



## **Five things you might like to know about Recovery Colleges**

**Dr Jonathan Leach explains in this five point guide.**

### **What is a Recovery College? When did they start?**

A recovery college takes an educational rather than a clinical approach to improving mental health. As far as possible the distinction between service users and professionals is avoided and there is an emphasis on co-production, co-delivery and co-participation in the learning.

People with experience of mental health problems are encouraged to take part in the design and delivery of courses and not all of those attending courses will have a psychiatric diagnosis (family, friends and professionals are encouraged to attend too).

The emphasis within the college is on strengths rather than problems and people may choose to develop their own individual learning plan to guide their studies. The aim is to offer subjects that would not be always available within mainstream education and could include:

- Understanding recovery
- Understanding mental health conditions
- Looking at mental health services and treatments
- Personal wellbeing and health
- Training, advocacy and peer-support skill

## **When did Recovery Colleges start?**

According to Meddings et al. (2015) '*The first Recovery College was established in 2009 by Rachel Perkins in South West London and a second College was quickly established in Nottingham*'.

The impetus for these first colleges grew out of the recovery movement which developed quite steadily from the late 1980s onwards. A key aspect of the concept of recovery in mental health is that it is '*a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involved the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness.*' (Anthony, 1993).

Although many mainstream mental health services embrace the idea of being recovery-focused, the establishment of colleges offers greater opportunities to break down the barriers between staff and users and to focus on strengths rather than problems.

## **How many Recovery Colleges are there?**

In 2014 we could count only eight recovery colleges in England (McGregor et al., 2014). Since then the number of Recovery Colleges has increased exponentially both inside and outside the United Kingdom.

ImROC in the 2017 report have identified 85 Recovery Colleges operating in the UK (77 in England, 2 in Scotland, 5 in Northern Ireland and 1 in Wales).

- 85% of RC's work with partner organisations to co-produce / co-facilitate courses.

- Partners most frequently include; colleges, universities, third sector organisations, emergency services and social care providers.

## What do the people who use Recovery Colleges think about them?

Although it is still relatively early on in the development of recovery colleges the indications are that the people who attend them have a positive experience. A number of articles have been published on the experiences of students at these colleges and their comments seem to show that they are making a difference to people's lives. One study using the feedback from 220 students reported that:

- Students were positive about the college in the interviews:
- *"The best idea I've ever heard of in mental health. Made a big change to life, and gave help when needed most."*
- *"Improved self-esteem and confidence. Sense of fulfillment and achievement."*
- "Giving me a smile again". (Smeddings et al., 2014)

## How can I join a Recovery College?

As recovery colleges are educational establishments you don't need a health referral and you can apply directly to them. One college states: *'There is absolutely no need for a referral; in fact we do not have a system for referrals. Although the college is designed for people with lived and professional experience of mental health services, we operate the same as any adult learning centre would. Your local team may recommend us to you but they cannot refer. We pride ourselves in treating everyone as students and you will have equality with all students at the college regardless of background.'* (Southern Health NHS)



## References:

**Original article can be found at: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/health/health-studies/mental-health/five-things-you-might-know-about-recovery-colleges>**

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