

PART TWO – Suggestions about moving forward.

These sections have been put together by Penny Arnold and Rob Van Beek with feedback and additional ideas from Making Waves.

Penny Arnold was involved in instigating the Insight in Mind film and has been responsible for its subsequent development as a DVD and a website resource.

Rob Van Beek is an artist working in Nottingham. He contributed images and words to the original film and also has been instrumental in revising print material for the website.

Making Waves is a service user organization based in Nottingham that provides training, research and service evaluation within mental health services in the East Midlands.

We would like to emphasize that this advice and the suggestions presented here are based on personal experience. They have been suggested from those who experience highs or lows of mood themselves or by friends or loved ones of people who have these experiences

They are not intended to be authoritative but to promote discussion and to help encourage others to share their experiences.

We hope some people will find some of these contributions helpful. We are still developing this resource and welcome feedback and ideas for future additions or changes to these suggestions.

For the sake of simplicity we discuss moods simply in terms of high, low and stable moods.

Advice and suggestions are presented under the following headings:

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5. SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

5.1 Repairing bridges

Repairing the bridges afterwards can be very difficult.

It can be awkward dealing with people that you may have upset whilst you were high or low. Many people simply have no knowledge or experience of dealing with people who experience highs and lows. Often I just explain that I would have normally gone about things differently. *Rob*

When you are well, it can be worth taking the trouble to repair bridges and explain that sometimes high or low mood is affecting your judgment. If you are going to do this, try to do it when you feel you are able to do so, especially with people you do not know as well. Try not to worry how others may react. You may be surprised that some people can find this honesty refreshing. Mostly, people who know you and care about you will understand. *Penny*

5.2 Being open about your own experiences

It can be a good thing to be open about highs and lows of mood and pass on an accurate picture of what they involve. In practice, however, people will give out information about themselves in a way that is consistent with their own character and personality.

I would never be very upfront about the fact that I experience mood swings unless it was in a therapeutic setting or I was confiding with someone else who understood what mood swings meant. I would always let people get a picture of me as I am before I told them I experienced mood swings. As an interim measure I might mention that I had a poor tolerance of stress and that I had suffered from sleep disturbance and had to be careful about getting enough sleep. Eventually when people know me better I will be more specific about the mood swings. It is part of who and what I am but it is not the key bit of information about me. *Rob*

I try to talk to others about the diagnosis and how it makes me feel as well as any illness symptoms so they know what to look out for. *Penny*

Sometimes it can be useful not to look at your experience in terms of “illness” and “diagnosis” but instead look at how you feel and what you have experienced. *Penny*

5.3 On being open – for carers and loved ones.

Ask the person who experiences highs and lows of mood what their preferences are: Who they want to know and how much information they want to pass on. If in doubt be discrete. Check with the person involved.

Every individual has a personal attitude towards sharing information about themselves. People who experience highs and lows of mood are no different in this than anyone else.

After I was spectacularly high once I felt that I had lost a lot of my privacy and dignity. The last thing I wanted at that time was to be open and upfront about my mood swings. Now I have had years of relative stability. I'm in a position to be more detached and confident about it. *Rob*

5.4 Advance Directive

It may be useful to write your own advance directive which is a way of letting other people know what is acceptable to you in terms of treatment and care in the future. This is something that you can give to your family and any members of your care team, so that they know what medications you would rather not take in the future and what preferences you might have about support and care - should you need this in the future. For more information about advance directives and how to write one : <http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Legal/AD.htm>

5.5 Discrimination

Recognising that there is an amount of discrimination towards people who have a mental health diagnosis or experience can be difficult. It helps, if you feel able to share any information that you want to, in your own time and with the people that you want to share it with.

For loved ones and carers it can be helpful to be aware of the effect of discrimination and that most people will want to feel in control about who knows about their experience. It is not down to you to share their experience with others unless they have requested it. Be careful not to share information without that person's permission.

People with mood swings are now legally protected from explicit acts of discrimination. Find out what the law says and use it if you are the subject of discrimination.

See links to Open Up anti-discrimination toolkit <http://www.openuptoolkit.net/home/index.php>

This is not a bad time and place to be a person who experiences mood swings or to have a child or loved one who does. Things still have a long way to go however. As someone who experiences mood swings I try to do my bit for raising awareness and making things even better for future generations. *Rob*

Sometimes it is the people with all the right jargon that have the most entrenched attitudes. Sometimes the people who are less 'sophisticated' and use non-PC terms and attitudes turn out to be more sympathetic and more prepared to do something.

Not putting up with discrimination is something we all have to work at in lots of different ways. Attitudes will hopefully change but this is not going to happen overnight.

Like every other aspect of life mood swings involve risk. The 'general public' at present doesn't know how big or small risk is involved with mood swings. Hopefully this will change as the risks in having mood swings are set to get less and less.

