

RECOVERY, INC. AND THE RELATIVES PROJECT:  
UNDERUTILIZED COMMUNITY MENTAL  
HEALTH RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT

As managed health care limits the number and length of psychiatric hospitalizations, self-help community resources are becoming ever more important. Recovery, Inc., one of the oldest self-help organizations in the United States, is just such a resource. The Recovery program offers a comprehensive method of self-help aimed at preventing relapses and recurring conditions in people suffering from mental illness or emotional disorders. Hundreds of Recovery groups meet weekly throughout North America as well as in other parts of the world. Groups provide guidance in simple yet effective methods for reacquiring self-leadership, strengthening self-confidence, and overcoming fears, anger, and symptoms of nervous origin.

Abraham A. Low, M.D. developed Recovery, Inc. in 1937 at the University of Illinois College of Medicine. Although founded by a medical professional, Recovery, Inc. is governed, operated, and supported by lay volunteers who have sought help from and been trained in the Recovery method. Recovery training consists of regular attendance at Recovery meetings, study of Low's literature and tape-recorded lectures, and practice of Recovery's cognitive behavioral techniques and tools in one's daily life.

Meetings of Recovery, Inc. begin with members listening to an audiotape recording by Dr. Low or reading aloud from one of Low's books. Members of the group then give examples of how they have applied Recovery techniques to troubling events in their lives. Each example is presented following a four-part outline developed by Dr. Low that is designed to illustrate objective observation, skill-building techniques, coping tools, and recognition of progress. The group's comments on each example offer a wealth of suggestions on how to use Recovery, Inc. techniques more effectively.

After voluntary contributions, a brief period is provided for questions and comments on any of the examples that were given. This is followed by a "mutual aid" period in which members break into smaller, informal groups to offer more help to each other.

Recovery members come from many walks of life. Some have recently been discharged from hospitals; some are under the care of professionals but have never been hospitalized; some have been diagnosed by their physicians as suffering from a psychiatric disorder; others suffer almost constantly from tenseness, are painfully self-conscious and feel inadequate, or have difficulty with anger. Although members may have been diagnosed with psychiatric disorders, Recovery intentionally avoids making therapeutic distinctions based on diagnoses. Instead, it focuses on helping members learn to cope more effectively with the symptoms that are common across many diagnostic groups. These nervous symptoms (sometimes called "symptoms of stress") include fatigue, fears, panic, angry outbursts, head pressure, loss of appetite, dizziness, sweats, palpitations, difficulty in swallowing, light-headedness, obsessions, compulsions, jealousy, depression, self-consciousness, and bizarre sensations.

The meetings of all authorized Recovery groups are open to the public and are held in public buildings. A Recovery group ideally is small enough to allow each person the opportunity to participate. Any authorized Recovery, Inc., group is expected to be conducted according to standard Recovery procedures.

There is no charge for attendance, although voluntary contributions are collected at each Recovery meeting. Recovery, Inc., is a tax-exempt charitable corporation financially supported by contributions, the sale of Low's literature and recordings, donations, and bequests. All Recovery group leaders, area leaders, committee members, officers, and members of the Board of Directors serve without pay. A small paid staff administers the policies that the Board of Directors formulates.

Hundreds of psychiatrists, mental health professionals, physicians, and clergy refer people to Recovery, Inc., knowing that Recovery is not intended to take the place of mental health professionals or members of the clergy. Recovery does not offer diagnosis, treatment, advice, counseling, or religious guidance. Members are at all times encouraged to follow the authority of their own physician or other professional helper.

Physicians, psychotherapists, and the clergy often participate as regular members in meetings if they are suffering from mental or emotional disorders. However, in order to maintain the status of the leader as an average member of the group, professionals may not become Recovery, Inc., leaders. Members of these professions who are not seeking help are welcome to observe a meeting at any time, but not to participate. In addition, meeting demonstrations are available for groups of mental health professionals.

### THE RELATIVES PROJECT

In 1993, the Abraham A. Low Institute, a non-profit corporation separate from the Recovery, Inc. organization, established The Relatives Project. This national initiative, modeled after Recovery, Inc., provides a similar comprehensive system of coping skills and stress management for relatives of individuals who are mentally ill or emotionally disturbed. The Relatives Project offers continuous guidance and skill-building techniques through community-based self-help groups.

The Relatives Project is intended to help families meet the challenges facing them when a family member or close friend has a mental or emotional problem. With managed care's insistence upon brief hospitalization, the family needs help dealing with the problems confronting them as the newly discharged relative returns home.

Relatives' meetings are similar in structure to Recovery, Inc. meetings, but the primary text for the Relatives groups is a book Dr. Low wrote specifically for the families of his patients. There are other subtle differences. While Recovery members tend to attach danger to their *own* symptoms and distrust their *own* basic functions, the relatives' inner distress usually attaches danger and distrust to the ill family member's mental health. The fear uppermost in the relatives' minds is that the recently discharged relative is in danger of not improving, of losing ground, of not trying, and of not doing what has to be done in order to improve.

The Relatives Project shows family members how to understand the dynamics of the family environment, while maintaining empathy and unconditional positive regard for the ill relative. Its self-help groups provide not only emotional support to the family, but show them how to reframe the domestic environment to provide an atmosphere which empowers the relatives as well as the troubled family member.

The Relatives Project emphasizes the importance of cooperating with professionals, but its group leaders are not mental health professionals themselves. They are relatives or close friends directly affected by a person suffering from a mental illness or emotional disorder. The Abraham A. Low Institute provides continuous training for all group leaders.

The Relatives Project groups meet regularly and are open to teenagers and adults without a required fee or appointment. A voluntary collection is taken at each meeting, and annual memberships are optional at a nominal cost. As

with Recovery, Inc. meetings professionals are welcome to observe Relatives meetings, and meeting demonstrations are available for groups of mental health professionals.

Professionals can utilize The Relatives Project to gain constructive participation by the family in the recovery process. Professionals who are familiar with The Relatives Project know that it provides the tools for families to manage a healthy family system despite the frustrations and uncertainty that confront them with a mentally or emotionally ill relative in their midst.

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

To learn the location of Recovery, Inc. groups or for any other information about the organization, contact Recovery, Inc., 802 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, Illinois 60610, (312) 337-5661. A local telephone number can be found in the white pages of many telephone directories, or visit Recovery's Web site at [www.recovery-inc.com](http://www.recovery-inc.com)

For further information about The Relatives Project, contact the Abraham A. Low Institute, 550 Frontage Road, Suite 2797, Northfield, Illinois 60093 (847) 441-0445.

### SUGGESTED READING

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Low, A. A. (1950). *Mental health through will training*. Glencoe, IL: Willett Publishing.

Murray, P. (December, 1996). Recovery Inc., as an adjunct to treatment in an era of managed care. *Psychiatric Services*, 47, 12.

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