

# Mental illness in the workplace: recovery

"People who have psychiatric disabilities often find that they lose their 'selves' inside mental illness. Recovery is in part the process of 'recovering' the self by reconceptualizing illness as only a part of the self, not as a definition of the whole."

~ Nora Jacobson, PH.D., Dianne Greenley, M.S.W., J.D.:

*What is Recovery? A Conceptual Model and Explication*

With one in five Canadians expected to suffer a mental health disorder in his or her lifetime, it is likely that one or more of your co-workers is in recovery. What is it like? Gaining a deeper understanding of recovery is essential when welcoming an employee back to the workplace after a mental health leave.



## What is recovery?

The [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) defines recovery as:

*The personal process that people with mental health conditions experience in gaining control, meaning and purpose in their lives.*

*Recovery involves different things for different people. For some, recovery means the complete absence of the symptoms of mental illness. For others, recovery means living a full life in the community while learning to live with ongoing symptoms.*

"Recovery is a deeply personal, unique process of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills and/or roles. It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even with limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness."

~ William A. Anthony: *Recovery from Mental Illness: The Guiding Vision of the Mental Health Service System in the 1990s*

## Tips to help someone in recovery at work

It's not unusual for even the brightest of the bright to suffer from a mental health condition. Whether overcoming a bout with depression, emotional distress, post-traumatic stress disorder, or any other mental health condition, people in recovery often struggle to rediscover themselves and fit in. If you know someone at work who is in recovery, it's tempting to pretend that nothing happened and everything is back to normal. Meanwhile, that person is facing a battle of a lifetime; it's terrifying; it's exhausting; and it makes others uncomfortable.

### You can help by:

- Taking a genuine interest in the person and his or her progress. This doesn't mean being nosy; it means being a caring person. Make a point to stop by the individual's desk each day to say hi and ask how things are going.
- Paying attention to signs of distress. For example, if loud noises or harsh lights are problematic, you may be able to ease the person's stress by reducing ambient office noise or dimming the lights.

- Getting educated about mental illness and the recovery process. Your employee assistance program likely has a wealth of information about mental illness in the workplace. Another excellent resource includes the Canadian Mental Health Association.
- Being supportive and encouraging. Being a good listener and a friend can help the person in recovery to feel less isolated.
- Reminding yourself of how you would want to be treated if the situation were reversed. While you can't walk in someone else's shoes, you can treat someone in recovery with respect and interact in an honest and encouraging manner.