I think eventually there will be a more general acceptance that people can experience from severe mood swings on occasion and still hold responsible positions in the community.

I think that there is now a wider awareness in the culture about the 'special' contribution people with mood swings make. In fact there is a risk of it becoming a stereotype: if you experience mood swings you have somehow got to be creative or artistic! *Rob*

6.0 On staying okay and moving forward towards recovery

Some suggestions that can help towards remaining okay and towards moving forward to recovery:

- Trying talking therapies ¹
- Exploring creative pursuits ²
- Doing regular exercise ³
- Maintaining a healthy and regular Diet ⁴
- Keeping to a regular sleep pattern
- Trying to keep to routines whether they be daily, weekly or monthly
- Finding out about and trying self management techniques
- Spending time outdoors; nature, gardening ⁵
- Learning relaxation techniques. ⁶
- Finding out about vitamin or mineral supplements and/or seeing a nutritionist. ⁷
- Exploring and trying alternative therapies ⁸
- Self help – attending groups, accessing information in books or the internet or sharing ideas with others who have had similar experiences.
- Keeping a good work/life balance and making changes to lifestyle ⁹
- Doing things that make you feel good, make you feel happy or make you smile
- Doing something different or something positive that you haven't done for a long while (e.g. read a book, go for a long walk, go to the cinema/theatre)
- Pampering yourself (e.g. with a long bath, a haircut or a massage)
- Finding meaningful ways to occupy your time, with voluntary work or other interests.
- Keeping a diary or a book you can record feelings or thoughts in.
- Developing positive ways to deal with stress.
- Trying to build a good support network – with friends, family or loved ones and developing positive relationships with people who can listen, offer support and be understanding*
- Trying to find ways of putting your experiences in perspective *
- Developing personal strengths and understandings such as good judgment, self awareness, self-discipline or patience *
- Looking at medications you are on. If need be, discuss reducing the types or changes in medications *
- Finding out about and using one of the models or plans of recovery that are available. _L

²The suggestions with numbers are looked at in more detail from a personal perspective below.

* The suggestions with stars are discussed by Penny and Rob in their personal recovery stories.

_L There is further information to access via the links resource page on the website

Penny and Rob discuss in more detail some of their own experiences of these suggestions

6.1 On talking therapies - Penny

Talking therapies have worked for me in the past. Having someone to talk to about experiences, who is not a friend or family member, can be extremely useful. Talking therapy isn't an easy option – it can be hard work and can often require a great deal of input, with difficult issues being addressed – but it can be extremely rewarding.

In the past, it has helped me to see things in a different way and given me a fresh perspective. I feel it is important to ensure that the counsellor, or therapist is someone who you feel comfortable with talking to. I had one lousy therapist, which only made me feel more confused in a situation I felt I desperately needed help with. Conversely, I have also had the experience of an excellent therapist who challenged me in a way that I really needed.

Sometimes, you have to be in a receptive frame of mind to get the most from talking therapies particularly with an approach like CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy).

On Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Low Mood - Rob

The drug regime I am on now is a very positive development for me but I am aware that before I started on it I had just finished a long course of CBT. The benefits I feel at the moment are probably due to both these influences.

What I took away from my talking therapy was a sense of my own mental habits - some of which were fine - but some of got me into fixes.

Typically under stress my thinking becomes angry and I tend to produce interpretations of situations that 'polarise' or jump to false conclusions rather than look at the possibilities that exist between the opposing options. This trait in my thinking feeds into the mood swings. All too often there is a tendency for 'good' to mean 'all good' or 'good in every way' and 'bad' to mean 'all bad or 'bad in every way'.

I learnt from CBT how to moderate my habits of thought and how to steer a steadier course. I actually feel this has enabled me to take more risks and be more adventurous than I was before because I have a better understanding of what risk is and how to weigh it up.

I find CBT helps generally with life but is particularly helpful when you have to deal with mild to moderate lows. If you want to tackle lows with or without medication I would recommend you access some CBT counselling through your consultant or GP. It does take some working at. There are self-help books available if you want to see if it might suit you.

6.2 On Creativity - Rob

Almost any activity can be done more or less creatively. To me creativity moves us from a position where we are *getting by* to the position where we are *more than getting by!* Creativity is about making life less repetitive and more to do with growth.

Again, 'being creative' is not just about being impulsive. I have found that it is about *being able to work with one's impulsiveness*

I have found that using *symbolic media* such as games, writing, art forms, virtual media etc. involves risks and trade-offs. On the one hand you can take bigger risks and be more adventurous because you can only come to grief within the scope of media you are using.

However you can get into the habit of using these media to crank up your mood artificially. If so you risk becoming over-immersed in what you are doing at that moment and loosen your sense of reality.

On creativity - Penny

During periods of recovery it helps me to have outlets and ways of directing my creative energies. I enjoy writing poetry, photography and painting and I have found it helps me enormously to direct energy into creative projects.

