

A Checklist on Recovery from Mood Disorders— One Experiencer's View

By Sarah T.

The following items are thoughtful reminders on how to stay on the beam and recover from a brain illness:

1. Find a safe place to live with positive nurturing people who love you. They may be from your family, friends, church, or twelve-step group.
2. Find a medical doctor you feel you can trust. Not every medical doctor is the same. Some have personalities that may conflict with yours, others may not care about you as a person, and some are not competent. They try to stabilize the mind/body with medicine and write prescriptions to treat illness. Talk therapy and other treatments can then be used to change behavior. Medical doctors' expertise is not talk-therapy. I have been satisfied with 2 out of 5. I have tried to talk to my doctors in complete honesty and without reservation. If I don't, they can't help me with my problems and illness.
3. Adopt a 12-step program to begin to find a pathway to life that is based on a higher power, honesty, and simplicity.
4. Stay in the moment. Try not to regret yesterday or worry about tomorrow. Things take care of themselves if we just do the next thing in front of us to do.
5. Take your medicine. This must be emphasized. When people feel better they simply decide they no longer need treatment and quite frequently end up in the hospital. Do what the doctor tells you to do. Stabilize your mind/ body. After about a month the medicine will take effect but it may take your brain's nervous system several years to recover and reach equilibrium with the medicine. Then work with your doctor to optimize the dosage and types to regain more normal living. Remember: After a psychotic break, over 85% of the people need to stay on anti-psychotics for the rest of their lives. It is very dangerous to believe that you are in the slim 15% minority. Continued breakdowns can reduce brain functioning and precipitate an increasing tendency to have additional breakdowns.

6. Do not drink or use drugs. These substances can induce psychosis, cause depression, precipitate panic attacks, and impair brain functioning as well as interfere with prescribed medication. These substances are also habit forming and may result in dependency.
7. Acceptance of the illness is the key to recovering from it. We must work out of the denial and anger that we have a problem that makes us different from the norm. Medication, therapy, and special work on our part are required to stay on the beam. We must learn to accept our illness and work with it so that our lives can be more full. From acceptance we can move towards understanding and then action because our minds have been opened. As a result, we are willing to learn to take better care of ourselves. We should remember that most people have some kind of problem that sets them apart from others.
8. Stay away from caffeine. This is a drug that is abused, out-of-control, and over-used.
9. Adopt a pet. I found a dog very helpful. When I couldn't connect with people because I was too sick or depressed, my dog always was there. My dog and I formed a special bond that lasted 11 years and helped me bridge the gap I had with people—all people. But don't think a dog is the only answer, try a cat, a mouse, or a fish, or even for starters a plant. Having the responsibility to care for another and allowing oneself to receive the beauty that that other has to offer us is a key part of recovery. Caring for a dog and the companionship he offered probably saved my life.
10. Help others. Not matter how unfortunate you think you are, someone else has it worse. Not matter how hopeless you feel, you have been given a gift that will bring a little peace to someone else's life. The gift can be as simple as being able to read to another, or sing, play music, drive, fix things, sit with, cook, tutor, or something else that you like to do, that you may do everyday, that you could do for another without any thought of something in return.
11. Find a therapist that you trust. Therapists are not the same as medical doctors. Doctors take very few courses on how to relate to people while a therapist spends most of his/her time involved with the various ways to relate to people and the dynamics that go on between people. Seeing a therapist once a week is ideal. That time period is short enough to allow for all the week's events to be brought up and

possibly work on some issues as well. I've found a therapist who likes to talk but holds back from giving too many suggestions or who tells me what to do. I do feel she recognizes patterns and helps me try to break them. She cares a lot about me and I've found that to be very important.

12. Don't make any big life changing decisions for a year. If you can, try to postpone as many as possible for as long as possible. It can't be said enough that when our brain's functioning is impaired, we are the last to know it. Make changes in little steps. That may be hard to accept and even harder to put into practice but that it is all what is about: finding a balance in life. Sensitive people need to approach change very gradually. After a while, you yourself will be able to feel the change as it happens inside your gut and then you will know quicker what outside change is now bothering you, what outside change happened too fast for you to process, and when to slow down the speed of change.
13. Obtain guidance from people you trust. Before making decisions, practice running them by someone else. Try to find one person, preferably someone outside of the family, who you feel has something you want on an emotional and spiritual level. This person may have had problems similar to your own but has somehow surmounted them. By confiding in this person, you will find that your strangest thoughts and darkest secrets that seem to make you so different, are really rather commonplace. He or she may hear your problems at a level different from a therapist and offer concrete suggestions based on what he did in a similar situation.
14. Trust in God. Or try some other spiritual or natural force. It can be as simple as acknowledging a spiritual light in things or as complex as being a practicing member of one of the great religions. After all, everything had to come from somewhere. Believing in something other than oneself takes the pressure off daily living. Do your best in all your endeavors. If you make a mistake, apologize, and if needed make amends. No one is perfect. The imperfections make us human, unique, and lovable. Remembering that we are not perfect helps eliminate another emotional zinger: GUILT. We need to work on our faults with the professionals and people we trust to become better, more useful and helpful people.

