

Recovery: A Participant in Life

By Patricia Feinberg, MS, Peer Educator
The Coalition of Behavioral Health
Agencies, Center for Rehabilitation
and Recovery

Living one's own life: a rather simple concept but somehow thrown on the back burner. Somewhere along the path in this journey of mental illness, we lose ourselves. Prior to the onset of my mental illness—well into adulthood—I was someone: a daughter, an educated woman, a teacher, a wife, a mother of two children, a good friend, and the list goes on.

But mental illness is a disease of isolation. It's like the parting of the Red Sea. At least in my case, all those significant roles and relationships disappeared with the tides. Friends suddenly took sides, there were boundaries drawn and alienations ensued.

And then, my life was no longer my own. I entered a whole new world of caretakers, doctors, social workers, programs and medications. Welcome to your new family: Monday – Friday, business hours only.

My life became all about work. When that inevitable question came at the party, "What do you do?" I had an answer; I did volunteer work. Then I had a Transitional Employment placement at Venture House. Next I had a Supported Employment position at the Coalition of Behavioral Health Agencies, a real job for real pay! Work



Patricia Feinberg, MS

was all-consuming with expectations, and demands, Monday through Friday.

Then came the weekend, and I dropped out of sight. With no work, there was no meaning. I asked myself if that was all that there is.

Something shifted. I began searching for something else, for the real meaning of wellness. Happiness was finding the balance and harmony between work, play, and personal relationships, as a mother, wife, partner, and dog lover (how could I forget Dylan, my twelve-year-old pedigree Pug?!).

Wellness means rediscovering your passions, hobbies, interests. I became a participant in the world.

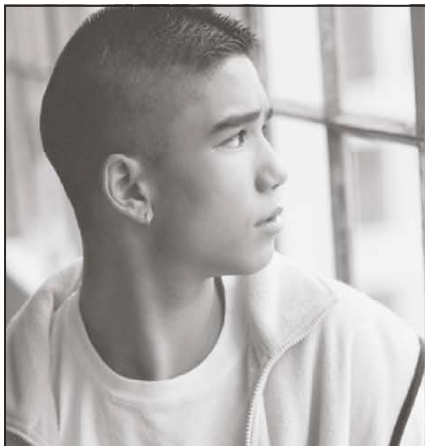
I decided to try to commit to just this one Saturday devoted to an afternoon of Wellness & Yoga. After a session of Yoga for beginners, as well as a long walk around the park, I could barely manage to sit down at a table. The next day was even worse as far as the aches and pains were concerned. The true test was whether I could commit to another Saturday. This was not an overnight transformation. Slowly I began to re-discover my passion for yoga. After about seven weeks of this regime, I noticed that I felt more energized and my posture had improved. A sense of well being was coming over me. Remnants of the old Pat began to emerge! My ability to multi-task returned and my ability to tackle everyday problems improved.

I rediscovered yet another passion: listening and dancing to 1970s-80s and Rhythm and Blues music. For several years I have assisted my boyfriend, currently a DJ, with the selection of vinyls for his set at fundraisers for a nonprofit organization. When New Challenges Clubhouse created opportunities to learn how to become a DJ, I signed up immediately for Session 1. I am now enrolled in Session 2 and am certified in basic wiring and set up on the CD mixer. As the course progresses, our instructor will help to refine and modify our techniques, so that

we can acquire a marketable skill. My grown children cannot believe that their "old" mother is becoming a DJ. As a DJ during a social event, I feel so empowered. I am no longer on the sidelines. I went from being a passive assistant to being in control of the music itself. I get a rush when I see the crowd's excited response to the flow of the play list.

With each new step I am taking I feel more mastery over my environment. It has a kind of domino effect, and I find myself taking risks. I'm entering a new and exciting territory and the possibilities are endless. "I feel my time to get a life is now," to quote John Allen, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, New York State Office of Mental Health, author of *Envisioning a Life Beyond Services*.

I aspire to live that American Dream and have a piece of that pie. To get a taste of life again, we need to recover our passions in our own natural environments, in addition to treatment. The new paradigm of intervention, at its core, should be based on a person's desires, wants, and needs. Staff and supports can be used to help people take advantage of naturally occurring organizations such as volunteer organizations, schools, parks, libraries. Being a native New Yorker and current city resident, there are vast arrays of free events touching on culture, art, music, sports, and nature that are listed in local newspapers. The possibilities are endless to exist in the world and live your life on your own terms.



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About Therapy from page 25

your discomfort but not have the faintest idea how strong your feelings are or what they may be related to unless you convey this to him; (2) Don't be concerned about offending or displeasing your therapist. Your task is to learn to be honest with yourself. The responsibility of your therapist is to listen to what you have to say in a non-judgmental, non-critical way; (3) Give the relationship a reasonable (but not unlimited) amount of time to see if the issues and roadblocks can be resolved in a way satisfactory to you. If within this time-frame you still feel the same way, recognize that it may be in your interest to consider a change. This is neither a reflection nor failure on your

part nor a statement of incompetence on the part of your therapist. Rather, in a field where feelings and communication are so crucial, it is an acknowledgement that you may need someone who enables you to reach yourself in a different way.

Being in therapy should enlarge your freedom, not diminish it; should increase your courage, not reduce it; should promote your responsibility, not dampen it. Translated into actual practice, you simply should not endure or tolerate what feels like an unproductive situation for you. You need to be able to speak up and speak out rather than wait-out or drop-out as a way of dealing with something not working well for you. Your therapy, after all, is supposed to belong to you and is for you.

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it or worse, you may know it. Do I have to lose my mind and my life at the same time? It is backward thinking that the two go hand in hand, and hand in glove.

What is quality of life? In the simplest form, it is what you and I both want and need. What do consumers want? What everybody wants. If you are a human being you know what quality of life is. Does it mean eating McDonald's food everyday? I hope not, but you may want that. You could learn why that is not a good diet for an average person on a daily basis or what is a good diet or what would be a reasonable alternative to that. Quality means good! If you are going to force treatments on someone at least give them

good alternatives! Quality is about respect and considerations. I could go on forever like this, but I do not want to burden those who immediately think that the quality of life for consumers means more work for them. Quality means empowerment and participation in the process. Lastly, quality of life gives us back our own responsibilities and dignity before it is taken away by an intolerant society that can give value to the oppression of people in need. Our real quality in life must begin with when we maintain value for any human condition.

Dedicated to the memory of Rick Sostchen, Executive Director of Baltic Street, Advocacy, Employment, and Housing in Brooklyn, New York. In all his goodness, HE WILL BE MISSED!