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Peer Support Online

www.self-help-alliance.ca/forum

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Put the ME in Empowerment

I Can Do It!

By Craig Connell

I can do it—A simple phrase that may not carry much weight with most people. However, for me and others in recovery, that idea can be daunting. For the most of my life, I had not the will, drive, passion or self confidence to take control of situations that molded the path that I walked. As my mental health deteriorated and I fell deeper into my addiction, the idea of me not only having some semblance of control but to make healthy, positive decisions seemed as foreign and uncharted as the universe.

I had heard many times in my automotive career that to be truly effective as an organization, we had to empower the people and have them feel part of the decision making process. We had to help them feel confident enough and secure enough so that all staff felt they could bring their own ideas and see them introduced. This, I was told, would have people buy into the company's vision, lead to personnel growth, job satisfaction, and increase motivation and loyalty. I had the task of introducing this concept, and though it took time, it worked. I had seen the benefits, but could not see past the work model and bring this to my own life. I did not believe in myself.

With my history of disasters and procrastination, I thought there was no way I could do it. My life was chaos, and in that, I thrived. My self esteem had reached new lows but the concept of empowerment thrived close to me. I had seen people take control of their lives in recovery and come out of the pit to lead a joyous future. But that was them—I was different.

It was not until about a year ago when I met someone who seen in me that which I could not

see in myself. He told me I was worth it, that I had all the skills, all I needed was the willingness. He made me truly look at myself and see that if I was to move forward, I needed to take control of my journey—putting positive resources and supports into my recovery plan. The plan was up to me and it was up to me to follow it. The plan established long terms goals broken up into small manageable chunks. All the goals had to come from me. I was so used to letting other people guide me or doing nothing, that this was very scary at first. I decided to dip my toes in, testing the waters.

I started to complete the small chunks, a little every day. I was told to, and did, write the goals out and marked them as 'complete' when done.

This instilled in me a sense of accomplishment, and before I knew it, I had taken control of most of the things in my life that I had given up on previously. I was told to write down what I was grateful for and celebrate my small victories. I did this. My self esteem and self confidence increased and, with these, my ability and willingness to take control. What seemed beyond my grasp was now firmly in it.

I still utilize my supports and need gentle pushes now and again - but my life is running under my rudder. Now empowerment is part of who I am. It provides me with the clarity and realization that I can do it, no matter what comes my way. I recognize that to be successful and happy on my journey, I control what I can control. This is the way I approach and handle situations - not what I expect of others and not to try to control things beyond my realm. Empowerment of self is the realization and discipline that shows me daily that the more I do, the more I grow. ■



Recovery from the Start

By Paul Reeve

Part of life's journey can involve injury and brokenness. That is when recovery kicks in. It is a process, something that ideally we design to help us to be fully functional.

So how, as someone who cares, can I help?

From day one, we can all help if we are asked. First and foremost, recovery involves a hopeful approach and attitude towards the person and their experience. Many of us have experienced the power of HOPE and know it contributes greatly to our recovery. All family, friends, peers and service providers can engender a spirit of hope regardless of the circumstances.

Of course, our primary focus is in helping the person keep safe. Let them know that is what you are doing. Think in practical terms. Work with what you have and support the person in understanding how and why they came to be in their circumstances. At first it may not be fully conscious process on the part of any person. It will be most helpful when the person gains insight and comes to a place of understanding how they behaved and how it contributed to them being where they are. Ask them "What happened? What did you say? What did you do?" Help them understand the connections between their behaviour and circumstances. Later, you may be able to explore what they might do differently in the future in order to avoid a similar situation.

If a person has never experienced the mental health system before, it likely appears as a very foreign environment—the settings, the language, etc. To talk about such concepts as "mental health issues" may be very difficult to comprehend initially, given there are so many new things happening. Ask yourself "How helpful will it be to suggest a 'diagnosis'?" If that is important to them and you, then offer the information and be open to any questions and exploring what it means to the person.



