Mental health recovery is an ongoing process, not a single outcome. Each person’s recovery experience is unique. By making a personalized, inclusive plan for managing a mental health condition, a person has the best chance of living a meaningful life.
Hello!

If this is your first time here, welcome to the Choices in Recovery newsletter. If you have been part of our community for a while, welcome back! We’re glad you are here.

Our goal is to provide an experience that’s warm, friendly, and supportive—because that’s what the Choices in Recovery program is all about. We’re committed to helping people with serious mental health conditions and their support network throughout the recovery process.

Special thanks to members of Fountain House for sharing their inspirational stories. Located in New York, Fountain House was established in 1948 and was the first Clubhouse.

Clubhouses are local community centers for people living with mental health conditions. During the course of their participation in a Clubhouse, members gain access to opportunities to rejoin the worlds of friendships, family, employment, and education, and to the services and support they may individually need to continue their recovery.

To find a Clubhouse in your community, visit www.iccd.org.

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People living with serious mental health conditions deserve to live healthy, long, productive, and fulfilling lives. Yet research shows that people with serious mental health conditions are likely to have shorter lives—living, on average, 25 years less than the general population.

Wellness starts with you.

The statistic about shorter life spans represents the average — but it does not have to represent you and your health. If you take control, make healthy choices, and meet with your doctor regularly, you can work toward living a long life.

Working toward better health is not a quick fix. It requires focus and dedication to lifestyle and behavior changes. You can start today by setting reachable goals and making small changes. Over time, you may be able to improve your physical health and feel better.

Wellness is essential to mental health recovery.
Preventable medical conditions causing premature deaths include:

- Heart disease
- Respiratory disease
- Diabetes and kidney failure
- Infectious disease

People with serious mental health conditions live, on average, 25 years less than the general population.

Higher rates of risk factors impact lifespans

- Smoking
- Drinking alcohol
- Being overweight
- Poor nutrition
- Not exercising
- Illicit drug use
- “Unsafe” sexual behavior

...as do other vulnerabilities

- Lack of access to health care
- Social isolation
- Homelessness
- Unemployment
- Poverty
- Incarceration
- Trauma/victimization
There’s been a change over the years. Twenty-five to 30 years ago, many people thought that achieving stability or staying out of the hospital were adequate goals for a person with a serious mental health condition. Today, we’ve raised the bar in all kinds of ways.

We want people living with mental health conditions to have more complete and longer lives.

We want and believe that people with serious mental health conditions can exercise, be fitter, stop smoking, and feel better physically—which is going to help them in many aspects of their recovery.
DR. DIAMOND: If somebody is on a medication and feels like it's causing a lot of weight gain, and there are other options available, it may be worth the risk of switching their medication. That's a discussion I may have with the person and sometimes their family. It's a decision we make together. If the person has been on a number of medications and this one seems to work much better—even if it's causing a lot of weight gain—then the decisions are much harder. A person may stay on a medication that causes weight gain, for instance, because there is not another medication that is going to manage symptoms as well and keep the person functional and without a lot of distress.

The question then becomes 'How do you deal with the carbohydrate cravings, or the hunger that may be associated with some of the medications?' There are available medications that we sometimes use to help decrease some of the food cravings.

But for the most part, it's like any of us who are trying to lose 10 or 15 pounds. It's really hard work no matter what your weight is to try and go below your set point. Taking medication can make it more difficult to lose weight—but not impossible.

It is important for us to have conversations about all possible medication options, including their risks and benefits. It's not just my decision as the prescriber. These are joint decisions between myself, my client, and, sometimes, their support network.

Remember...

- Wellness is an ongoing process. Change takes time.
- Get support. Support networks can make it easier for some people to adopt healthy behaviors. If we’re surrounded by people who are smoking or eating unhealthy foods, it can be harder to stop smoking or eat healthier. Making healthy changes with a good friend may be easier than doing it alone.
- Do what's right for you. If you prefer to work on wellness on your own, it's your choice. Make healthy changes in a way that feels comfortable.
- Be kind. If you or someone you know is struggling or having a difficult time losing weight or sticking to a health plan, be kind. It's easier for some than for others to make changes. Each person's biology is different. People do the best they can, so try not to place blame.
- There will be ups and downs. This is true for eating, exercise, and most things about mental health recovery and overall wellness.
Dr. Diamond’s TOTAL WELLNESS Suggestions

See a Primary Care Physician
Ideally, the psychiatrist prescribing psychotropic medications should encourage patients to have a regular checkup with a primary care physician to have their weight, waist size, and blood pressure monitored. Either the psychiatrist or the primary care physician can order blood tests needed to safely monitor prescribed medication. In either case, the psychiatrist should try to ensure that these blood tests are actually done.