I do have to be careful I don't sweep myself up into an extended high-energy state as I can get very absorbed in what I am doing to the exception of all else.

This aside, I have found that keeping my creative side happy is extremely important to me, regardless of how others might perceive it, or the outcome - such as the huge mural along my hall and staircase. This mural was the result of coming through the other side of a very low mood and was what kept me going for days on end when I didn't feel like doing anything else and had been struggling to get out of bed. Once I had decided to paint, I had a straightforward beginning to each day, without the need for further decisions. I followed the same routine of putting on painting clothes, cleaning the brushes and continuing with the mural. By the time it was completed I was ready to move on to something else too.

Many people find pleasure in a range of artistic and musical activities. There are many levels of involvement that you can have towards different activities – whether they just be for personal pleasure or whether you have opportunities to take part in poetry performances or open mike music events or art or poetry groups. They can be a good way of meeting new people. I have often found that other creative people can be more receptive to the way I might approach things.

6.3 Doing regular exercise - Penny

I find exercise enjoyable. I have always done so and was involved in many team sports in my youth. These days, it helps keeps me focused and calm. I try to walk, swim, dance, run or cycle regularly. I have to be careful that running doesn't inflate my mood, but mainly it is positive in that it helps me burn off some excess energy.

In the past 10 years or so, I have been through many long periods of little or no activity and also times when I have exercised daily (One year I ran a half marathon) Whilst I am recovering it seems important to spend time doing leisure activities and I exercise more. Yet when things are pretty much on an even keel, exercise and other leisure activities become less of a priority.

Whether I am regularly exercising is often a good indicator of what is going on with my energy levels. If I haven't felt like exercising for a while it can indicate that I may be withdrawing a little. If I can't make any time to exercise then this is also a warning sign. Also, if I do exercise but can't enjoy it (as my head is too busy) then I know I have to make time to relax more.

Often the turning point for my recovery can be making the decision to start exercising again or just getting out and about for a daily walk. It can sometimes feel as though I am dragging my body out of the door for a walk, but I know that I have to stick with it and after a few times, I actually begin to enjoy it again and then I wonder why I had ever stopped!

I believe that any kind of exercise can be good for your spirits and I remember reading research that said that exercise was the one proven factor in helping to recover from a depressed state.

Exercise such as swimming, or walking are usually more gentle than activities such as running or cycling. Dancing and football or other team sports can all be fun ways to exercise. They also include an important social aspect. There is a bit of a knack to finding the 'right' activity for your mood. It is largely a matter of try it and see - and of not being discouraged if it doesn't always go well. It is important to be aware of your current limitations and not to try to do too much too soon.
Penny/Rob

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/mhaw/exercise-and-depression/>

Penny shares some of her personal experiences on the following suggestions

6.4 Diet

Diet is a definite mood regulator for me. If I am regularly cooking fresh food then I know I am taking care of myself in a way that is helpful. If I am struggling to both plan & cook for a longer period of time then I know I am not properly taking responsibility for my own health and that I probably need to look at how I am spending my time. Nutrition has always been an important thing for me. My first visit to the acute wards involved me sitting apart from everyone else in the lunch area, eating miso soup (I was trying to be macrobiotic at the time) that I had asked my mum to prepare for me. I no longer attempt any extremes of diets or eating regimes as I can get quite obsessive about this which isn't helpful to my general state of mind. I do try and eat regularly and healthily and very rarely have any caffeine or alcohol or food additives. I do grow a lot of my own vegetables, which helps. I have one main downfall in my general diet, which is my incredibly sweet tooth.

I try to manage my diet well, I know that if I can achieve this when I am well, then it is easier to cook and eat well through more stressful times. I am a firm believer that particular foods can help at times with moods but at the same time I am also aware of how this can get a little obsessive, which sometimes doesn't help stress levels, and I think it is good overall to keep some balance. (so I don't give myself too much of a hard time when I indulge in bars of chocolate)

There has been a lot of research done about how foods can help regulate mood. Amanda Geary has developed an excellent food and mood workbook on this subject. Her website provides excellent information and links to other information on the web. <http://www.foodandmood.org/>

6.5 Spending time outdoors ; nature, gardening and the great outdoors

During times of recovery I have found enormous pleasure in being outside, growing things, or just taking the trouble to see the seasonal changes in the local park. It can help bring me out of myself, and helps me to see the world differently and to forget about personal issues.

I have an allotment that I find incredibly therapeutic in many different ways. The digging, I find very grounding and I can take a well-earned break and relax by the pond with a cup of tea. The pond, with its visiting creatures provides me with creative inspiration. I can lose myself for hours watching and photographing dragonflies and other insects, frogs and foxes. Of course, growing fruit and vegetables is extremely rewarding and tasty!