Deciding next steps is an important right and responsibility in our lives. Recovery incorporates self determination and owning the choices I make in life. The sooner I get to choose the directions I want to go, the sooner I will exercise greater control of my destiny. I have come to know and trust there is an inner wisdom in each person I meet. Each person knows what is best for them. Others can help us figure it out if we lose our way, but ultimately, each of us must make the final decision. Respecting that is important to building trust, confidence and healthy relationships with ourselves and others.

How do I become empowered or help others to do so? The word empowerment is often used in recovery because many people have had little opportunity to exercise power and control in their lives. My belief is that a person comes to discover their own power. It is not something that can be given by another person. There are many kinds of personal powers we can exercise, including physical, relational, social, political, moral, etc.. It may take time to learn them all but it will be worth the effort. Helping a person understand that they can grow in these areas offers great hope. It does not mean they have to do it alone. We all need help in our lives from time to time. It is an act of strength to ask for help and acknowledge that we do not understand or are struggling with our circumstances. There are so many resources available in our community to help people on their way. You may want to become familiar with them and offer referral. Thankfully, there are a lot of people able and willing to help us along our journey.

Whether you are a family member, friend, professional worker or part of a self help group, by adopting a recovery approach you could be one of the people that will make a big difference influencing how a person goes forward in their life. ■

Fiona's Song

By Brenda Gateman

A part of her is gone
But her Spirit lives on
In the wild waves of the sea
And the soft breezes
That capture you and me.

A gentle rain
Is her tears for our pain
On a starry night
Of glistening light
Her twinkling eyes are shining
bright.

Love shines from her very being
Sky full of wonder
Awesome colours gleaming
A beautiful life not very long
But the gifts she shared
And her memory is strong
And she will carry on.

Peer Support Online

Being involved in peer support on the internet can be very rewarding and helpful. Not only can support happen at any time of the day or night, but you can ask questions and share stories from the comfort of your own computer. This can be especially useful to individuals living in rural communities or with limited transportation.

An online forum can be a place to share your voice and get connect by posting and answering messages. It can be a little like a public resource centre. You can read others' experiences, questions, or post your own questions and get answers.

It is always important to keep yourself safe when using online forums and supports, as there are those on the internet who will try to take advantage. Use a nickname that will keep your personal information safe, only share any personal information when you feel it is ok to do so, and report any inappropriate content.

There are so many ways to to share support—why not check it out today?■

To join the Self Help Alliance online forum, visit
www.self-help-alliance.ca/forum/

For more information, contact

The Self Help Coordinator at
519.623.6024 x421 or editor@self-help.ca

Empowering Myself Through Peer Support

By Carole Moran



When I was 19, the most fearsome thing I could think of was to be labeled “mentally ill.” By the time I was 37, and involved in peer groups for adult children of alcoholics, I was able to laugh at my naive teen-age notion. Once I realized I was surrounded by “mentally ill” people, and had grown up with them, and had even considered them a normal part of my life, I realized that “mentally ill” was simply a word for people with certain problems.

Problems come in all sizes, shapes and colors. Some folks have financial problems. Many people have social problems. There are relationship problems, school problems, work problems, and so forth.

In my case, I had a number of problems, some of which bled over into my social, work, school, and relationship life. For example, I felt great guilt feelings when I tried to stand up for myself instead of giving in to others. Also, I was terrified of abandonment and held on to relationships even if they were bad for me. These problems and more I identified after learning from ‘Adult Children of Alcoholics’ groups. Myself and many others who grew up in alcoholic family systems are trying to deal with the symptoms rather than the underlying issues arising out of an alcoholic family system.

In the peer groups for adult children of alcoholics, I became able to face life realistically, to share my feelings in a safe environment (and eventually in any environment), to stand up for myself, to nurture my self-esteem, to place the blame and guilt where it belonged rather than on myself, to detach myself from dysfunctional others, to make more healthy and more lasting relationships, to parent my children with honesty, and many other good things. My life and personality were so changed that people at work noticed and commented on it.

The down side to changing myself was the chaos that resulted in my own home and among my friends and relatives. A

dysfunctional family is a closed system and any change in one of its members results in changes for all. These are changes over which they have no control, except to try to convince me to fit back into my previous role. This was not desirable nor possible, so my family broke apart. I separated from my first husband and he eventually divorced me. My daughter became distraught, took her father’s side, and claimed she hated me. My two sons seemed to withdraw, picked sides, and went on with their lives.

