

“Learning to value ourselves even in the middle of distress”

Recovery involves learning how to understand and cope with our experiences so they do not overwhelm us so much or stop us from living life the way we want or need to. This is the process of learning to value ourselves and what matters to us, even in the middle of distress.

Recovery also involves making sure our body is resilient to stress and engaging with situations that meet our emotional and social needs, like connecting with supportive friends and family, and doing things that use our strengths.

Our environment and the people around us make a big difference to this process. **We all need** a safe and supportive environment to live in. If you are in a situation that is harmful for you, it is normal to be distressed, and so important to seek support to get yourself to safe place.

New Zealand has so many community resources to support you on your journey. Your GP is a good first point of contact as they can help with referrals to support and can screen for any physical health problems that might be contributing to your experiences. Every District Health Board has a range of specialist mental-health services and an after-hours, urgent team for crisis situations. Helplines make phone counsellors available 24-7. Many therapists are also available in private practice and some people are eligible for funding from WINZ or ACC to help pay for this. There are also a range of community support services providing peer support, personal development groups, employment support, respite options, emergency housing and more. If you can't find it in your community, there is probably an app or website to fill the gap.

Build a coping tool kit

The Coping Kete is an online resource for building a personal tool kit full of coping strategies to draw on in the tough moments. You'll find a collection of over 150 coping strategies gathered from support group participants over several years. Use the Coping Kete to find new strategies to experiment with in daily life then add what you find useful to your own real-world collection for times of distress.



Be flexible - get creative

There is no one-size-fits-all, right way to cope and recover, but there is a right way for each of us and with persistence, flexibility, and creativity you will find the pieces for your personal recovery puzzle. Be prepared to adapt things to suit yourself, this is your exploration of what works for you. There are so many different lenses to view things through and so many different ways to walk this kind of journey. Don't be afraid to change things, mix and match from different approaches, or invent something new to suit you. Necessity is the mother of all invention and some of us look back one day and realise we developed some of our best qualities and life-hacks during our times of greatest struggle.

Be patient - it takes practice

It takes time to find out what works for us and turn it into habit. Know that it will be harder to use a strategy when you are distressed or if it is unfamiliar to you. It helps to put aside a few minutes every day to practice new strategies at times of low stress before we try to put them in action at times of distress. Having written prompts, worksheets, or recordings to listen to can help guide us. There are many online resources, community supports, and therapies around to help.

more recovery tools live at www.engagenz.co.nz



What is recovery?

Recovery is the journey to wellbeing when we have experienced a mental-health problem and we each get to define what it means to us. There are heaps of ways to change the experiences that make up mental-health problems and go on to experience a thriving life. Most people go on to do just that, whether they continue to experience mental-health problems or not.

Mental-health problems involve our situations, actions, thoughts, bodies and moods, so recovery involves all of these things too. There isn't just one answer for everyone, because we are all different. So recovery is something different for us all.

Recovery isn't like re-covering an old couch or recovering from a broken leg. For many people it is not about going back to an old way of being, recovery is about growth and development.

Recovery is more like a mission to recover hidden treasures (skills, resources and insights) from the ocean of life, so we can live in line with our values even in the presence of distress. Sometimes the treasure is hidden within us all along and sometimes we need to search out new treasures in unexplored territories.

How do I get there?

It helps to start with the basics; make a commitment to nurture yourself for a while. Get yourself to a safe place with safe people if you need to. Spend the next couple of weeks making sure you've got all the rest, movement and nutrients you need to be resilient to stress. Thirty minutes of exercise a day has been proven to help improve mood, concentration, and sleep. Your GP is a good person to talk to. They can help you with referrals to supports and screening for physical health issues that could be contributing to your difficulties.

It's a good idea to link in with our communities. People who have social supports (and use them) tend to have better mental health than people who do not. We are social beings. When we are born, our very survival depends on connection to others, and we remain that way throughout our lives. In the early days of human evolution, survival depended upon our ability to be part of a group and we are still 'wired' that way. Human beings need connection.

Some people find that medications can be helpful for a while; they can reduce the intensity of some experiences and make it a bit easier to work on the thoughts and behaviours. They can bring their own set of adverse effects to manage as well as withdrawal symptoms when they are stopped and it is important to be informed so you know what to look out for and what do in case you face these things.

Many people recover using non-medical approaches like psychotherapy, peer support, self-directed learning, nutrition and exercise. It's important to give yourself time. As you become more skilled at understanding your experiences, testing out new responses, meeting your needs, and connecting with what matters to you, things will start to shift. The people around us can make a big difference to this process.

Coping for recovery

Coping is anything you do to get you through a challenging moment. Sometimes our coping strategies are purposeful choices and sometimes they are habits that we do without even thinking.

Some coping strategies seem to help in the moment but set us up to feel worse later and can physically hurt us or the people around us (like self-harm, drinking alcohol, using substances, taking risks, using aggression). Some coping strategies can be the wisest thing to do in some situations but are unhelpful if we rely on them across the board because they actually make our distress more distressing, interfere with our performance, stop us from gathering new experiences and skills, distance us from the things we care about, and keep us stuck in the same place. Coping strategies focused on suppression (trying not to feel it/think it/show it), avoidance (staying away from certain things), and withdrawal (keeping to yourself, tuning out) all tend to make things worse in that way.

Other coping strategies have positive or neutral effects on us in the short and long-term. These strategies help us get through the moment and allow us to improve it or at the very least, stop us from making things worse for us later. The key to effective coping is having different tools for different moments, that you can use in a big long chain to pull you through, step by step.

Kinds of coping

There are countless of ways to cope that can help recovery and to make this less overwhelming we break these down into four categories: (1) Expression and support, (2) Self-soothing, (3) Mindful distraction, and (4) Engagement. Each kind of coping strategy can be practiced using techniques that work with our thoughts, behaviour and physical responses to change the way we feel, give us space before responding to things and build resiliency to distress.

Expression and support

These are the strategies of expressing ourselves and connecting with others to share, manage and make sense of things. Expression includes talking, non-verbal communication, writing, and creative activities like music, song, dance, poetry, or art. We need spaces to name and share both our joys and our distress, the light and the dark of us. We can express ourselves to others and in private for our own self-reflection.

Self-soothing

Self-soothing is using your mind, your behaviour, your body and your environment to give yourself comfort, make space for difficult emotions, get perspective on our thoughts, and settle the physical stress responses that come with distress. This includes things like mindfulness, self-talk, relaxation, breathing, and sensory strategies. Think of it like treating yourself as you would a loved friend or child; attentively, kindly, and without judgement.

Mindful distraction

Mindful distraction is purposefully turning your attention towards something more helpful or meaningful until the moment passes. It is important that we do not try to push distress away with endless activity but sometimes we also just need to give our hearts and minds a break and involve ourselves in something more neutral, enjoyable or meaningful. We can use mindfulness to allow our thoughts to come and go and focus on the task at hand.

Engagement

These are the strategies of engaging with or turning towards our thoughts and feelings so we are aware of what is driving us and can make sense of our experiences. Engagement also involves turning towards the situations that affect us to find solutions to the problems we face, gather information, get our needs met, build our strengths, and move towards the things that matter most to us in our hearts.