I know that not everyone would find gardening relaxing and at times I must admit it can be stressful, as I do have a huge site to maintain - along with 16 fruit trees and an array of crumbling out-buildings assembled with windows and doors. However, my allotment with its cosy shed and fire, has also provided a place to escape to when I feel confined by my house or other stresses. [L](#)

Therapeutic gardening projects <http://www.thrive.org.uk/>

Report about nature and mental health http://www.dundee.ac.uk/geography/news_events/inclusion/nature1.htm

6.6 Learning relaxation techniques

Learning relaxation techniques has been useful for me. I learnt some Tai Chi after my first hospital admission. Since then I have done Tai Chi when I have needed something to help calm my mind, especially in a hospital environment. This created interest from both staff and patients (and some strange looks) but I have found that blocking out others and having something positive to focus on, has helped me to maintain a peaceful feeling in what can be a very disruptive environment. I have also tried both yoga and meditation and find meditation tapes quite useful as I am not so good at sitting still without a guide to help me focus.

When I am feeling OK I am not very good at making time to practice these techniques unless I make the time to go to classes. Nevertheless, I do believe they have a beneficial effect, and are worth exploring especially, for when times are more stressful.

6.7 Taking vitamin or mineral supplements

I try and take a variety of vitamins – my partner helps me organise them into daily amounts and reminds me to take them (I am very forgetful with routine things and need all the help I can get!)

I have spent considerable time in the past gathering information about the different vitamin and mineral supplements that might be suitable from articles, books, the Internet or friends and then checking these out again with someone who is experienced in nutrition. I think it is definitely worth remembering that what might be helpful for one person may not help you. It is important to introduce them slowly and be aware of their effects and side effects.

It is very important to get dosages right and to remember that some supplements can interact with other medications. Most information I have read recommends that you talk these through with your GP or a nutritionist.

6.8 Alternative Therapies

I have tried various alternative therapies– acupuncture, shiatsu & aromatherapy massage. They have been helpful at particular times over the years. Currently I regularly visit a homeopath which I find extremely useful. I have built up a good relationship with her over about 4 years and I feel that my sessions with her are an important outlet for my feelings. It is helpful for me not to use the words ‘suffer’ or ‘illness’ or ‘diagnosis’ with her because things aren’t looked at in this way in her consulting room. I recognise that for many people this would not be a useful approach – but for me – it fits with the way I already think. Some therapists offer discounts if you are unwaged.

6.9 Making changes to lifestyle & work

For me, to retain some balance in my life, I have found that I have to have a certain amount of control and independence over how I spend my time. I need to feel I have the freedom to make changes and to be flexible so that I can be spontaneous.

I am often outspoken or unconventional in the way I communicate, live and work. Spending time with people that understand this helps! Conversely, spending time in activities that don’t allow me much freedom of speech or creativity doesn’t help.

Currently, I find it helpful to try and ensure I have a good balance of work activities and creative projects that I find meaningful and challenging. I don’t find it helpful to be working on my own nor in an office environment for long periods of time. I build some ‘down’ time into each week for relaxation, exercise and my allotment. It is an ongoing challenge for me to find some balance.

Recovery Links

Self management training courses. MDF, the Bipolar organization: <http://www.mdf.org.uk/index.aspx?o=56979>

A self management course site: <http://www.steady.org.uk/>

Information about self management and recovery:

http://www.rethink.org/living_with_mental_illness/recovery_and_self_management/index.html

Recovery stories from contributors to Pendulum : <http://www.pendulum.org/stories/index.htm>

Tidal model of recovery : <http://www.tidal-model.co.uk/>

WRAP model of recovery: <http://www.mentalhealthrecovery.com/>

The scottish recovery network,articles about recovery and personal stories of recovery: <http://www.scottishrecovery.net/content/>

Equilibrium - the bipolar foundation: <http://www.bipolar-foundation.org/>

For alternative ways of thinking about diagnosis and mental health – see links on our resource page.

TWO PERSONAL STORIES OF RECOVERY

by Penny Arnold and Rob Van Beek

Penny Arnold and Rob Van Beek compare notes on their journeys towards recovery

Introduction

We are aware that for many people long-term recovery may still be a distant goal. We know that there are times when coping from day-to-day is the most that one can aim for.

We share and compare our own stories in the hope that the exchange of information and experiences may provide helpful ideas to others who are on their own journey of recovery or perhaps thinking about taking those first few steps.

These stories are in addition to the notes above.

Returning the paddle - penny

Background

When I was about 25 I hit a difficult personal time in my life. My reaction was to become very depressed but in coming through this I experienced my first high mood. I have since experienced a series of highs, lows and hospitalisations (including one Section) over the last fifteen years.

In order for me to move forward in a positive way it has helped to try and **make sense of the experiences** I have been through.