I lost all of my former friends. Many people, even strangers, blamed me for this and sought to re-unite me with my husband and family.

When all was said and done, I did what I felt was best for myself –I continued in the peer support groups and sought to improve my personal mental, emotional, and physical health. I could no longer be responsible for others or for the feelings of others. I had to hope that my children, who were all grown, would work through this in time, and come out as better persons, which they did.

More than that, my life has improved. I am blessed with a new and more compatible marriage, with self-identity, and with confidence in my abilities. Along the way, I also lost most of my illusions. This was painful, but necessary. I had to realize that many things I believed all my life were just not true. Many things I had been taught in school were not true. Some of these truths were hard pills to swallow, but the freedom from obsession that I gained was a much greater benefit.

These are some of the things that peer groups have done for me.■

For a more complete list of problems faced by adult children of alcoholics and the extended version of this article, please visit *Stories, Poetry and More* at www.self-help-alliance.ca.

Reaching Out - Tools for Recovery

Crisis Planning Tools

Being empowered can mean so much more than having individual strength, confidence in yourself and your abilities. Being empowered can also mean being prepared to take control of those less than ideal situations or even crisis. If before a crisis happens, you are able to plan supports, resources and more, you may be able to maintain your sense of empowerment and control over even the most difficult situations.

In our communities and on the internet, there are a variety of tools that can be used to help you plan for crisis or other life challenges. In addition, there are many people and organizations who can help you create these plans, and may even store a copy for you to access when you need.

One of the most well known is the *Wellness Recovery Action Plan*, or WRAP. This plan was developed by Mary Ellen Copeland and a group of people who themselves have experience with the mental health system. This group used what they knew about how to keep themselves well and put this knowledge into WRAP. As a result, these individuals were able to find their recovery path and hope for their future.

The goals of WRAP and of recovery are many, including moving towards increased wellness and stability, improved quality of life, and increased understanding. WRAP has helped many to decrease traumatic life events and increase their sense of empowerment. It is important to note that a tool such as this may not necessarily replace other supports and treatments, but can work along side them, giving you more options with which to journey towards recovery.

When a person is working through the WRAP tool, they are able to identify and list things that help to keep themselves well in every day life, such as eating healthy. Also explored are early warning signs of crisis, potential triggers, and signs that indicate to others that more help might be needed. The plan can also include contact information of supporters, and what types of support work best. For more information on the WRAP tool, visit www.mentalhealthrecovery.com.

Another plan that can assist a person is the Crisis Recovery Support Plan (CRSP). This plan was developed by the Waterloo-Wellington-Dufferin Regional Crisis System, and included a consultation process where individuals with lived experience of the Mental Health and Addiction Systems were invited to provide feedback.

When we are in crisis, it can be difficult to know what it is we need, or even to express those needs to others. In addition, our supporters, with the best intentions, may bombard us with

options, and encourage us to seek supports we do not want. All of this, and often the event that lead to the crisis, can leave us with a sense that we are not in control of our situation or even of ourselves.

It is times like these that plans like the Crisis Recovery Support Plan come into play. By having a written plan we can refer to and share with others we can help ourselves to maintain control over our crisis and feel empowered to help ourselves.

The CRSP form is designed to do just that—to help us think about what happens during a crisis, what steps we can take to prevent a crisis, and what we want others to do for us. The plan includes a space to share what has been helpful in the past, and what you think might be helpful in the future. In addition, some people choose to include other important legal documents with their plan and who to notify in the event of a crisis. To print your own copy of CRSP, visit the *Resource* section of www.crisislinks.ca.

Just as there are a variety of tools that can be used for crisis and recovery planning, there are a number of ways to go about working on these tools. You may choose to work through these plans on your own; however, there are great benefits that can come from working together with others.

When we work together, we are given opportunities to learn new ways to increase our quality of life, news ways to

manage stress and/or mental health symptoms, and ways to promote overall wellness in our lives.

