

The Seven Plateaux Recovery Programme

Stephen Farthing

I would suggest that today's clients are consumers of 'getting better,' bringing with them expectations of the 'instant' cure and remedy that can be provided by the expert therapist. Many clients expect the medical model, or at least a close version to it, where treatment and solutions abound in pain free and/or responsibility free remedies. Approaches that vindicate the client are much sought after, either by way of genetic predisposition, attributing the present to childhood experiences and parental shortcomings, the blaming of institutions, or a diagnosable condition that explains "why I feel this way and behave as I do."

Bookshops have shelves that can be found bristling with an abundance of self-help books providing sign posts as to how to turn around a mundane or frozen life, ranging from discovering your guardian angel or spirit guide, to the avalanche of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy workbooks cascading out of print works and competing for consumer attention. There is a cry for release from misery, and a hunger for a more fulfilling life, even though for some clients, the fantasy is more palatable than the reality, and for some an imagined future is enough in itself. Such expectations are fuelled by the consumerist culture that as Bauman notes "is marked by a constant pressure to be someone else" (Bauman, 2007 p100).

It is at the point of 'getting better' and 'being my old self again' that the Seven Plateaux Recovery Programme was initially devised to work alongside targeted treatment plans for patients with medically diagnosable mental health conditions. For many clients, relief from unwanted cognitions and their affective influence along with desperate cries of "I don't want to feel this way" drive their engagement with therapeutic services and searches along the shelves of self-development and well-being sections of bookstores and libraries. The Seven Plateaux programme rests on two fundamental questions:

- How will I know when I am better?
- What will being better look like for me?

The programme is profoundly influenced by, and draws upon Egan's *The Skilled Helper*, which is currently in its ninth edition. Previous editions presented two principle goals of helping; Life-Enhancing Outcomes, and Learning Self-Help. The ninth edition adds a third principle; that of Prevention Mentality, which Egan describes as "help clients develop an action-orientated prevention mentality in their lives (Egan, 2010 p10). The Seven Plateaux Programme also draws upon Egan's earlier work that addresses the social context of human development (Egan & Cowen, 1979).

At the outset, the term recovery is explored, defined, and re-conceptualised for each individual participant. The Seven Plateaux Recovery Programme is embedded in humanistic psychology and the Person-Centred Approach. The eight, ninety minute group sessions are thematic which provides a 'containment field' and a compass point for the participants. The groups are non-directive, with the programme indicating the topic, and the participants being given free space to develop the group and craft their own experience of exploration and reflection (Rogers, 1990). The therapist acts as a model of the Core Conditions.

Participants, from the first plateaux onwards, work systematically through structured exercises (Yalom, 1983) and are encouraged in self-reflection and out of session self-help activities. The seven plateaux are:

1. Hope for a possible future
2. Community and connectedness
3. Opportunity and decision
4. Responsibility and empowerment
5. Having a discovery mindset
6. Forgiveness of self and others
7. Faith, spirituality and meaning

The seven plateaux Programme utilises the following understanding of recovery,

"...a journey of discovery where you are your own experiment, uncover hidden or unseen strengths, remembering who you are, and use missed opportunities and unused resources to be everything that you possibly can become towards managing life more effectively and living more fully."

The definition begins by using the familiar concept of process. There is the sense of leaving behind one situation, thinking pattern, depressed mood and behaviour, and arriving at a different destination from which has been left. However, there is no on/off switch between being unwell, distressed, facing personal crisis, and being 'well' again, better, cured, or the problem going away. There is a passage that must be walked down between the room called unable to cope, and the room called able to cope better. Participants who are seeking change need to be accepting of the time this requires, and the personal responsibility and costs involved.

The second principle in within the definition is that of encouraging each participant to experiment with their own life. This involves trying out new ideas, doing new things, taking new opportunities and drawing upon their own inner-resources. This requires a willingness to take planned risks to gain life enhancing benefits. The challenge here is for participants to actively engage in their own recovery towards further self-actualisation.

A third principle is that of each participant learning about themselves as a 'self' who is present in the World. Participants come to see themselves as an existential mystery, with a presence and influence that can enrich the lives of others. Participants are discouraged from seeing themselves as special. They are asked to state why they are so special that they are excluded from a fulfilling life and healthy relationships, in a challenge to the narcissism and self-pity that victimhood can present (Egan, 2010a). Throughout the programme participants are encouraged to change the word recovery to discovery (Egan, 2002). It is the "I never thought I would be able to do that," or "I didn't know that about myself" experience.

A fourth principle is that of remembering. Participants who are particularly unwell, or suffering under the weight of personal crisis can lose touch with their sense of being a 'real you.' This is not an attempt at a fixed 'essential self,' but participants can forget how life looked before their crisis came about or becoming so swamped with their symptoms or situation that they almost become their illness. Remembering who they are helps each person to step outside their own illness and perceive themselves as being separate from it. Group members are invited to say "I am experiencing depression" rather than "I am depressed," and "I am here to learn how to manage depression" rather than "I am here for depression." Remembering also embraces appreciation of the giftedness of life and the wonder of the surrounding world.

