

Helping Behaviors and Recovery in Severe Mental Illness

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Background: Despite recent interest in peer-support workers in recovery-oriented services, little is known about how helping behaviors may affect recovery from severe mental illness (SMI). The current study is a mixed-methods approach to understanding self-motivated helping behaviors and their relationship with recovery outcomes among persons with SMI.

Method: Forty-six participants with schizophrenia-spectrum disorders completed a narrative interview and standardized measures of recovery, positive and negative symptoms, hope, patient activation, and illness management. Interviews were coded using modified grounded theory. We compared individuals who (unprompted) mentioned helping behaviors in their interview to those who did not on recovery-related outcomes.

Results: Sixteen participants (35%) reported unprompted self-motivated helping behaviors, including a desire to tell others their story, teach others recovery-promoting tools, become a peer-support worker, give back to society, and be more active family members. Those who discussed helping others in narrative interviews scored significantly higher on scales assessing recovery, illness management, patient activation, hope, functioning, insight and lower overall symptom severity, negative symptoms, and thought disorder than those who did not discuss helping behaviors.

Discussion: Findings suggest that helping others may contribute to recovery from SMI. Implications include focusing on meaningful work/volunteerism and expanding roles for peer-support in recovery-oriented services.