Get Laboratory Tests Done Regularly
Anybody taking an antipsychotic medication should have a check for cholesterol, lipids, and triglycerides as well as a diabetes test at least once a year—and potentially more often if they are in an otherwise high-risk group. This basic testing is the standard of care, and we want to ensure that our patients get these tests. Some medications may require other regular laboratory monitoring, so it’s important to check with your physician.

Be Attentive to Your Health
If you do have high blood pressure or elevated cholesterol—get it treated. If you have an unhealthy lifestyle, think about the way you’re living your life and consider realistic ways to improve your lifestyle.

MEDICATION & WELLNESS
Medication is a foundation of the mental health recovery process. Many medications are associated with weight gain, diabetes, high cholesterol, insulin resistance, and metabolic syndrome.
- Talk to your doctor about available medication options and potential side effects.
- Work together with the doctor to find the medication(s) that work best for you.
- Discuss your health goals and a plan to work toward those goals.
- See a primary care physician for regular checkups and blood work to detect any changes in your health.

What Is Metabolic Syndrome?
Metabolic (met-ah-BOL-ik) syndrome is the name for a group of risk factors that raises your risk for heart disease and other health problems, such as diabetes and stroke. You must have at least 3 metabolic risk factors to be diagnosed with metabolic syndrome.
- A large waistline
- A high triglyceride level or you’re on medicine to treat this risk factor
- A low HDL cholesterol level or you’re on medicine to treat this risk factor
- High blood pressure or you’re on medicine to treat this risk factor
- High fasting blood sugar or you’re on medicine to treat this risk factor

Source: National Institutes of Health
CIR: In what ways does a community approach to wellness support and motivate you?

RIVERA: I think Fountain House [the Clubhouse I belong to] is setting a tone which is going to help grow an overall culture of wellness in the mental health community. Right now there are a lot of things being offered—classes like supported sobriety and Weight-Wise, our version of Weight Watchers®—and programs to help people stop smoking. We have competitions to get people from all of our units into the gym and people are coming! I think slowly we will change the culture.

CIR: What role does peer support play in your motivation for wellness?

RIVERA: Peer relationships can help you get motivated when you don’t feel motivated. Sometimes you go through difficult times. Medication issues—being a little bit too sedated or dull—might cause you to not feel motivated. Or [there are times] where you don’t feel hope and you have ‘why bother’-type feelings.

With the integration of wellness and [the community approach] here, it’s a dynamic process, where 1 person starts doing something, another person sees it, and they want to join that person and a shift takes place. It’s a holistic approach that’s needed.

CIR: What are your favorite ways to stay active and be more healthy?

RIVERA: I take part in the yoga and meditation courses and am interested in spiritual wellness. My doctor wants me to lose some weight, and recently I started using the gym and the treadmill. What I find is that you start seeing the same people in the gym. There’s a member who goes at the same time I do, so it’s really good to see her and say, ‘How are you doing? How many miles are you doing on that treadmill? How are you feeling?’ It’s a social experience.

CIR: Have you set any wellness goals?

RIVERA: I personally don’t set specific goals. I try to stay present and enjoy the process. A lot of times when you have very specific goals, you ignore process. For me, it’s enjoying the process and getting fulfillment out of the process that will eventually lead me somewhere. Exactly where it will lead, you’re not sure.

When I go to the gym I don’t weigh myself because I get too caught up in the number and I might think, ‘I’ve been working out a week and I’m still the same weight,’ and it will be frustrating or demotivating. Sometimes it’s just enough to have an aim but let it not be specific, and just stay in the present moment and enjoy that.
John’s Health Progress Update

Weight Loss
“Two years ago, I weighed 244 pounds and now I’m 218. And I’m on a medication that’s known to cause weight gain, so that’s pretty good!”

Stress Reduction
“I have a secondary diagnosis of general anxiety and sometimes it’s really noticeable socially. Exercise, meditation, and yoga help manage my stress, and the anxiety has been much more quiet.”

Smokes Less/Drinks Less Caffeine
“I used to be a very heavy smoker and a heavy coffee drinker—the pleasure habits. But when you exercise, it produces a pleasure effect. I’m still smoking, but not as much, and I’m drinking a lot less coffee. It’s like the addictions are slowly ending with their own process. You realize you may reach for unhealthy things more out of habit than needing those things.”