The fifth principle of the recovery programme is recognising that there is opportunity in the World, no matter how bad or frozen the person is feeling and perceiving themselves to be (Egan, 2010b). It is the participant's experiencing of themselves as being unwell, unable to cope, and overwhelmed that influences their choice in taking up an opportunity or not. Within the programme, a key concept is the difference between capacity and capability. Participants have found this distinction very encouraging. Each person is encouraged by the group to take small steps to increase their capacity to use their capabilities and regain greater autonomy.

The sixth principle of the programme is that of challenging each individual group member to manage their difficulties, rather than be managed by problems. Participants are encouraged to accept situations that are beyond their control, and make the most of the times when they feel better and have higher energy levels. The more each person manages their problems, then the less their problems will manage them.

The first of the eight group work meetings is a general introduction to the format and principles of the Seven Plateaux Recovery Programme. During this first each person is invited to discuss what recovery means to them. They are also asked to imagine that they have now 'recovered' and say how life looks for them. This begins to frame the two fundamental questions of the programme. At the end of the first group, group members are given the suggestion of writing a letter to their 'recovered self' and post it into the future. This is then can be brought to the second group session for disclosure.

The second group focuses on group cohesion and further nurturing of the group into a mutually supportive experience. There are two themes within the second group; love and hope. The word love and its expression are explored using two sources as starting points. The first is the Beatles' lyrics of "All you need is Love" (Lennon/McCartney 1967) and the writing of St. Paul recorded in his first epistle to the Christian community at Corinth (chapter 13: v4-7). Group members are asked to discuss how they as individuals can bring compassion and understanding into the group. The Pauline text is particularly helpful as one of the structured tasks is to replace the word love with their own name. The group evolves into an experiential community, where physiognomic and cognitive empathy is developed between the group members (Lago & MacMillan, 1999).

The second group session then moves on to guided exploration of the first plateau. Hope, is a critical starting point of the recovery programme as it provides reason

and motivation (Egan, 2006). Group members are asked to think about what has been a source of hope for them in the past. They are asked in group to answer the self-reflective question of "If I was managing my illness or situation better, what would each day and week look like?" In the group, participants are asked to draw a branch of a tree, and sketch the bad fruit (self-defeating behaviour and counter-productive habits), and then add good fruit (beneficial habits and productive behaviour). Group members are encouraged to focus on strengths, resources and successes, rather than weakness, limitations and failures (Egan, 2010c) Quotes such as Walter Anderson's "True hope dwells on the possible, even when life seems to be a plot written by someone who wants to see how much adversity we can overcome. True hope responds to the real world, to real life; it is an active effort" are used to stimulate discussion.

The third session continues to look at the individual reasons why each individual participant wants to get better, and how their own chosen future life might look. These hopes are encouraged to be value driven outcomes (Egan, 2010d), rather than motivated by stale obligation. The second plateau asks group members to think about their experience of being in community, and reflect on their sense, or lack of, connectedness with others. This session also begins to look at self or internal connections, for example the participant's connection to their own thoughts, emotions, needs and desires. Each person is encouraged to explore how emotional needs can be met in unhelpful ways, for example comfort eating.

Participants are asked to think about their 'hope' and how they can better connect to community in order to fulfil their desired future (Egan, 1998). This can be at the level of "When I am better I will be learning Salsa dancing, so I need to find a class (community) and make new friends (external connectedness) with the same interest and enjoy myself (internal connectedness)." The fourth session further explores the third plateaux, the theme of developing the opportunities that are available to the participants for developing a wider sense of community and more valued connectedness. Group members explore their experience of communities, and look at their current sense of belonging. At this point many come to the realisation that they need to develop stronger roots and belonging. Others realise that they are rooted into unhelpful and destructive relationships.

The fifth session (fourth plateau) addresses the subject of the participant's need for self-responsibility and empowerment. This means each group member moving away from blame, and recognising how their own actions have added to, or maintained personal problems in living. Participant's self-defeating, or rather satisfaction limiting behaviour is highlighted, and they are supported by the group to make alterations (Egan,

2010e). Within the programme, individual self-defeating ways of are referred to as strongholds. In the exploration of strongholds, it is hoped that participants move towards organismic valuing.

An exercise used in the group is that of asking each patient to draw a mixing bowl. In the bowl, participants are asked to sketch all of the ingredients that they believe have gone into making up their problem. Having done this, participants are asked to sketch any ingredients that they have added to the recipe that has 'baked' their problem into what it is today. Finally, they are asked to sketch in any preservatives that keep the problem going as it is which contribute to the maintenance of the difficulty (Egan, 2010f).