The Self Help Alliance can provide support to individuals who want to learn about these tools and develop their plans. Through Peer Support Groups held at our sites, individuals can come together to learn the process of using the tool, and the valuable role it can have on their recovery journey.

In addition, by meeting someone at one of these groups, or by being partnered with someone by one of our staff, individuals can come to together to support each other. Working together one-on-one can be a different form of support to groups, and may provide motivation to complete and update your plan.

Being prepared will always leave you feeling empowered!

To learn more about these plans, contact your local Self Help Alliance site or visit our website www.self-help-alliance.ca.



Finding Empowerment in Movement

By Keely Phillips

When I think of personal empowerment I think of what makes me feel strong and confident, both emotionally and spiritually. Recently, I added another domain to my personal empowerment: the physical. I decided it was time to take that expert advice and see if there really is empowerment in movement.

First, I needed to find an activity that I enjoyed. Easier said than done - over the past three years I tried at least ten different activities trying to find exercise that is enjoyable. The good news is I finally found something, for me it is yoga.

So now I have an exercise I enjoy and I feel good physically: I am seeing all those benefits I had heard of such as having more energy, sleeping better and decreasing appetite. But has the activity increased my personal empowerment?

According to various sources, in order to increase one's personal empowerment one needs to increase self esteem, improve self efficacy and increase their internal locus of control.

Self Esteem [a feeling of pride in myself]: I feel better about myself being active. I believe that participating in physical activity helps make me a healthier person and I take pride in that.

Self Efficacy [belief in my ability to perform a certain task]: I now believe that I can be a yogi! (Of course, it will take lots of hard work to get there.)



Internal Locus of Control [my belief about how much control I have in my life]: Personal empowerment tends to increase one's *internal* locus of control. An internal locus of control is when I believe that I have control over my life and that my behaviors are guided by my choices. Conversely, an *external* locus of control is when I believe that fate, chance, or other external circumstances guide my behaviors and life. Here's an example from the *Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence*:

"If a child with an internal locus of control does badly on a test, she is likely to blame either her own lack of ability or preparation for the test. By comparison, a child with an external locus of control will tend to explain a low grade by saying that the test was too hard or that the teacher graded unfairly."

Locus of control is a continuum and will change throughout our lifetime. While there are some benefits to having an external locus of control (these people may cope better with a terminal illness), usually the focus is on improving one's internal locus of control. It is easy to see how experiences with a mental health issue can impact our locus of control or perceived control in life. I know that in the depths of depression I may feel like I have no choices and my life has been written for me. This is an example of when having an external locus of control is unhelpful.

The good news is with work, we can gain a greater internal locus of control. This brings me back to exercise. I started to notice that the more I exercised, the more control I felt over my own life. For me, the greatest benefit was the "exercise high" that I got afterwards - a physical feeling of accomplishment for challenging myself and pushing myself to go for personal bests. I had a greater sense of choice and empowerment: I chose to go to yoga class. I chose to eat healthy to continue to reward my body and mind. I chose to really push myself one day and to give myself a break another day. So much choice! So much control! Improving my internal locus of control is probably the hardest part of personal empowerment but also the most rewarding benefit. ■

Empowerment—A Personal Story

By H.O.

Empowerment to me means the power that comes from within each of us to see our own promise in life.

From the first day I walked into the Self Help Alliance Cambridge (CASH) I felt that the people there were very supportive. They have helped me see that I was more than a diagnosis; I am a person with challenges just like everyone else and should be treated as such. Thus, they helped me to see that I am able to do so much more than I originally thought.

Even in overcoming some of my hurdles, I was able to find the strength and ability to help others dealing with similar situations. This has given me a great sense of accomplishment and has elevated my self esteem. After several years, I can honestly say that I am able to conquer any challenge that comes my way. My new philosophy comes from a quote I heard Reba McEntire say: "Failure only comes from lack of trying!" Saying this quote everyday helps me recognize where I have started out in my journey called recovery, where I want to be and that I am capable of obtaining all my goals in life! ■

Nature at Its Finest

By Patti Milson

Quiet, peaceful and serene.
That's where we all have been.
Trees, water, birds and sunshine.
It's there we find answers or at least a small sign.

