



recovery network: Toronto

*people can and do recover from
"mental illness"*



Please, tell us about yourself – where were you born and raised? What did your parents do for a living? Do you have any siblings? What was life like growing up in childhood?

Toronto is my home

I live in Toronto and like the majority of people living here, I came from somewhere else.

This is my home, has been for ten years. Some say the word Toronto means “meeting place”; others say it means “where trees stand in water”. Take your pick, what I notice is that Toronto is a place that many people come to in hope of a better life – many do find it but many also have a difficult time: I did for a while.

I started my working life in engineering: as an apprentice, technician; then a manager- when I realised I was more interested in people than things. I spent many years working in the field of organisational change and development, performance management, teamwork and leadership. I worked on hundreds of projects and collected a lot of really useful skills and experiences along the way. Now I’m using those same skills, and some new ones, in a different field, and in a different country on a different continent.

I graduated from a local programme called PREFER which is a programme designed to give people a basic grounding in what it takes to work in peer support in mental health- I was one of the first graduates.

Unfortunately, I find, most agencies in Toronto have very limited and limiting ideas of what peer support is and especially about what it could be. In many other places around the world, peers are taking on a much broader range of roles including in leadership than I find is happening here. I do think, though, that this is just a symptom of how our mental health services generally are themselves both sick and stuck - and as much in need of recovery as many of the individuals they are funded to support. There are many good things happening and many great individuals but the whole system seems to be frozen and unable to move



beyond providing services that they need people to depend on. I see and hear a lot of frustration everywhere, especially amongst workers.

A focus on learning

My own focus is learning and helping others learn – and I mean learning in its broadest, most active sense. I've always regarded the active part as “learning” not “teaching” and for me learning is much more complex than sitting in a class having my head filled with information by an expert. If I want to learn I need to try something new, reflect and makes sense of what happens, then do it over again and again.

I've come to frame at least my own mental health as being rooted in learning – I became ill because I'd stopped learning and I started to get well again when I rediscovered learning and when I was able to put a curiosity for learning back into the core of my life. For me a curious, learning outlook has no end and it makes for stimulating life – a good life.

I do a lot of WRAP groups and for me WRAP® [Wellness Recovery Action Plan®] is one way to find a simple structure that we can use to remind us of what we can do to help ourselves but also to keep learning.

What have I learned works for me?

For me it's simply about continually asking myself the question, “What works for me?”

- ..Then, from asking that,
- ..Doing more of what works
- ..And doing less of what doesn't.

This way, slowly, bit-by-bit, and day-by-day I get stronger, more well, more resilient.

I recently noticed that I'd ended the each of last five years better than the year before.

In contrast, for the previous five years [and likely ten] my health had been going in the other direction.

That's it: no magic, no solution, no fix and no should-ing. Just simple curiosity about my own experience: learning; reflecting; persistence; choosing - and forgiving myself for whatever I did or didn't do yesterday - because today I get to choose again.

What I've learned is that the more I can focus on simply being well, doing the things I need to do to stay well, then the more energy I have for dealing with whatever happens. The



simplest kinds of mindful practice enable me to just witness what's happening without getting sucked into whatever my mind is playing with and throwing around. Sometimes it's like sitting back watching it on a giant screen...whatever you got - bring it on, I can deal with it.

I sometimes get strange experiences but now I know what it's all about and I can handle whatever comes up and even enjoy and look forward to them. Usually I figure out what it was all about in a day or two: I don't do anything in particular, just let the insight reveal itself.

Since I'm no longer hiding what I experience, I don't waste all the energy that hiding it consumes. And, you know, if you can't handle that I'm different from you then that's your problem, not mine.

Would you like to share about your mental health history?

I've experienced a few episodes in my life where I became ill – seriously chronically ill, and many ways. I've had a whole bunch of investigations, tests and diagnoses bandied around and none ever made more than partial sense – but that's how diagnosis works.

I diagnosis can be a good place to start, can help us make some sense but its unlikely any diagnosis will tell the whole story. Yet it's easy for a diagnosis to take over a life. We are encouraged to learn about our diagnosis, become expert in the expert language used by illness experts. It's easy to let ourselves believe we ourselves need to become expert in our illness, to talk using the illness jargon of the illness experts who label us. Without even noticing, we can come to inhabit the persona of an illness, a diagnosis – “I am XXX” rather than “I have a diagnosis of XXX”.

Why is it that “mental health” is the only field of medicine in which this happens?

As my friend Chris Emmanuel says in his book “A Mind That Matters”:

“We do not say: ‘I am a broken arm’
We say: ‘I have a broken arm’.”

People struggling with mental illness are no more “the mentally ill” than people with cancer are “the cancerous”.



That seems a really tragic way of treating people who are already suffering enough - let's stop doing that.

Recovery Network: Toronto

You are founder and coordinator of the blog website 'recovery network: Toronto' – please share how this came about? What is the website all about? What has been some of the biggest highlights the website has featured?

The blog **recoverynetwork:Toronto** started with two ideas coming together – I needed a way to organise and retrieve all the interesting and useful information I'd been finding on the internet as part of my own recovery; and I had a bunch of friends who were themselves recovering and we were looking at ideas about what we could create that might be helpful.

The basic idea is that it's as easy to share what we find with a few friends as it is to share it with the world; in doing so we could create something of a hub - maybe a place that others could find things that were useful to them, and in turn share what they find.

We're not in any way about telling people what to do.

