



History of Recovery International

One of the earliest group-based self-help organizations, Recovery International was founded at the Neuropsychiatric Institute of the University of Illinois Research and Education Hospitals on November 7, 1937, by the late Abraham Low, MD, a professor of neuropsychiatry and 30 of his patients.

Low observed the need for a structured organization to provide support to patients after release from the hospital. Rather than treat patients individually, which was limited by the doctor's and patients' resources, he recognized that more could be done for more patients in a structured therapeutic group setting. The first group consisted of 30 former patients of the Psychiatric Institute. From the outset, the mission of Recovery International was the prevention of relapses in former patients and minimizing their destructive habits of thought and behavior.

Low was a charismatic figure and an original thinker. His theories on the biological basis of mental illness put him at professional odds with many psychoanalysts of his day. He initially specialized in neurology and thoroughly studied neurosciences, publishing numerous articles on subjects such as aphasia, acalculia and the histopathology of the brain and spinal cord, before he began practicing psychiatry.

While Low closely supervised Recovery International's activities during its formative years, he ultimately developed techniques that would allow the organization to stand as an independent self-help lay group without professional supervision. He established a comprehensive set of techniques for managing fear, anger and the symptoms of depression, techniques that would now be called behavior modification and cognitive therapy. He believed that with the application of his method (in the absence of organic illness) there were "no hopeless cases." He created a freshly descriptive vocabulary specific to the system and its concepts. For example, the concept of "spotting" was a method of training patients for balanced introspection and insight.

His book, *Mental Health Through Will Training*, presents case studies in the form of interviews and panel discussions which are interpreted in terms of Low's theories of will-training, temper control and symptom analysis, rather than psychoanalysis.



Although his theories and practices were not received enthusiastically by the psychiatric community in general, their use spread from patient to patient, and by word of mouth among practitioners who accepted the concepts of Recovery International. New groups formed, first in the Midwest, then eventually throughout the United States and internationally. Realizing that he could not supervise each group directly, Low devised training methods to teach selected group members how to maintain the structure of the meeting and the consistent application of the Recovery International system within a group and from group to group.

Recovery International became an independent organization in 1952, and entirely self-help. The Recovery International system enables participants to see, hear and experience the application of Low's principles for reacquiring self-leadership, overcoming the fear of nervous symptoms and strengthening self-confidence. With the presentation of "examples" by other members (using the four-step outline), followed by "spotting" techniques, members seek and obtain the help of fellow meeting participants and learn how to practice the Recovery International system more effectively.

Recovery International has community-based meetings in the U.S., Canada, Ireland, Puerto Rico, Spain, Israel, India and the United Kingdom, and is also available via telephone and online meetings.

Recovery International remains the self-help group-based program Low envisioned. As he wrote, "Recovery stands for simplicity. Its systems of instruction and training are meant to enable the patient to practice self-help. Self-help in psychiatric aftercare calls for simple methods of interpreting and manipulating symptoms. When you are ill, your main and all-absorbing purpose must be the will to get well. All other purposes, no matter how inspiring and exalted, must be subordinate to the one leading purpose of getting and keeping well."