: The role of peer support, Mike Watts and Agnes Higgins (Routledge, 2017) ISBN: 978-1-13-884799-6 (158 pages)***