After I had recovered from my first distressing experiences, I realised that I had been on a path in my life that I was fortunate to be off! Of course, it is easier to feel like this once there is distance from the more distressing parts of past experiences and life has moved on.

I have found that my extreme experiences have helped me to have a better understanding of myself and provide an opportunity to re-assess my life.

I have also found it helpful to understand what's happened to me in **spiritual** terms - to put things in perspective in a spiritual way.

Although, some times my experiences of altered states of mind have been quite frightening, I have also felt that I have had quite spiritual experiences that have felt enlightening or have given me a powerful feeling of rebirth or awakening. Some of these experiences have been quite wonderful and often I have felt an overwhelming sense of belonging to something greater than myself.

I know that it can be extremely enticing to feel special or blessed with such experiences so I try to explore and question these feelings that I have had. It helps me to try and think about my experiences in a way that is not all about 'illness'.

I recognise that some people find their 'diagnosis' helpful. There are benefits to having a diagnosis, not just access to support, services and financial help but also in terms of having some kind of explanation of how you are affected. I know I have found it useful at many times. But often, there are ways to understand these experiences that can't all be explained as "illness".

Although I don't always accept that I have been 'ill' in the way other people may think, I do accept that I have had periods of disruption where I have needed **support and care from others** and have needed to rebuild some basic structures into my life. I feel very fortunate to have a good support network, especially when times are a bit stressful.

I come from a very close-knit large family, which has been a blessing at many times as they have been fantastically supportive and understanding. However, sometimes it is easy to feel they are being over-protective and over concerned. Generally though, I feel very lucky that I have had a lot of support from *friends* as well as family, this has been important in helping me get through difficult times as well as helping give me the confidence to move on.

Recently, the understanding and support of one key person in my life, who spends time with me on a daily has given more confidence to move forward.

I lead a fairly non-conventional life compared to other members in my family and so maintaining a sense of being okay with myself, has been hard at times when I have been single, it was easy to feel the odd one out. I feel that perhaps my family can understand and accept me more easily now that I am in a more conventional relationship and draw comfort from knowing I have a more settled life. I feel that they have given me a bit more space and that this helps me to feel free to move forward confidently as I have someone else in my life to rely on to help me maintain a balance.

In the past, it has been my family and friends who have been by my side when I have needed support and have helped encourage me to **rebuild some basic structures** in my life.

Sometimes, things do slide a little and I can become immersed in a piece of work or project of some kind and this takes priority.

If I realise that I am struggling, then I try to make efforts to pull back from activities and bring my focus back to basic needs such as food, exercise and rest. It helps that I keep flexible in my work and other commitments, and that I have someone else to help me keep me on track.

I feel I have been through a process of rebuilding many times now and have learnt from these experiences. In the last 3 years since my last hospital admission I have been in a process of moving forward and trying to re-assess what I need to do, to keep some balance.

Making new strokes.

A dictionary definition of recovery is to return to a normal state of mind or strength.

I want to feel that I have recovered when I am longer feeling at odds with myself – not because I want to regain the same world that I inhabited before.

I found a more helpful definition of recovery that's used in rowing, swimming or cycling – its used to describe the action of **returning the paddle**, leg or arm or back to initial position to make a *new stroke*.

This is more helpful; once I have moved forward from a period of disruption I don't return to the same place I was in before.

Once positive changes in my lifestyle are more or less in place, I feel that moving forward is more than just putting some of these into practice. I don't feel that my recovery is about following a strict regime or achieving some delicate balance of helpful factors.

I think there are probably various stages of recovery that I go through, and that each time it has been different. Yet there always seems to be some kind of catalyst, which is different each time, and it is not necessarily important what it is, but just that something positive is there to help me on my journey.

Over the years I have picked up the paddle many times. Each time it has been something different that has helped me to move in a new direction, make new strokes. For me, to paddle forward and keep returning the paddle I have had to remain hopeful and to put my faith in doing something or, perhaps, finding something that made me feel positive.

One time I began listening to children at the local school read – just once or twice a week but it helped me get out of the house and outside of my head. It was something to look forward to, something to talk about and share with others.

Sometimes it has been one person or a group of people that have helped reach out a paddle to me and give me confidence to move forward. It may have just been a small conversation with someone that inspired me to think differently or a suggestion was made that sparked off something positive.

I think the actual process of trying to find the right thing at the time for how I feel, is part of the journey that helps too. (Rob sums this up well, in his section on good judgement.)

Paddling forward & staying still.

I have made numerous changes to my life over the years so that I can try to live in a way where more things are in balance. I have tried to learn something from each experience- something that can help in the future. At times, I have looked at what's in my life, how I work, study or occupy my time and how I feel about the people I spend time with.

Each time I have 'returned the paddle' I feel I have gained a number of **personal strengths and understandings**. I think this comes with experience - a lot of paddling! I don't think it happens overnight.

