

Growing leaders in mental health recovery

Richard Lakeman and GROW leaders Mike Watts and Marurene Howell review the latest developments of the multinational self help group GROW and consider how it has helped the recovery of many people over the past 50 years

Mutual self-help groups have a long pedigree in assisting people in mental health recovery. One such group, GROW has quietly been providing a safe, supportive space for recovery for over 50 years and has gone beyond this role in terms of developing community leaders. Research has demonstrated that members assuming leadership roles has been pivotal in sustaining the organisation and that participating in mutual-help has many therapeutic benefits.

Roots of recovery

The promotion of 'mental health recovery' has only recently become a part of mental health policy in the UK and Ireland, and mental health services are challenged by the task of incorporating recovery into the practice of mental health services. However, in 1957 a mental health self-help group called Recovery (now known as GROW) was formed in Sydney with the aim of assisting members to grow, develop and work towards recovery. Just as the term 'recovery' is derived from its use by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) (Barker and Buchanan-Barker, 2008), GROW too owes a debt to this famous programme. A small group of people who did not identify as alcoholics but had all experienced mental distress were drawn to AA's supportive

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New GROW leaders receiving their certificates of recognition

community, structure and direction in the form of 12 steps to recovery. They obtained permission to adapt AA's methods to recovery from mental illness and GROW has subsequently grown into an international network of over 800 groups.

In the early days meetings were held twice a week (now more often people meet weekly) to define and discuss challenges that members faced in their growth and recovery including managing destructive emotions, changing thinking and behaviour and dealing with many practical social needs (e.g. finding employment, housing and support). They suggested strategies to each other and in the week ahead went out and tried out the effectiveness of the ideas. At a second meeting, which they called a leaders meeting they reflected and recorded everything that worked. Over the last 50 years these findings have been honed

and refined into a very practical program for living that is officially described as a 'psychology of mental health' based on the experience of ordinary people.

In 1972 the organisation changed its name to GROW and groups spread rapidly through Australia to form a national network of over 400 groups. Groups also formed in New Zealand, Ireland, Canada and the UK. Later, GROW spread to North America where it was influenced by the self-help group Recovery Inc (now Recovery International) founded by Dr Abraham Low in 1937. GROW was introduced to Ireland in 1969 and rapidly became the republic's largest mutual self-help group.

Today GROW groups may be found meeting in church and community halls, hospital wards, prisons and schools throughout Ireland. Members strive to follow a set of 12 steps (*Table 1*), although

Table 1. The twelve steps of recovery and personal growth

1)	We admitted we were inadequate or maladjusted to life
2)	We firmly resolved to get well and co-operated with the help that we needed
3)	We surrendered to the healing power of a wise and loving God
4)	We made a personal inventory and accepted ourselves
5)	We made a moral inventory and cleaned out our hearts
6)	We endured until cured
7)	We took care and control of our bodies
8)	We learned to think by reason rather than by feelings and imagination
9)	We trained our wills to govern our feelings
10)	We took our responsible and caring place in society
11)	We grew daily closer to maturity
12)	We carried GROW's hopeful, healing, and transforming message to others in need

emphasis is placed firmly on practical knowledge and skill development of participants (Swan, 2001) to deal with life challenges, be they mental health problems, the loss of a job or difficult relationships. The free and confidential meetings follow an established structure involving sharing problems and members offering solutions.

'Helper therapy'

A range of studies demonstrate that participation in self-help groups for mental health-related problems is associated with positive outcomes such as reduced frequency or length of hospitalisation, less use of professional services, less distress, increased satisfaction with life, better self-esteem, improved relationships and a broader use of community resources (Kyrouz et al, 2003). GROW promotes reasonable thinking and various ways to think about problems which have been described as a 'layperson's cognitive-behavioural therapy' (Finn et al, 2009). Through these activities members develop problem solving and social skills, recognise and mobilise their own capacities and personal resourcefulness, and extend their social networks.