Trees, tall, green and complex.
The wind blows, and they bend and flex,
While the roots stay planted, firmly in the ground,
The rest of the tree sways without a sound.

Water from ponds to river, lakes and seas.
It trickles, flows, falls, and in and out with the tide it shall be.
It can stay calm and quiet like a picture on a wall,
Or roll, crash and destroy, causing the levy to fall.

Birds, singing, soaring and fluttering from branch to branch,
Just like a performance of some "bird dance."
Yellow, white, blue and sometimes a mixture of many too.
Watching them fly, land and sing can bring peace to you!■

Reaching Out Tools for Recovery

...Continued from page 4

To begin thinking about your own planning, here are examples of the types of questions you will find on the CRSP form:

- What am I like when I am feeling well?
- What things can I do for myself when I am triggered or feeling less well?
- What is unhelpful when I am in crisis? What should others avoid doing?
- Who is someone who can support me and what specifically can they do?■

Send along your comments about a recovery tool that assisted you on your recovery journey, or a recovery related question to:
c/o Self Help Alliance, Newsletter Editor
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Or Email:
editor@self-help.ca

The 3 L's and Positive Thinking

By Wanda L. E.

Coping in the moment reflects words of very unique individuals, who learn to cope in that moment with every day struggles – learning that there is a new life to live together. Learning who we are as caring individuals, learning how to have fun, togetherness within that moment. Life, Love and Laughter – the 3 L's. We learn to know that it is ok to enjoy that wonderful feeling, in that moment, amongst each other.

Experiencing the 3 L's is important because we, as very unique and special individuals, who have a lot to offer, with our uniqueness and our walk of faith. We have learned to not give up our inspiration and continue to be fun loving. Laughter shows us that we are beginning and learning to not give up. It gives us hope and knowing that in despair we can lean on each other for support. From this, we look forward to a fun loving, grateful, and hopeful future.

Within our uniqueness of a fun loving group of people, it is important that we learn to laugh together.

We learn to cry together.

We learn to trust each other.

We learn to walk beside each other,

And above all, we learn to bowl together.

We learn to respect, and how to help each other keep happy, hopeful and love.

Within each and everyday of not taking life for granted in every special moment, we use the 3 L's: Live, Love and Laughter!

So live it up, because every moment matters – and so do we – as special individuals – and let us never forget that. Peace.

How to Think Positively About Yourself

Acceptance—Know and accept your strengths and weaknesses. We all have them!

Help—Set realistic goals, and meet them by learning new skills and growing your abilities.

Time—Take time with yourself and do things you can enjoy alone.

Trust—Listen to your instincts and act on what you think is right.

Praise—Be proud of your accomplishments, big and small.

Encouragement—Say to yourself "I can do it!" Set a reasonable timeline for goals and reward yourself along the way.



Respect—Be yourself and be proud of who you are.

Love—Love the unique person you are, regardless of mistakes, success or failures. ■

Mandalas for Meditation

By Mikayla Goving

If you are like me, being still long enough to meditate in a meaningful way can be very difficult. I really enjoy the relaxation and sense of peace I find in myself following a successful meditation session. Unfortunately, I am sometimes too restless or anxious to find that place of calm.

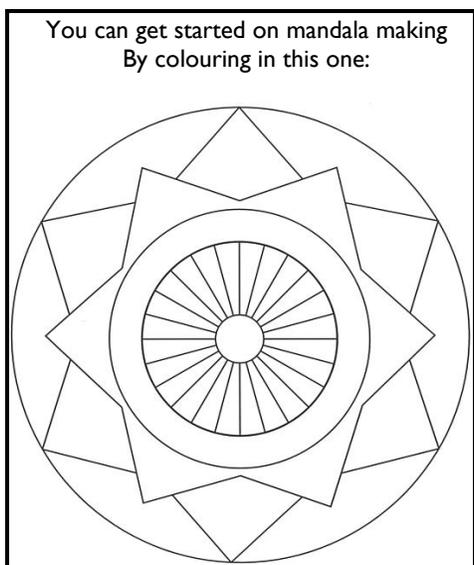
For these times, and many others, mandalas can be helpful. A mandala is an intricate circular design which symbolizes wholeness. The word mandala comes from the Sanskrit word for circle. Often, these are associated with Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions who view the mandala as appearing in all parts of life—from the sun and stars, to the circular shape of the moon and the earth. The creation of mandalas were often involved in Vedic ceremonies, involving hymns or mantras.

