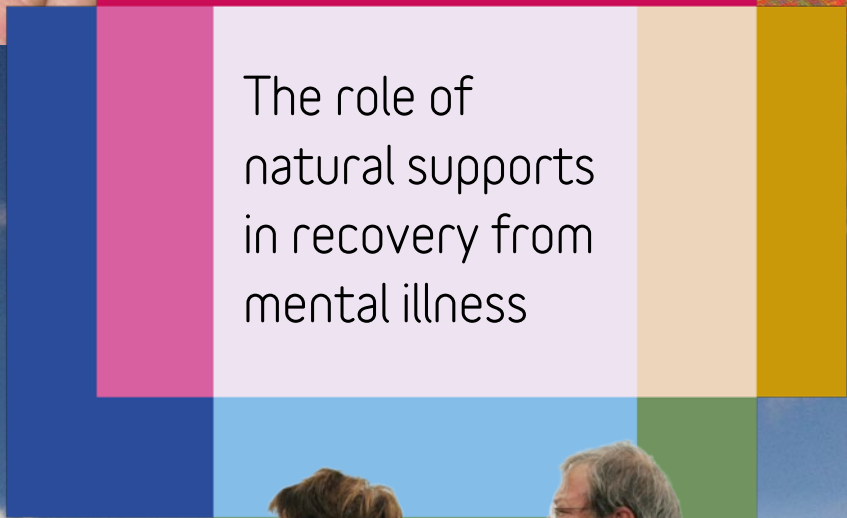




BUILDING A GOOD LIFE



The role of
natural supports
in recovery from
mental illness



What are the facts?

- 1 in 2 Australians will experience mental illness at some point in their lives.
- 1 in 5 will experience mental illness within the next 12 months.
- Less than half of people with mental illness will seek support and assistance for their illness.
- Early intervention is critical. Left untreated, mental illness can get worse, affecting many aspects of a person's life, with far reaching and sometimes devastating consequences for them, their family and friends and the community as a whole.
- Major depressive disorders are the second highest cause of disability in Australia. More than 1 in 10 people who reported living with a disability in 2012 experienced mental and behavioural disorders. Almost a third of people receiving a Disability Support Pension in 2013 had a psychiatric or psychological condition.
- People with mental illness often experience significant socio-economic disadvantage, including poverty, social isolation, poor health, insecure accommodation and unemployment.



The best support is to have a mum and dad that understand me. Which they did. Because mum stuck through me thick and thin.

The most important fact

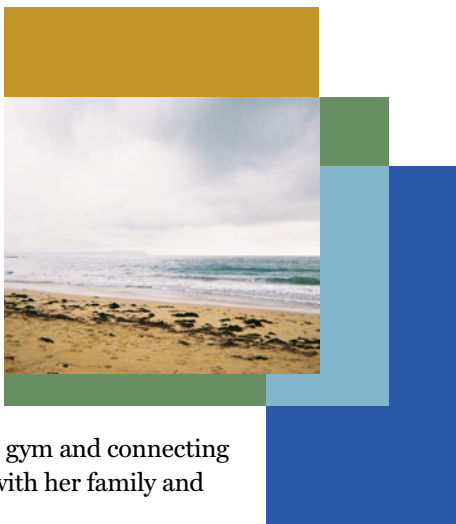
about mental health is that many people with mental illness live in recovery and lead fulfilling and rewarding lives.

Every second Saturday two friends and I go op shopping all day and we have a counter meal ... We have fun. That's our relaxation. So I've got to really depend on that for a support.

Everyone in the community is important. Everyone in the chemist and the supermarket and the newsagent and the library. The fact that they have been so nice to me, for want of a better word, and not like – look out, watch him, he's a bit 'wooo'.

Allison's story

Allison is 56 years old. After pursuing a demanding professional career for many years and raising her two daughters she now works part time in a local café and has the opportunity to do many of the things that she never used to have the time or the energy to do. She enjoys gardening, walking her dog, going to art classes and the gym and connecting with nature. She also values spending time with her family and seeing her friends as often as she can.



Allison is also recovering from a mental illness. She has been ill for many years and has had periods of hospitalisation. Her recovery is hard work.

It's like if you're doing physiotherapy for a badly broken leg. Some people will give up and the leg will stay twisted. So you have to work hard at it and you've got to work hard on the days when they're shocking.

But she doesn't give up.

I would work very hard doing things and trying things and they wouldn't work and I kept trying. I keep trying all the time. I haven't given up cos I know I can get well.

And, as she says, she has 'really come a long long way'. Her days are, in her words, 'full and worthwhile.' According to Allison, it is because of her daughters, her friends, the people she knows at her art class and the services that supported her, that she is now able to live her life to the full within her community.

My two daughters are of paramount importance ... The have been a wonderful support and a great joy. I'm lucky. I've got a good family that understands.



What is this research about?

Allison's story is not unique.

We talked to people recovering from mental illness across Tasmania and asked them to tell us about what helped them to reclaim their lives and enable them to lead full and rewarding lives in their community.

Specifically, we wanted to know about the role of natural supports in this.