We are about sharing ideas and information that others might find informative, useful or inspiring – even it's just where to look next. And you know what? lots of people tell me they appreciate the blog but when I ask what they like best about it I usually get the same response – “the variety of ideas” and “the music, definitely the music”.

We also have no fixed ideas what it takes to recover – except that each person is different and needs to find it for themselves, their own mix of stuff that works for them.

We can't recover for you; we can't tell you what you need to do; we can simply share some ideas that we found useful. It's your recovery, be curious and persist: try stuff and learn and you will find what works for you.

We're more than just a blog, we're a collective, and we run groups and operate as an informal network. Neither are we just in Toronto – people from around the world read the blog and send in info to be shared with the world. We have one group **secondwednesday** that is totally “peer run: for peers, by peers”. It's been running for four and a half years and has been attended by over two hundred people.

In 2013 we are moving into a new phase, we'll be making some modifications to the blog [including a shorter URL – <http://www.recoverynet.ca> - and working towards creating an



operating framework that will enable us to do more things like offer training, talks and events, book spaces and contract with agencies. We want to create a simple operating framework for creating spaces so other peer led groups can start their own projects.

And key, we want to enable and draw on the vast range of skills and expertise that people have before they discover they have a mental illness. Many who come to work in peer support find that their life before diagnosis is dismissed. I know people who were top executives, accountants, salesmen, trainers, – yet in peer support their role becomes limited to using their “lived experience of mental illness”. Well, I don’t know about you but I think that sucks. We hope to create a space people can use the skills and abilities they do have – if they want to.

Voices Toronto

One of our projects, and the one that I’m most involved in, is Voices Toronto – we have now hosted a self-help group for people who hear voices for almost two years. We also do talks and media work. In that our aim is to start a conversation in the fourth largest city in North America so that people can hear there is more than one way of thinking about voices. We want people to have the opportunity to hear that the experience is so much more common than is generally portrayed and that if someone hears voices it does not necessarily mean they are ill. We also want people to have chance to hear that there are ways of learning to live with voices, some of which can be remarkable simple.

Toronto likes to think of itself as the world’s most diverse city – “diversity is our strength” is the city’s motto. I regard hearing voices as a story of diversity – I think it’s a good fit and when I talk to people, offer them opportunity to see it as such, they get it.

I believe even the biggest change happens one person at a time – when we recruit ourselves to the cause we believe in and want to do our part.

Worker training

Another key part of the project is training – we offer worker training for workers in mental health and social services, we started in January and it’s getting a great reception, we’re just about to advertise the next dates. We now get more and more inquiries from agencies – and this our first hospital- to do follow up work exploring what might work and for the people they support and in their environment. We are interested in helping workers integrate practical ideas and approaches into their work that can better help individuals find the lives they want.



We're also about to start a WRAP group for people who hear voices and we're designing a program for families and carers who have a loved one who hears voices.

Much of our approach is inspired by Ron Coleman's idea shown in this slide that we use in talks....



Mental health services seem to me to be largely *stuck*. More and more people can see that the meds-only approach does not work as well as we might have wanted, and people are looking for what else they can offer. Yet there is no real clarity of ideas and no money: budgets are tight and getting squeezed ever tighter yet we are spending millions and billions on services that are clearly inadequate for many. The result is that mental health services are just as stuck as an individual with mental illness might find themselves stuck. That's really not very helpful.

At recoverynetwork:Toronto we are not about creating new edifices or new institutions – we see that as a sure way to get as bogged down. Our approach is to find the people who are interested now – individuals, teams, agencies - and to work with them on finding practical small changes they can make in the ways they work every day. If we do what's possible today then we have already begun to create a better tomorrow.

For me it's the same as working with an individual in distress or with a diagnosis – there is no one big thing that will miraculously fix everything but lots of small changes can change a life.

If individuals are in recovery then so too are mental health services them in need of recovery.



Hearing Voices Network – Toronto: You manage the Toronto Hearing Voices Group – please tell us how this came about setting it up? How is the group doing? What has been some of the major success's for the group?

Leadership project

I'm also, for two years now, part of a small group- the Leadership Project- that has for over a decade been setting up international conferences that bring some of the world's best thinkers, researchers and practitioners in mental health and recovery to the city. Our last big conference was in Nov 2012, and was organised around on the topic: **Challenging our Understanding of Psychosis and Exploring Alternatives for Recovery**
<http://understandingpsychosisexploringalternatives.wordpress.com/>

It was amazing; I met so many people whose work has been important in helping me make sense of my own experiences and also in sparking the ideas and belief that have been key to my own recovery. I even got to work alongside two: Sandra Esher and Rufus May.

We are working on our next conference right now.

It was with the Leadership Project that we put together Toronto's first **World hearing Voices Day** event 14 Sep 2012. It is because of the work done by this group over the last decade that there is now a receptive audience for the work I'm engaged in and have taken on a lead role in.

Favourite Quote?

I don't have one favourite – there are simply too many good ones out there. Here's one I like this week...

"Some scientists claim that hydrogen, because it is so plentiful, is the basic building block of the universe. I dispute that. I say there is more stupidity than hydrogen, and that is the basic block of the universe."

– Frank Zappa



Some scientists claim that hydrogen, because it is so plentiful, is the basic building block of the universe. I dispute that. I say there is more stupidity than hydrogen, and that is the basic building block of the universe.

Frank Zappa



You can catch all this and more of Kevin Healey and **RecoveryNetwork: Toronto** at:

Website <http://recoverynet.ca>

Facebook: [@RecoveryNetwork.Toronto](https://www.facebook.com/RecoveryNetwork.Toronto)