Each time, I have had to begin by taking small steps at first. I have to be patient with myself and wait till I feel comfortable and ready to make changes. Gradual changes have been more helpful than trying to attempt to try lots of things in one go.

I feel that my own recovery is something that can't be rushed or pushed along. I can make plans and organise things that might make me feel good but change still occurs gradually, slowly. After a while, maybe when I am doing the most mundane thing, I realise that my thinking has shifted and life has moved on.

Through experience, I have a better understanding of how my energy levels naturally ebb and flow. I also have a better awareness of how my high and low moods are reactions to my energy levels and stress levels.

For me high energy is very much associated with being able to achieve a lot of different tasks, being quite creative and working on stimulating projects. This can sometimes cause me difficulty in switching off - a state of mind I call 'busy headed'.

I have realized through experience, that unwinding from this state of mind is a necessary component to my remaining OK. I try to have the **self-awareness** to know when I need to do this and the **self-discipline** to make positive changes in my actions and thinking.

This is a challenge for me as I have always had difficulty in relaxing and in the past have struggled to develop **positive ways to deal with stress**. My natural reaction is to keep going, and to do more instead of less. This is something I now try to pay attention to, when I am feeling stressed or in a high energy state, I try to withdraw and disengage from the world as best I can.

In the past I would overwork until I was forced to stop – by physical illness or by someone else! I do recognise the need to take breaks now, and I am getting better at saying NO to people and to say when I feel angry or upset by something.

My low energy state often follows a period of high energy. Typically I want to do very little and switch off from the world. I have learnt that this is often necessary for me to rest and recharge.

I have realized that these states are natural for me - one is often a reaction to the other. Yet, I do risk losing balance if I allow myself to indulge either energy state for long periods of time combined with dealing with stressful situations.

I am currently learning some **mindfulness** teachings from a friend. I am finding this extremely helpful in many ways. I have a lot of internal chatter and spend thinking time reviewing my behaviours, words, thoughts and feeling. I am learning through mindfulness that this *is* okay, to accept that *however* I am is okay. Perhaps things are different than how I might want them to be and it is fine to acknowledge this.

I am also to let go of any expectations and not to attach too much importance on any outcome. I had already been doing some work with my homeopath about the need I have in my life to push myself to the full and how this can put me off balance. I am realising that **staying still** is important to help me to move forward.

It's *my* recovery when I feel free, spontaneous and in control again to move forward *or* stay still and I remain hopeful that in the future, should I need to 'return the paddle' again, I can do so.

ROB

Background

I feel I have had mood swings all my life. I can certainly remember feeling depressed for periods of time when I was as young as of twelve or thirteen.

However, I have never thought of myself as a 'sad' or 'unstable' person. I probably think of myself as a rather fortunate and happy person but one who has periods of mood instability.

I had a catastrophic crisis when I was in my mid-thirties (I am in my mid-fifties now). I thought I was doing so well at the time. I felt was being busy and effective! Then I picked-up a common, minor virus. Gradually everything began to slip away from me. I fell apart. I fell apart so thoroughly that I don't think anybody thought I would be the same again.

After my first psychotic episode I soon lurched into a second, nastier one. Clearly a pattern began to emerge. It was not long before I realised that my mood swings pre-dated my big breakdown. Throughout my life I had made sudden changes of direction and had sudden changes of heart. I had a tendency to polarise - to go to extremes. This had clearly become more pronounced, more pathological.

I think stress precipitated by big crisis and my subsequent manic-depression. But I think I may also have a natural-born talent for mood swings too.(I learnt from a cousin a few years ago that one our great grand fathers had had an important and creative job but he had killed himself. On his death certificate it said that he killed himself whilst suffering 'delirium'.)

Recovery

I actually feel quite proud of the recovery I have made since that first acute episode. I feel reasonably competent at leading a reasonably productive life managing my moods swings largely by myself.

However it does feels as though it has taken me all of the last twenty years to get my recovery as good as it is today. I think I can summarise my “success” in three points:

- First, I learnt to take my well-being **seriously**. Mood swings may be more that a medical condition but I think you have to accept that they have very serious implications for your well-being. What is more, everything else you want to do, and the way you do everything, depends on your state of well-being.
- I learnt to accept that sometimes, particularly at times of stress or crisis, someone else might be in a better position to make judgments about your state of mind than you are yourself. This is very, very hard to accept.

Now, if my partner says I am acting out of character or that I am pushing at things too hard, I may not like it, but on principal I always take it seriously. The situation is such that I know I may not always be in the best position to judge my own state of mind. Sometimes you have to defer to someone else's judgment and it is better that it is someone that you trust.

I think I am also very fortunate in having a Consultant and a GP that I trust. There are a lot of pressures on doctors to err too much on the side of caution (if I were in their position I would do the same...) If you can build a good relationship with your doctor they will trust your view or judgment more. Then you can for on develop a more customised approach to you treatment and medication together.