This session includes participants thinking about their current responsibilities. This includes looking at basic self-care. Participants explore how they feel about having responsibilities, and the stress and anxiety this causes them. Group exploration includes given and chosen responsibilities, with a discussion about my own quote "We are responsible for the amount of responsibility that we are responsible for." This leads to the issue of personal boundaries.

Empowerment is explored in terms of autonomy, with control being explored in terms of influence. In my clinical experience I have found that the term 'control' is emotive for many participants, so I prefer to use the term of gathering and increasing autonomy and influence. Participants discuss that:

- Empowerment only happens when you decide to overcome the limitations of your illness or addiction. If you still have not decided to recover (discover), or expect someone else to do this for you, than you will not have the beginnings of personal empowerment.
- Empowerment means setting up a safety net around you. This safety net might be parents, family, friends, support groups, crisis intervention services, professionals such as social workers and religious leaders.
- Empowerment means that you have now accepted responsibility for your own future, no matter what is written on the pages of your past.
- Empowerment means taking your own life seriously.

The fifth plateau (group six), encourages the participants to move more fully from recovery to developing a discovery mindset. This is more of a creative group, with the

first structured task being the group members sketching themselves as a plant or tree. A healthy tree has strong roots and reaches upwards, ever growing, sprouting new shoots, flowering and bearing fruit. Participants are asked to share their metaphor of the tree with the group. Another structured exercise undertaken during this session is a Wheel of Life (Mindtools, 2011). This is a set of rings one within another, that are then divided into equal segments; environment, vocation & employment, finances, health and physical well-being, social life, significant others including romance and family, religion or spirituality, and enjoyment and relaxation.

Participants take the centre of the circles as being least satisfied, and the outer circle as being very satisfied. Participants shade in each area according to how they rate their level of satisfaction. Following this they look at the shaded shape of their wheel, and in pairs or as a group discuss how bumpy a ride they would have if the shape was a real wheel. This of course assumes that the unrealistic idea of life having a perfect balance, but it does help participants review their life style and values. A key is that a change in one life area can cause a natural change in others.

At this plateau, the CRAVE acronym is useful to help participants craft their recovery. The acronym for control, relevant, appeal, values, and environment helps patients to stay grounded and contained when discovering new possibilities (Wosket, 2006). This is particularly important as participants are encouraged by the Seven Plateaux Programme to become their own experiment.

Having looked at discovery, the next (sixth) plateau deals with resentment, bitterness and forgiveness. This is the hardest part of the climb to recovery for many people. Participants begin the session by reading through and discussing a number of well known quotes such as Nelson Mandela's "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies"

The out of session work is that of suggesting participants write a no send letter to those how have caused the emotional pain or injury. Participants can then bring the letter to the next group. During this group, participants are given the opportunity to read out the letter while gathered in the hospital grounds. Following this reading, the letter is set alight. While the letter burns, the participant reads aloud the following affirmation of Forgiveness which I developed along pastoral lines. A key discussion during the sixth group meeting centres on my following phrase "forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation, but one cannot be reconciled to another without it."

My Affirmation of Forgiveness

I release myself from all the chains (demands and judgments) that have kept my life so limited. I destroy the strongholds of hate and revenge. I give myself permission to be set free to live in happiness, love and peace. I allow myself to develop enriching friendships, to have good things in my life, to experience fun and enjoyment, to know that I am worthy and deserve to have what I desire. I now set myself free. In this act I release all others from my demands and expectations that I have placed upon them and let them go. I choose freedom from resentment, bitterness and anger. I allow others to be free. I forgive myself and I forgive them. I will step into fulfilment.

- Stephen Farthing

The final session, which includes the opportunity of burning no send letters, concludes by addressing issues of faith, spirituality and meaning. The rationale behind this plateau is that of adding a wider personal worldview that will help the participant to sustain their recovery and expand into a broader life. Participants are encouraged to talk through their personal understanding of spirituality, and how they can develop meaning and nurture faith in their lives. This includes completing a guided spider gram that asks group members to map aspects of spirituality as they perceive it in their current life. This step opens up the possibility of expressing faith, which includes atheism; the faith that there is no god or creator. Many group members find my reframing of atheism as a faith rather than a science to be thought provoking.

The Seven Plateaux uses the metaphor of recovery as being rather like a mountain climb. Each plateau as it is reached offers the individual participant the opportunity to explore a new broader perspective of their 'being-in-the-world.' As the mountain of recovery is climbed, each plateau builds upon the former. The higher the plateau however, the steeper and harder the climb. Groups are client lead, with each session of the programme having a set of notes and worksheets that are distributed at the start to each participant. These 'format' and 'therapeutically contain' the process. The eight sessions encourage participants to explore their individual sense of being human, to take full responsibility for themselves both individually and socially, and to develop a life enhancing relationship with their own sense of personhood. The group itself becomes a micro (therapy) world where each person is valued, held, challenged, and encouraged.

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