15. Stay out of relationships for at least a year. One of the big stresses is sexual energy. Picking people who will unintentionally hurt us is a big problem. Only hard work around parental/partner issues with professionals and friends will bring the problems into the light on the intellectual level. Knowledge of the problem will bring to light a solution but that still must seep into the feeling level and then we must learn how to act with the new set of feelings. The whole process can take years before a complete personality transformation can occur. Some may require a lot of work and others will learn faster.
16. Stay around positive, uplifting, decent, caring people who by their actions will bring you up to their level. Selection of the confidant is a key in getting this connection. Sometimes, the people may not seem willing to socialize with you. Don't give up. Try to be available to them. Talk to someone who isn't talking to someone else. Talk to the people talking to your confidant. Talk about feeling disconnected at a twelve-step meeting. Introduce yourself to a new person each day and try to find something that the two of you have in common.
17. Anniversaries. Be careful of spring (15 March +/-30 days) and fall (1 September +/-30 days). These two time periods are disrupters to the nervous system due to the accelerated change from light to darkness that occurs during the equinoxes. I have found August 15 that starts the fall a serious stress; the discomfort generally lasts a week. However, for those not taking proper care of themselves and experiencing a lot of emotional stress, these tough times can cause anything from a series of sleepless nights to a serious hospitalization for a major breakdown. Other ones to watch for are the three at year-end: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's. Other ones are more personal: a hospital stay for a breakdown, the ending of a relationship, a birthday, or death day of you or a loved one. Or the day of a major life change, whether good or bad—a sobriety date, a wedding, and a career change. When you feel the upwelling of anxiety that is not account for, remember what has gone on in your life during that time for the past number of years. Then you can stop blaming the people, places, things, and situations around you. You can use the phone and talk to your friends and professionals and 24-hour help lines. You can write in a journal, read, play, expect a little less of your self for a few days, talk about it at twelve-step meetings, and ride it

out. The better you are taking care of yourself during the rest of the time, the less effect the anniversaries will have on you. A suggestion—put all your personal anniversaries as well as the obvious ones mentioned in your calendar for reference. When the feelings of gloom, doom, and high anxiety come upon you, check your calendar. Don't forget to pray too.

18. **Medicine.** Find out how much extra medicine you can take in an emergency to prevent a possible breakdown. More than a few times, my illness overwhelmed my medication and I had to rely on my doctor's instructions and my own instincts to increase the drug dosage to prevent a possible breakdown. This is something that should not be done lightly but emergencies do occur and you must work with your doctor to prevent the illness from overwhelming you. Denial may creep in and prevent you from seeing your own erratic behavior. Living with another person may be helpful. I had a number of roommates, however roommates and coping with them is a book in itself. Another note on medicine... I had to taper off lithium because I realized after several years that particular medicine was clouding my thinking. I am still on another mood stabilizer, but for now I no longer take lithium. I can trace part of my recovery from that medicine change. It must be remembered that all medicines affect us differently and some of my friends get along fine with lithium.
19. **Play.** Try to find some fun things to do. Develop a hobby of your own like gardening or cooking or reading. Try a sport like volleyball to play with others: Roller skating, ice skating, contra dancing, walking, golf, tennis, bowling, golf, ping-pong, or basketball. Finding an activity that you can focus on will stop you from focusing on yourself and your problems. Performing the activity with people that are also having fun lifts the spirit as well. Remember physical exertion produces endorphins that give the brain a little high and relieve stress.
20. **Meditation.** The benefit of one half-hour of daily meditation is equivalent to a dose of anti-depressant such as Prozac. Try yoga or Tai chi as a spiritual exercise. I found Tai chi a good way to start learning how to move energy through my body. I have practiced it every day for a number of years during my recovery.

21. Alternate healing forms are moving into the mainstream: Reiki, kinesiology, reflexology, hypnosis, acupuncture and accupressure. I have found Reiki to be very helpful and became a Reiki master so I could perform healing on others and myself.
22. Try to keep a neat house. Stick to routines. But break them once in a while too.
23. Sleep. A regular amount of sleep, say 8 hours per day, is needed for maintaining good health. Too little sleep can bring on mania. Also too much activity can bring on mania. Not sleeping for more than a day can indicate mania. Over-sleeping every day and taking frequent naps can indicate depression.
24. Eating. Learn how to eat a healthy balanced meal. Cook in bulk and freeze to save money. Find a good multi-vitamin. Go out to eat with a friend once a week. Or take yourself out at least once a month. You are worth it.
25. If you think this checklist is helpful, perhaps you can make a copy and give it to a friend in need.