Even if you do not view the world in a spiritual sense, it is difficult to deny the importance of circles in our culture today. We use circles when describing the relationships with our

friends, family and community. Scientific explanations for our world often involve cyclical process, and many business models use the idea that we can come back around to where we were.

Today, mandalas are used by many as a form of meditation or as a creative outlet, to help you discover yourself and the real you. Mandalas can be helpful in finding a place of relaxation and to center yourself. Since the mandala does have a spiritual history, there are those who feel that by creating or filling in a mandala, they are able to merge their body, spirit and soul.

If you feel that working with mandalas is something that would be helpful to you, follow the instructions below to make your own or simply colour in an existing one. You can find many mandala templates on the internet, or in a mandala colouring book.



Instructions for Drawing a Mandala:

Materials: Paper, drawing/art materials (pencil, pencil crayons, marker, etc.)

1. Imagine your mandala, picturing symbols or images you might use: triangles, hearts, dots, images or symbols that have meaning to you.
2. Trace a circle onto the paper. You can use a compass, bottom of a cup or plate, etc.
3. Draw freely in the circle, imaging the design growing in your heart and out through your hand. Do not worry about your artistic skills, this mandala is for you alone.
4. Fill in your circle with designs, shapes, or whatever comes to you.
5. Colour in your mandala with any colours you wish. You may want to separate your mandala in halves or quarters and colour each differently. You can also add words or phrases to your mandala. ■

Sources:

Goel, Nitin. (2000). "The Mandala - Sacred Geometry and Art". *Exotic India*.
<http://www.mandala-4u.com/en/start.html>
<http://www.mandalaproject.org/What/Index.html>

Words of Empowerment

W	S	R	T	Y	U	I	P	C	O	N	F	I	D	E	N	C	E	R	E
E	U	S	T	R	E	N	J	L	O	O	K	U	B	E	L	I	E	F	Q
V	P	U	U	E	Z	E	W	T	Z	U	A	H	L	K	H	S	M	R	U
E	P	C	C	N	Q	T	S	S	G	E	R	F	F	T	P	E	R	E	A
I	O	C	M	Y	R	R	D	C	H	Y	M	A	V	O	M	E	K	T	L
H	R	E	E	U	T	F	D	C	I	T	W	S	G	W	D	A	R	G	I
C	T	S	N	J	N	O	R	T	E	M	P	O	W	E	R	M	E	N	T
A	R	S	T	R	E	N	G	T	H	W	E	R	T	B	S	A	F	B	Y

- Empowerment
- Courage
- Success
- Strength
- Equality
- Confidence
- Belief
- Support
- Achieve

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Self Help Alliance.

For Your Inspiration



Concentrate on the “cans” and
conquer the “cannots”
~Ellen B.

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”
~ Alice Walker

“We must become the change
we want to see”
~ Mahatma Gandhi

“Courage is like a muscle, we
strengthen it with use”
~Ruth Gordon

“Whatever you are,
be a good one”
Abraham Lincoln

“If you listen to your fears, you will
die never knowing what a great
person you might have been.”
~Robert H. Schuller



Journaling Ideas

- What does empowerment mean to you?
- Write about a time in your life when you felt empowered
- Reflect on one or more of the quotes on this page
- Write a poem about empowerment
- In what areas of your life do you think empowerment is most important?

We Want to Hear From You!

Send along your articles, images, letters to the editor, comments or views about topics in this newsletter or other topics related to the mental health system.

Please note that any items submitted may be edited for space and other needs of the “Changing Lives Newsletter.”

Please send your items to:
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