Better Eating Habits
“Before, I was really into a lot of fast foods—like Chinese takeout—and now I’m eating better. Once you start doing healthy things, certain [unhealthy] foods become less appealing to you.”

John’s Energizing Breakfast
Oatmeal With Cinnamon, Nuts, Raisins, and Yogurt
Kathy Pieper joined Fountain House (the first Clubhouse in the United States) 4 years ago, and works in the Horticulture Unit. She takes great pride in the projects she is a part of and her Clubhouse community.

On a recent visit, Kathy gave us a tour of the Horticulture Unit, pointing out some lettuces that are growing in the greenhouse hydroponically—a process in which roots of plants are submerged in water, rather than dirt.

Pointing out some beautiful note cards she and her peers make using leaves and other materials, she explains that creativity is a stress reliever and plays a role in her physical and mental well-being.

Although it’s raining, she takes us outside to see the beautiful city terrace gardens maintained by her Unit, pointing out different summer flowers in bloom. “Here in the garden,” notes Kathy, “It’s calm and relaxing and smells like sweet honeysuckle and hydrangea.”

Kathy spends time at Fountain House 3 times a week, and she’s made some good friends. Six months ago, she became involved in several of the Wellness Unit activities and led a group walk around the neighborhood during Healthy Aging Month. She finds these activities beneficial to her overall health and says that exercise keeps her mind active.

Kathy adds that just being a part of the Fountain House community helps relieve stress. “Everyone here is included. Everyone here is treated with respect, and everyone works.”

She is aware of studies that have shown people with mental health conditions are likely to have shorter lifespans than the general population—but she pays the statistics no mind.

“I’m going to live to 92!”
Kathy’s Total Wellness Strategies

**Workout DVD**
Kathy lost 30 pounds using an exercise DVD at home along with healthier eating.

**Light Weights**
A peer at Fountain House taught Kathy how to do arm exercises with 2.5 lb. dumbbells.

**Healthy Eating**
Kathy tries to incorporate more vegetables into her diet. She participates in Fountain House’s Wellness Market program, where she can buy affordable farm-fresh vegetables once a week.

**Walking**
To keep off the weight, Kathy walks on the treadmill for 15 minutes 3 times a week.

**STRESS Management**
- **CREATIVITY** An artist, Kathy uses creativity to relieve stress. She says creativity is peaceful “brain work” that keeps her mind active.
- **HAVING A PET** Kathy says her Calico cat, Ginger Ale, has been a steady companion and source of happiness for 14 years. She also enjoys cat-sitting for other people’s pets.
- **GETTING ENOUGH SLEEP**
Izzy Lopez smiles widely and tells us that being part of Fountain House, a Clubhouse community that gives him purpose, has helped his mental health recovery and improved his overall wellness.

Israel (Izzy) Lopez
Wellness “Whiz Kid”

When he was first diagnosed with schizophrenia in his teens, Izzy struggled with hospitalizations and experienced difficulty managing his condition. A few years after his diagnosis he decided being around peers would benefit his recovery, so he joined a Clubhouse. At first the experience was challenging. “When I got to Fountain House I was really overwhelmed because it’s so big and I didn’t know everybody. It took me a while to get adjusted,” he says.

“Izzy chose to become part of the Culinary Unit, because it was busy and he liked to do physical work. “I clean the kitchen, I bus tables, I wash dishes, I carry pots and empty them, and I lift the mats and big crates full of dishes,” he says. He also enjoys making breakfast in the morning for members and staff.

All of the physical work he does requires a lot of energy and became tougher a few years ago when Izzy was not feeling his best. He had gained weight, and during a regular appointment with his primary care physician, he learned his cholesterol was too high.

He decided to take charge of his health and participate in the Wellness Unit activities. He created an exercise program with the support of a social worker and began eating healthier.

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Facing Health Challenges

- Gained weight
- Felt tired
- High cholesterol

“I went to see my doctor for a physical and she said I had high cholesterol. I came back to Fountain House, and I spoke to a friend here who is a vegan and I said, ‘How can I lose some weight?’ And he said, ‘You need to work out and eat healthier.’”

Setting Health Goals

- Lose weight
- Lower cholesterol
- Feel less tired

“I met with the head of the Wellness Unit and he asked me what my goals were. I told him I wanted to lose weight, lower my cholesterol, to be more toned, and feel less tired. So he gave me a plan and showed me workouts to do. And he told me to keep a journal to see how I was progressing over time.”

Health Improvements TODAY:

Normal cholesterol levels
“I went to see my doctor for a physical and she said my cholesterol is normal now.”

