

Wellness Recovery Action Planning: The Essence of a New Paradigm

By Stephen Pocklington

When people are first introduced to Mary Ellen Copeland's Wellness Recovery Action Planning (WRAP) they generally want to know what it is: that is, they seek to know the thing people call a WRAP, the format for organizing wellness tools into action plans in order to deal with Life's challenges, especially those related to mental illness. However, to understand the essence of WRAP and fully appreciate what makes it so uniquely powerful, one has to look beyond the format and the plans. It is necessary to understand how it evolved out of (and continues to be) a deeply value-based process for stimulating mutual growth. It is necessary to understand that it's a facilitated process through which people who have struggled with Life's most challenging difficulties share with each other what those struggles have taught them about wellness and recovery.

Rather than retell Mary Ellen's life story, let it simply be said that her life illustrates the influence one remarkable person can have when she simply sees what is remarkable in others and shines enough light on their goodness that it grows. Mary Ellen's experiences in her youth with her mother's hospitalization and eventual recovery laid a foundation of hope that she returned to when later in life her own struggles overwhelmed her. That spark of hope sustained and inspired her to reach out to others who had had similar struggles, and to recognize in her peers a source of hard-won wisdom about recovery tools and strategies. Mary Ellen's practical research revealed what people who transcend their struggles have in common, or what we have come to think of as key recovery concepts: hope, personal responsibility, education, self-advocacy and support. These are not academic or theoretical constructs; they are commonalities evidenced in the lived experience of everyone who has risen above the presumed limitations associated with "mental illness."

When Mary Ellen confounded her psychiatrist's expectations with her first book and her early workshops, she was tapping ever more deeply into the practical wisdom of hundreds of peers who individually and collectively demonstrated the power and efficacy of thinking critically about what lived experience teaches us about wellness (what works and what doesn't) and about taking personal responsibility through deliberate planning and follow through. This pioneering work in Participatory Action Research produced Wellness Recovery Action Planning as a clear and simple distillation of the lessons learned through Life's struggles. WRAP literally took its basic form as Mary Ellen and thirty workshop participants discussed the key concepts and how to use one's personal wellness tools to maintain wellness and deal with Life's predictably difficult times. It grew out of what made good practical sense to the people who were trying out new strategies and tools, and now it stands as a body of time-tested, empirical knowledge, which hundreds of thousands of participants have added to and benefited from in countless WRAP classes over the last decade.

From the beginning it was obvious that Wellness Recovery Action Plans held great power and benefit for the people who developed and used them, however it also became obvious that WRAP's deepest value lay not in having and using a mere static plan. Beyond the initial value gained in developing a WRAP lies the even greater value of learning an ongoing planning process that captures and utilizes what one learns continuously through having and using a WRAP. Using a WRAP creates a wellness feedback loop. Using my WRAP I learn and grow. I begin thinking more critically about what works for me (and what doesn't), and I pay more attention to how I am feeling and to the freedom and power I have to respond constructively to whatever is going on in my life. At the same time that I am acquiring new wellness tools, I am also taking on new challenges that require more of me, and soon I find I want and/or need to adapt my WRAP, both to take advantage of what I've been learning and to meet the new challenges I have embraced. My WRAP has to grow with me.

It's no wonder that when it came to getting WRAP out to the world, it was also obvious to Mary Ellen that it would be necessary to deliver more than the mere WRAP format. Mary Ellen wanted to make sure that people were able to take full advantage of the wellness feedback loop, which is created by having and using a WRAP. Hence, it became necessary to establish a network of facilitators who could speak from their own lived experience with WRAP, and who would manifest the real power of having and using WRAP. So Mary Ellen created a curriculum and process for training people to facilitate classes wherein participants would learn to develop, use, and then keep developing their personal Wellness Recovery Action Plans while getting connected with a network of potential supporters.

Since 1996, the curriculum for training facilitators has been refined into an exacting certification process, which assures that facilitators are skilled and committed both to set of values and a shared-learning process that truly empowers people. Today there are thousands of WRAP facilitators around the world who are actively transforming their communities through WRAP's message of hope and tools of empowerment, and the Copeland Center continues to help communities build WRAP programs through the training and certification of local WRAP facilitators.

Using Mary Ellen's materials and curriculum, these WRAP facilitators share her research findings on the key concepts of recovery and wellness, share the WRAP format and what we have been learning from each other about (and through) the dynamic WRAP planning process, and they share their own recovery experiences. But most importantly, by adhering to the values and ethics of WRAP, they also make sure that each and every individual who participates in a WRAP class knows that they are the experts on their own recovery, and that, by sharing what they know with their classmates, they are contributing to growing this body of knowledge.

Because WRAP grew organically out of the lived recovery experiences of thousands of voluntary participants, its empirical foundations are immediately evident even to people who have been so disempowered that Recovery seems an alien concept. WRAP honors individual experience and appeals to our common sense through its elegant simplicity and its nonjudgmental acknowledgment that what works for you, works for you. WRAP facilitators know with certainty that when people are accepted completely and exactly for who they are in this moment, then, with no need to defend perceived flaws, they are free to change and grow in keeping with their hopes, dreams and goals in life. Here is where the value-based process of facilitated stretching and learning together empowers people far beyond what one might expect from a mere format for organizing wellness tools into action plans. WRAP is not the format: it is a format, a process, an ever-growing body of knowledge, a deeply held set of values, and ultimately a whole new paradigm for wellness and recovery.

We understand WRAP clearly when we recognize that it isn't empowering because it gives people something they are seen as lacking; it's empowering because it shines a light on the freedom and power everyone already has. WRAP doesn't prescribe a list of you shoulds or you need tos; rather, WRAP supports (without judgment) each individual's discovery or recognition of those things that personal experience has shown to support his or her personal wellness. WRAP's action plans aren't someone else's plan for the person nor a plan that has to be negotiated with a treatment team; they are simply the individual's chosen vehicles for taking personal responsibility to get what he or she wants out of life—truly self-determined, truly self-actualizing. In essence, WRAP is the embodiment of everything system transformation is supposed to be about.

Finally, it is important to understand that WRAP has proven to be for everybody: there are no readiness criteria, there's no profile to fit, no exclusionary correlations between success and IQ, diagnosis, history, etc. It is absolutely and necessarily voluntary so the only people who won't benefit from it immediately are those who freely choose not to explore WRAP. However, even for these

individuals, WRAP's message of hope and its open welcome to all to participate (when and if they choose) remain beacons of light regardless.

When WRAP becomes a presence in a community, wellness begins to crowd out illness as a focus of our dialogue. Taking charge of one's recovery and being mindful with one's choices become natural expressions of personal responsibility, while wellness education increasingly becomes a centerpiece of the service system. Gradually, more and more people find their voices and self-advocate in powerful new ways that clearly re-define what help means to the individual, and which also reshape how we support each other as fellow citizens. Ultimately, WRAP proves itself a paradigm for a healthy community where everyone is welcome for the unique gifts each of us has to share, and where, through WRAP, we all grow in our capacity to support each other as we take better care of ourselves. And just as WRAP works for anybody, WRAP programs can transform any community.

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