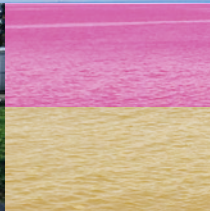
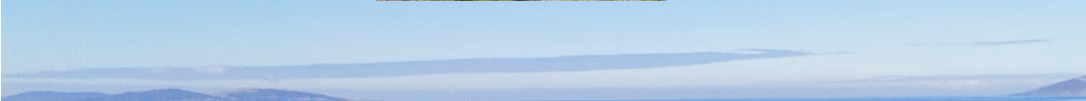
This research:

- Identifies the range of natural supports used by people recovering from mental illness and explores their experiences of accessing, using and maintaining them.
- Explores the links between natural supports and social inclusion and recovery.
- Reviews how mental health service providers currently understand and experience their work in assisting people to mobilise natural supports and what opportunities there are to maximise a person's natural supports.

What are natural supports?

Natural supports are those that typically occur in everyday life. They can derive from relationships with family, friends, peers and other social networks, by participation in voluntary and community organisations, such as sporting clubs and churches, and through interactions at places within the local community such as cafés, libraries, gyms or the local park. Natural supports are not necessarily confined to relationships with people. They can also include the things that we all find useful and important in our lives including interactions with nature or pets, or time spent alone meditating, writing or gardening.

My interpretation of natural supports is having friends, church and other things who actually liked and loved me through my illness and are still there. It's incredible. So they must have seen what was good in me not what was bad. These people are really important to me.





What did we find out?

We found out that recovery is possible and that it can be positive and exciting. It is also a unique, personal and individual process. But there are some important common components to recovery.

- Feeling included and welcomed by the community is key to recovery.

I volunteer with the regional arts group ... That's been an important connection with the local artists in town. A sense of belonging is important ... It's got me out of the house, feeling like I'm valued, that I'm not the totally useless, worthless, unequal person that people like psychiatrists and parents tried to tell me I was.

- A person's natural supports are vital in facilitating them to live their life to the full. They are often the most important support for people recovering from mental illness.

They are probably one of the most important things you can get. You can rely on that much more than you can a real service ... Well you don't have to make an appointment with your friends and family.



- Not everyone has natural supports and it can often be difficult for people living with mental illness to identify and access them.

I haven't got a close mate, like a male friend, a best mate.

I haven't got anyone like that and probably that's been a bit of a struggle for me.

- Formal services can be important in supporting a person to identify, engage with, stay connected with and build their natural supports. They can help people build confidence and skills so that they can participate in their community.

My girlfriend rings and says she's going to the community fair.

But she cancelled. So I went by myself. Now I wouldn't have done that before. I would have stayed home, felt sorry for myself, felt disappointed, internalised it and got upset. And I thought no, you're ready to go, so go. So I went. And I had a lovely time.

This is the difference with this mental health program.



What does this mean?

Natural supports are important in creating a sense of place and belonging and fostering a sense of wellbeing and inclusion. People with mental illness are no different from anyone else in the community. People want to feel part of the community. They want friends, they want to socialise, they want to contribute, and they want reciprocal relationships with others. They want to be included and welcomed.

I've got quite a strong circle of friends here which is something I've not had before. So because I've got a strong circle of friends, social supports and volunteering supports ... here I can't see myself moving away.

But it is not always easy for people to identify, access and build natural supports. And natural supports are not always positive. They may sometimes hinder a person's opportunities or ability to reclaim their life.

Formal services have an important role to play here. They can help people to build, access and maintain positive natural supports. They:

- Can be deliberate about talking with people about who and what is important in their lives.
One of the first things I ask our clients is specifically, "What things do you do that are good for your mental health?"
- Can support people to identify, stay engaged with and build their natural supports. This may be through the provision of opportunities for social interaction or through helping people to build the skills and confidence to be able to identify and connect with natural supports outside of the formal service framework.
- Can promote engagement in activities that people express interest in.
They really encourage me to go bushwalking. And they always ask, "How are you going with that?"
- Need to ensure that they do not replace the role of friends and family who are already a part of a person's life.

But it is not about one or the other. It can be both. Natural supports and formal services are both important for people. 'They both worked together to get me where I am.'

Future directions

Given the prevalence of mental illness within our community and given the emphasis placed on natural supports by the people we spoke with, there are a number of issues and opportunities that require further consideration by services.

- Natural supports are identified by people living with mental illness as an invaluable support and resource in their lives and as a significant contributor to people's experience of recovery. Services need to be deliberate in their efforts to ensure that they understand who is involved in someone's life, what that relationship means and to support people to stay engaged and build their natural supports.
- Services need to think about natural supports as an essential part of planning and support and resist replacing these with service supports that risk confining people to relationships that are subject to funding or that limit people's capacity to truly experience community inclusion and participation.
- Services have a role to play in identifying the support needs of a person's natural supports and connecting them to these services. This might include education and information opportunities, respite or opportunities for time to self for families and friends.
- As a community we need to be more aware of the issues surrounding mental illness and the impact these can have on families and friends. This means ensuring that we have a community that is understanding, inclusive and able to respond appropriately. It also means that we balance our efforts in reducing stigma. We need to be careful that we do not create reactions but rather a community that is truly inclusive of all people.
- We can all promote access to natural supports within our communities.



Find out more

For more information about the research findings and suggested recommendations, see the full report, *Building a good life: the role of natural supports in recovery from mental illness*, by Naomi Sidebotham, to be published by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania in late 2014.

It will be available by calling 1800 243 232 or by downloading it from www.anglicare-tas.org.au

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