Many self-help groups do not survive beyond a few years but GROW appears to have many of the features that contribute to a successful group such as typically strong attendance at meetings, outreach to encourage new membership, supportive local and national infrastructure and most importantly diversification of leadership (Wituk et al 2002). In an evaluation of

GROW programmes, Rappaport (1993) suggested that GROW's success was dependent on the creation of leadership roles. Indeed, the leadership potential and roles of all GROW members are nurtured and encouraged. Roberts et al (1999) found that of those who attended GROW over a period of 6–13 months ($n=98$) helping other people in the groups was most strongly associated with positive adjustment, even more so than having received help. Undertaking acts intended to help was more beneficial to people's mental health than being the recipient of help. In 1965 Riessman coined the term 'helper therapy' to describe the beneficial effects of helping, which has been repeatedly demonstrated in research and through the lived experience of group participation. In GROW each person is called upon to both give and receive help.

An indepth study of the factors contributing to wellbeing of 28 new GROW members followed up over a 12 month period concluded that the leadership roles expected of members and the process of helping others appeared to be the central catalyst in changes of self-concept associated with wellbeing (Finn et al, 2007). Leadership roles include chairing meetings, organising groups, welcoming members and keeping the groups focused, or being involved in managing the organisation. Such tasks extend the social skills of group members (Finn et al, 2009). As Finn et al (2007) note, participants move from being passive to active, and with this change they develop a sense of belonging.

Growing developments

Members within Ireland have sought more formalised training for leaders as well as some formal and external recognition of leadership. To this end GROW designed the five-part distance learning course 'Personal Growth and Community Building through Leadership'. Each participant is assigned a mentor who assists them in their process of development. The course covers:

- Leadership as teamwork: this makes the argument that all behaviour effects others. As such it can be seen in terms of leadership. Leadership is therefore not an activity that one person does for another. Everyone brings with him/her qualities of leadership. These can be seen in personal qualities and skills such as warmth or listening skills, or in learnt skills or behaviours.
- Each GROW member is expected to work on recovery, personal growth or community.
- A GROW meeting provides many opportunities to help an other
- GROW meetings are chaired by different members of the group
- The final part of the course looks at ways that all these areas of leadership can be improved.

This Dublin City University accredited course is fittingly coordinated by leaders who identify as former mental health service users. The first 11 participants graduated in September 2010 and reported that the course helped them improve their confidence and leadership skills. One participant, Maurene Howell, who joined GROW two years ago and stated she had 'zero self esteem or self confidence' now works as an employee of GROW and commented that she had now developed the confidence to share her learning through facilitating a GROW group with women members of the travelling community. Additionally this was also her first experience of third level study and she hopes to now undertake further study:

'I've been involved with GROW for more than four years; the last two as a fieldworker. When I first got involved in GROW, it was as a volunteer in a training group in Wexford. At that



Maureen Howell (centre): 'I began to recognise my problems.'

time I hadn't realised just how poorly I saw myself or how much I worried about how others perceived me. I had no confidence or self-esteem. In a very short time I began to recognise my problems. I believed I deserved whatever happened to me and I had no control over my life. These beliefs began to change.

I began to see that some things I could have control over and that acceptance would play a huge part in my growth. Around the same time I was grieving the loss of my father, a relationship of over ten years, and three other family deaths within the space of 18 months. There had been many other issues to

deal with also. The group and program was, and continues to be a great support to me.

I learned to say 'no', something I had previously thought was a selfish thing to do. I learned to express my anger in constructive way in order to change unacceptable situations. I learned to differentiate between love and dependency; over control or under control; how to have hope and how to recognise and use my own resources... and much more. I've done many 'new' things since I joined GROW. For example, I've overcome my lifelong fear of water by learning to swim; I've undertaken this leadership course at

Dublin City University, which was my first venture into third level education; I've learned to love others, because I have started to love myself.

At the moment I am conscious that to remain well mentally I need to keep my thinking and acting right and my feelings will follow. To this end I draw on the programme for support. Earlier this year I had several bouts of depression, connected with medical problems. I was able to work on keeping my thinking right, keeping busy and, with more difficulty, to relax. I'm working on having a new hobby at the moment; also doing a 'train the trainer' course in conjunction with GROW and I am looking forward to continuing to promote GROW as programme for living that works. To live is to change—to live fully is to have changed many times.'

Mutual self-help shows enormous promise in complementing all manner of therapeutic programmes and activities. While opportunities to help others may be inherent in therapeutic group activities (Yalom, 1995) what sets GROW apart is the emphasis on developing and contributing to communities. People are enabled to develop their capacities at a pace that suits them and to both learn from and teach others.

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For further information please visit:
www.grow.ie

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