- Finally I think it helps to have **reasons** or motivations for keeping stable. When I first had to deal with severe mood swings my motivations were largely negative. I wanted to avoid the disruption to my partner and kids, I wanted to avoid being in a hospital, I wanted to avoid the drop, drop, dropping sensation of bottomless depression.

Now my motivations are more positive. I enjoy stability. I feel I am doing worthwhile things. I see high mood as perhaps a greater threat to stability than low mood. I feel that life is long enough to do what I want and that I don't have to cram things in to it add 'meaning' or 'value' to it. It is simply here to be enjoyed.

I actually feel that my current state of well-being is a largely joint-production of myself and my consultant. I also feel my experience of low mood has been transformed by CBT. (See notes-suggestions part 2.)

Making sense of my more extreme experiences

To me the concept of the 'spiritual' does not explain anything. I have had 'mystical' and 'religious' experiences when I have been high but I certainly don't take these as evidence that there is a spiritual or religious reality. I think it is far more likely that the unusual or extreme experiences (such as those of mania, epilepsy or being close to death) have influenced the imagery of religion, not vice versa.

I think mood swings are massively associated with what might be called **aesthetic** experience. I began to research the relationship between aesthetic and manic experiences through psychology and philosophy in the years after my biggest crises. I feel this helped me come to terms with what I had experienced better than religion or mysticism could.

I supposed like everybody who has had these kinds of experiences I find them interesting. Is this because they make us feel special in some way? (If so, it begs the question why didn't we feel special without these experiences?).

I think it would help if this subject were opened-up a little more. I think you can discuss these very powerful experiences in terms that are neither spiritual or simply a matter of atoms and molecules. I think **Insight in Mind** project is a step in the right direction.

Lifestyle

I have come to the conclusion that there are no especially good or bad things to do if you are recovering from mood swings. I think that almost anything can be therapeutic and almost anything can be harmful depending on the moment, circumstances and degree.

I have found that recovery is about recovering **good judgment for oneself**, so that you can make good choices – choices that are good for you.

Nobody, whatever their health status, finds making good decisions easy. (This sounds very obvious and probably is...) Essentially I think good judgment in this context involves **realism**. At some point we all bow to reality. Otherwise reality just keeps knocking us down. That does not mean we have no choices. In fact it means taking **sensible** risks. Which, in turn, means being *realistic* about what you can or cannot do at any given moment. I have also found that 'getting one's good judgment back' involves an ongoing dialogue or conversation with one's **impulses and desires**.

Good judgment is a bit like gardening, take writing this text for example: at a certain point I might feel like digressing because something interesting has suddenly come to mind. That's OK, it might produce a useful sentence or two but I have to resist the temptation to go on and on. Following that impulse would not get me to where I want to go. Instead I make a deal with myself. I say I will get on with what I am doing now and take up those other ideas later if they still seem important. If they seem really, really exciting ideas I can stop what I'm doing and change tack but I must ask myself is this what I really want to do or is it what my mood disorder wants to do – is it my normal self or my polarising self that is making the judgment? You can't do everything. You can't stride out in all directions at once. Instead you have to prune and shape your impulses realistically. *Both* aspects are important. The realism gives things a shape but the impulsiveness makes things grow, develop and keeps work interesting.

Everybody has to do this. People with mood swings are no exception.

Conclusion

I don't think it is worth me saying much more. There are not many 'definites' about recovery and I have probably generalised enough.

*I think it is better that I end by re-iterating my belief that in recovering from crisis and living with mood swings there is no substitute for developing and using **good judgment for oneself**.*

Good Luck.

On Medication and Drug Therapy - Rob

I have only ever had two psychiatric consultants in twenty years. Over that period the range of drugs on the market has changed and so have therapeutic fashions. Most significantly I feel I have benefited from having a psychiatrist who is lively, interested, bright and prepared to try out different things without compromising the stability I have.

I have been taking lithium for all of the last twenty years, except one. When I met my new consultant I asked him how he knew the lithium was having a positive effect (I was still experiencing mood swings). He said that it was a fair question and I came off it, very gradually, to see. However things soon got worse. So I decided to go back on the lithium.

For many years lithium therapy half-worked. I would have lows that I would have to take anti-depressants for and highs that would have to be capped with chlorpromazine - leading to the inevitable reactive low. To improve this mediocre regime I also took carbamazepine.

However the regime I am following today is an enormous improvement this and has had the effect of making my moods far more predictable. Although I might wish to be 'drug-free' (or 'mood swing free, come to that...') I have never thought this was realistic in my case.

However I think over the years I have managed to develop a drug regime that is far **simpler** than the one I had before. Whereas ten years ago I would take four or five different drugs I now take only two.