30 pounds lighter
“I have more energy and I’m less tired. I feel like I have a quicker step and I want to do more.”

More energy
“Before I would stay to myself, and now I feel like I want to get involved with everything.”
IZZY’S HEALTH TIPS

Start Walking More
- Take the dog on a walk or to the dog park
- Walk to the store instead of driving, if possible
- Get off the subway or bus a stop earlier and walk the rest of the way
- Walk around the block
- Park in a space farther from the entrance
- Take the stairs when you can

Avoid Processed and Fast Foods
Izzy rarely eats fried foods, chips, cookies, and lunch meats.

Cut out High-Sugar Foods and Drinks
“I stopped drinking sodas and juices and it helped me lose weight.” It’s important to stay hydrated, so try to drink more water or unsweetened iced tea or seltzer.

Exercise With a Friend
Find a buddy, or join an exercise or activity group doing something you like to do (e.g., bowling league or softball team, etc.) to help motivate you.

Try Easy Exercises at Home
If you want to exercise alone or at home, Izzy recommends “chair exercises.” He says all you need is a chair and your body and suggests searching the Web for chair exercise instructions.

Begin With Small Goals
At first, Izzy walked for 10 minutes on the treadmill, which at the time was a huge challenge for him. Over time he built stamina and got fitter. Today, he can run for 40 minutes straight.

Talk to Your Doctor About Total Wellness
“I go to the doctor regularly and check in with her. I tell her if my medication is working and if there have been any changes in how I feel.”

TIP:
Try flavoring your water with fruit and lemon. When it tastes good, you are more likely to hydrate more. The Fountain House Wellness Unit has a flavored water “hydration station” and also prepares healthy snacks for the snack cart.

Eat a Low-Sodium Diet
This can improve your heart health and blood pressure.

IZZY RARELY EATS FRIED FOODS, CHIPS, COOKIES, AND LUNCH MEATS.

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“I GO TO THE DOCTOR REGULARLY AND CHECK IN WITH HER. I TELL HER IF MY MEDICATION IS WORKING AND IF THERE HAVE BEEN ANY CHANGES IN HOW I FEEL.”
Sitting with Luis Oliver, you are in the company of an engaging man who has made healthy living a priority in his recovery. Today, Luis’s passions are fishing and cooking healthy meals for loved ones and friends. He considers exercise vital to his overall wellness plan and values his support network at Fountain House, the Clubhouse in New York City he joined 13 years ago.
Over the decades, Luis Oliver experienced his share of struggles—including post-traumatic stress disorder after his service in Vietnam, alcoholism, and hospitalizations. During a period of homelessness, an advocacy group found Luis in a park and helped him to enter a treatment program where he was properly diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and began to receive medication, therapy, and complementary support resources. At this time, he also joined Fountain House.

Noticing Health Changes

Luis’s life was improving, but he was not feeling physically well and had gained weight. “I was diabetic with hypertension, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol, says Luis. “My whole system was out of whack.”

When Fountain House created its Wellness Unit, Luis decided to join Weight-Wise, a program similar to Weight Watchers® that assigns a point system to each food. Participants are asked to limit food intake to a certain amount of points per day and are encouraged to be active and do regular exercise such as walking.

Write Down Everything You Eat

“I started writing down everything that I ate—everything that went into my mouth. I still do it today and it’s been more than a year since I started. I began seeing the results right away. This is what I needed all along because it showed me how to eat the proper foods.

“It made me a new person overall. I went back to my doctor after I lost my first 60 pounds and she said, ‘You’re not the same patient in this chair. What’s your secret?’ I said, ‘Well, it’s the wellness program at Fountain House.’ People always stop me and say, ‘What happened to you? Your clothes don’t fit no more!’ All those little pats on the back made me feel that I have to help somebody else.”

Inspiring Others

Luis wanted to use his experiences and success to inspire family and friends. “I have a sister who lost 40 pounds, my niece lost 60 pounds, and her husband lost 38 pounds. I feel I’ve inspired some other people in the Clubhouse because I was a success.”

According to Luis, anyone can start a wellness plan by making small changes and becoming more aware of everything he or she eats.

Luis believes his commitment to improving his total wellness impacted his mental health. “My schizophrenia symptoms eased up once I started the wellness program,” he says.

Luis is a passionate advocate for total wellness and community support. He has kept his weight off and checks in regularly with his primary care physician and a nutritionist.

“Discuss your health with your doctor,” he recommends. “Life is a complete turnaround for me—a whole 360.”
**Luis’s Health Tips**

- **Adding flavor without added calories:** “Garlic. I love garlic.”
- **Saving calories:** “I try not to use oil or butter whenever possible or to use as little as I can. I also avoid fried foods.”
- **Favorite snack foods:** “Oranges, apples, grapes, watermelon, smoothies with strawberries and a little yogurt. Grapefruits are great because they have fiber and it burns calories.”
- **Cooking is social:** “I love to cook. I invite people in my building up to eat. I used to be more shy.”
- **Life goals:** “I’m thinking of going to culinary school. I’m also thinking about doing instructional videos on fishing for people with mental illness. Fishing is relaxing and helps with stress management. You don’t know how happy a fisherman is when he gets a fish on the hook!”

**Luis Oliver’s Tomato & Avocado Salsa**

Serves 6

**Ingredients**
- 1 pound ripe tomatoes, finely diced
- 1/2 small red onion, diced
- 1 serrano or jalapeno pepper, minced
- 1 ripe avocado, peeled, pitted and finely diced
- Juice of 1 lime
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro
- Pinch of salt

**Directions**
1. Soak the diced onions in cold water for about 5 minutes, drain the onions, rinse them, and pat dry with a clean paper towel.
2. In a large bowl, combine all of the ingredients and toss.
3. Let the salsa sit about 15 minutes in the refrigerator before serving.

**His Wellness Strategies**

### Gets Support
- Sees his psychiatrist and primary care physician regularly
- Discusses medication options and side effects
- Communicates openly and honestly

### Healthy Eating
- Drinks lots of water
- Cooks and eats healthy meals at home
- Sees a nutritionist
- Eats in moderation (has a bite or 2 of favorite “treat” foods—like cheesecake—once in a while)
- Writes down everything he eats
- Uses phone weight-loss “apps”

### Exercise and Stress Reduction
- Walks several miles a day
- Wears a pedometer to measure his steps
- Swims laps in the pool
- Uses breathing and yoga exercises to reduce stress and anxiety
BY CLAIRE FLANAGAN

Mental illness? I was 17. I didn’t understand the concept. I didn’t always take my medicine. I smoked 2 and a half packs of cigarettes per day, lived on fast food, drank nearly a dozen cups of coffee, and had inconsistent sleeping habits. I did these things because they helped in the short term, but they were unsustainable fixes to a long-term problem.

Two years ago, I accepted that I had a mental health condition and started to take my medications everyday. However, I didn’t see the recovery results I wanted because I was still abusing my body.

Recovery is more than taking medication everyday, it’s a holistic process. Mental health requires medication and physical wellness.

I have personally experienced the benefits of wellness. When I participate in wellness activities, I have a stronger, more productive recovery. Medication alone does not cure all of the symptoms associated with my mental health condition. There is also a physical component. My wellness routine enhances the effectiveness of my medication regimen, and my medication regimen enhances the effectiveness of my wellness routine. Together, they make for a powerful recovery protocol.
My wellness routine enhances the effectiveness of my medication regimen, and my medication regimen enhances the effectiveness of my wellness routine. Together, they make for a powerful recovery protocol.

The hardest part is starting a wellness routine. Battling old habits and addictions can be frustrating and overwhelming. Many times during the past 10 years, I have tried to quit smoking and lose weight at the same time, only to fail at both. It made me feel frustrated and demotivated.

So I decided if I was going to successfully make a change, I would have to take a different approach—a slow and steady one in which I made smaller, more attainable goals. An approach in which I was kinder and more compassionate to myself.

I modified 1 bad habit at a time. For 6 months, I slept more consistently. Next, I quit smoking and drinking. A year later, I looked at my eating and exercise habits. Trying to do so all at once would have been overwhelming and would have set me up for failure. Instead, each step was a step toward wellness. As my physical health improved, my mental health improved.

My symptoms have decreased in severity and scope since starting my wellness program. Today, I have less anxiety and fewer manic and depressive episodes. When I do face these symptoms, they are tolerable. My wellness program has given me coping skills to deal with whatever symptoms I do have. For instance, a regular walking program has improved my mood episodes. Stretching every morning has helped combat anxiety.

Wellness often feels like a full-time job, but it gives me the recovery I deserve and is worth extra effort.

For me, physical wellness is vital to having good mental health. My recovery is strong today because I am taking my medication as prescribed and I have replaced many of my unhealthy habits with wellness activities. I see my psychiatrist and a primary care physician regularly and communicate with both about my health goals and medication options.

Building my wellness routine 1 habit at a time yielded big results. I sleep more soundly. I have more emotional stability. Two years ago, I accepted responsibility for treating my mental illness. Now, I live the life I deserve.