I still take lithium. In addition, for the last two years, I have also been taking a very low dose of quetiapine (an 'atypical' anti-psychotic, whatever one of those is...) I take the quetiapine at bedtime. In the past I have had recurrent periods of sleep disturbance which fed into mood swings. The quetiapine nightcap means now I always sleep. The sleep I get is slightly artificial but fine. Much better than having to take sleeping tablets.

If I feel my mood is rising uncomfortably I might increase the quetiapine dose slightly for a few nights. Similarly if I feel my mood dropping distinctly I will lower the dose for a few nights. Mostly the dose stays about the same. Occasionally I use the quetiapine during the daytime if I am very stressed or becoming uncomfortably speedy.

This *symptomatic* use of medication has worked well for me. I have not had a period of very high mood (for which I needed anti-psychotic levels of medication) since I have been practicing this self-regulating technique.

I no longer feel routinely threatened by highs - or scared of the prospect of taking anti-psychotics if I did. Although I have slight high moods I know that I have the means to dampen these down. They don't have to be hammered. Therefore I don't get the reactive lows.

Sometimes I visualise the preventative effects of lithium and quetiapine as two different ways of controlling a forest fire. Lithium therapy is like building firebreaks into the plantation. They work as long as the fire is not too bad. (At the same time you are losing quite a lot of forest to the breaks and the fires...)

Quetiapine is like those sea planes that dump water on any fires that start - a more carefully targeted approach. However there is the risk that a small fire might become a big one and take more putting out.

I no longer have to take carbamazepine, anti-depressants, traditional anti-psychotics or sleeping tablets. I feel I have day to day, week to week control of my moods. I still experience mood swings but they are within a range that is acceptable.

I do not feel 'cured' but I do feel adequately but not excessively protected. Although I am not inclined to mess about with things whilst they are going well, it would be interesting to see how I would manage on just the quetiapine.

Medications - Penny

Reducing medications or going drug free is something I think many people consider at some stage. From what I have read (as well as my own personal experience) it is not advisable to suddenly stop taking medications. This can be very disruptive and can have many difficult side-effects.

I have made two very unsuccessful attempts of withdrawing from long term medications – both times resulted in extreme altered states of mind, hospitalisations and many months of recovering.

Despite, never having a high whilst on them, I was still determined to be not taking them and In 2006 I decided to give it one last shot. I tried to ensure that I had made other changes in my lifestyle first and had a much more considered year-long withdrawal plan.

I had much better support and made more space in my life to deal with side effects. During the withdrawing process I used the intervention from short term medications and I still see this as a necessary component to staying off the 'mood stabilising' drugs. This third effort has been successful so far but I accept that at some point again in the future I may need to go back on to long term medications.

Reviewing this process, for this piece of writing, I am trying to understand while I feel it is important for me to be medication free – as clearly the odds are stacked against me succeeding – plus each time I have failed in the past, the highs have felt more frightening.

I understand quite clearly that these risks are very real, so why am I putting myself through this again ?

Why should it work this time ?

I have realised that making other changes (in thinking and attitude as well as lifestyle changes) have been more important than being drug free – once they were in place it was easier to deal with reducing and coming off the long-term medications.

This time round, I feel that I have finally gained enough insight and am sufficiently able to maintain the self discipline I need to keep myself in some kind of safe balanced zone.

I try to keep in mind the times when it has all gone horribly wrong in the past and this help me to keep myself from going down this path again. I know that I have to take responsibility for how I am and have invested a lot of time and energy into being drug free and making this continue to work. Knowing this also helps me to keep on track.

However, should I need to keep the scales a little more balanced and help me re-focus on staying OK then I use short term medications or sleeping tablets to get me back on track.

My own advice for someone who may be thinking about being medication free is to take the process of coming off medications very seriously. Try to discuss and plan a course of action with your psychiatrist, family and friends. The more information you can gather to help you on this path the better. It has been important for me to take a long-term view and to accept that medications can be important at certain times. My first piece of advice would be to read as much advice as possible. There are some excellent resources with a lot of information available about the many factors involved if someone was considering this route. See links below and on website links resource page.

MDF have a useful guide to medications
<http://www.mdf.org.uk/?o=56894>

Mind have a variety of facts sheets and booklets about various drugs.
<http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets/Alphabetical+drugs+list.htm>

Mind have done some research about coping with coming off medications
<http://www.mind.org.uk/News+policy+and+campaigns/Policy/CWCO.htm>

Icarus Project have produced a guide to coming off psychiatric drugs that is available to download from the web.
<http://theicarusproject.net/alternative-treatments/harm-reduction-guide-to-coming-off-psychiatric-drugs>

Your Drug May Be Your Problem, how and why to stop taking psychiatric medications. Peter Breggin and D. Cohen (1999). Perseus 2000.
Coming off psychiatric drugs: edited by Peter Lehmann Peter Lehmann publishing 2004