

# Methodology of community participation through Recovery College principles and experiences

**This publication is part of the project Open to your communities - Impacts of developing community-based approaches in public services**

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## A word of introduction

We do not present definite instructions or a patented cookbook. Instead, we want to offer inspiration based on our experience gained during almost five years of the Prague Recovery College operation. But we still have a lot to learn.

In this Methodology we offer you a description of the experiences and processes that we have managed to do in the Recovery College. While the Recovery College offerings may be different in some ways than the services you offer, we have aimed to describe what we do in the hope that you will find parallels for your own work in the text.

At the end of the publication we present a list of sources that were used for the elaboration of the text, but also as inspiration for further thinking. Although these are also sources that are published in English, we believe that a range of translators are available to enable understanding.

During the writing process we had the opportunity to reflect on the processes set up in our Recovery college and found many opportunities for change. Thus, for us it was also a growth and learning process.

We very much wish you every success in working with your communities with joy, creativity and enthusiasm.

Petra Kubinová, Juraj Marendiak, Tomáš Vaněk

## Recovery College. What does it mean?

Above all, a recovery college is an excellent chance for a change. In professional mental health services, people are divided into providers and recipients, helping workers and clients, and those giving and receiving. That relationship is inherently asymmetrical even in the most modern and best-performing services. And the recovery college is an earnest and successful way to balance forces.

The recovery college is a programme of education and personal growth for adults, but, above all, a unique opportunity to meet people with different life experiences, social backgrounds, cultures or professions and varying degrees of wellbeing and health.

The courses you will find here are mainly related to mental health. They can be about managing a crisis, staying calm, or talking to doctors about medication. But you can also come across courses that teach you how to cope with social media or gain the courage to speak about your experience and live beyond the limits of your mental health problems.

All courses in the recovery college are created by people with their own experience of mental health problems and other experts.

The goal of recovery college is not to replace psychiatric or social services. Although its effect probably surpasses most traditional in-person attendance programmes, as shown below. A recovery college gives people with mental health problems the opportunity to be more than a patient and learn and grow. In a recovery college, patients become students and lecturers. It seems trivial, but it works.

If you have heard of recovery and are thinking about bringing this idea to life, starting a recovery college is a good choice. The journey does not end with mental health problems but begins!

The concept of a recovery college has its roots in the United States in the 1990s. In 2000, the Recovery Education Centre was established in Arizona. Rachel Perkins and Julie Repper then founded the first recovery college in the UK in 2009. Today, there are more than 100 recovery colleges in 20 countries worldwide, and their number is growing fast. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the courses moved to the online environment, and international cooperation of recovery colleges became more accessible and more common than ever before.

Hundreds of academic articles have been published on the benefits of recovery colleges (Thériault, Lord, Briand, Piat & Meddings, 2020). Although not usually large randomized trials, the evidence collected is very promising and growing. Recovery colleges contribute to wellbeing and hope (Ebrahim, Glascott, Mayer & Gair, 2018). The study by Bourna et al. (2018) found a lower need to use professional services in students of recovery colleges. A positive effect on experts by experience was repeatedly demonstrated<sup>1</sup> (Meddings, McGregor, Roeg & Shepherd, 2015; Gill, 2014). Notably, the recovery college can also involve those somewhat reserved towards more traditional educational programmes and help them significantly in various areas of life (Whitley, Shepherd & Slade, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> A lecturer is a person who consciously participates in changes in attitudes, knowledge and skills. He teaches people to work or think in a new way, to do something in a different way (Trdá in Ďásková, 2018, p. 23).

An expert by experience educates professionals (doctors, nurses, social workers, and workers by experience) through the lived experience with the disease. He is a person who has his own experience and, in addition, knows the theory he can use in teaching (Říčan in Ďásková, 2018, p. 27). Furthermore, experts by experience educate future employees in mental health care and university students in psychology, social work, medicine, etc. (Foitová et al. In Ďásková, 2018, p. 23).

Since 2017, experts by experience have also been educating people with mental health problems within recovery colleges in the Czech Republic. We call these people students.

So far, the programme's impacts on students with mental health problems have been studied, as they are the main target group. However, recovery colleges can also be attended by professionals and have the potential to influence, for example, attitudes of health-care professionals, reduce stigma and change the overall atmosphere in helping organizations and in the whole society (Crowther et al., 2019).

### Prague Recovery College

**We established the Recovery College in 2017 when the Centre for Mental Health Care Development implemented the first project of the so-called Community Centre for Recovery. In the next two years, it was followed by the Development and Improvement of Services of Community Centre for Recovery project in a similar format. It expanded the college's existing activities and developed new activities to integrate people with mental health problems into everyday life. One of the main principles of a recovery college is the participation of people with experience of mental health problems (so-called experts by experience) in the activities it implements and the involvement of the public. The content of the college's activities is based on the concept of recovery, which motivates people to engage actively in everyday life, take care of themselves, and learn to alleviate and manage their difficulties, leading to a fulfilling life even with illness. The project was co-financed by the European Union.**

### Recovery college

At our Recovery College, we offer a positive, caring and respectful learning environment. We organize courses dealing with recovery from mental health problems, which will give our students support, hope and courage in working with their strengths and motivations. Experts by experience who recover from mental health problems themselves share with students their personal experiences of living with the illness and their own path to recovery. We also offer the help of mental health professionals. The courses are free, and the college is open to people with mental health issues, their loved ones and everyone who wants to help people with mental health problems and understand them more.

The training programme includes thirteen courses promoting recovery from mental health problems. The central theme is strengthening self-confidence and confidence in one's skills and abilities. Interactively designed courses contain both theoretical blocks and practicals.

**Hearing Voices:** The course covers reflections on the reasons for hearing voices, how to work with them, and strategies for learning to manage voices and living a fulfilling life in society.

**Photo Story:** The course aims to engage students in everyday life through self-expression through the medium of photography. By taking pictures and composing them into a meaningful whole, students gain the ability to reflect on their life stories (life situations).

**Safety Plan:** The content of the course is creating a safety plan. The lecturers teach students how to recognize the coming crisis, deal with it, and mitigate the impact of difficulties on life through self-knowledge.

**Recovery Group:** An intensive course focused on exchanging experiences, providing hope and support in achieving goals in the recovery process, developing social skills and getting to know oneself.

**Recovery:** The course is led by two lecturers with experience in mental health problems recovery, who show students how to recover from illness and live fulfilling life.

**Self-Management:** The course helps students become aware of and develop their own management mechanisms. The principle is to support self-confidence and perseverance in working on oneself.

**The Story of My Recovery:** The course focused on the topic of recovery in the students' stories takes place in a focus group. Sharing experiences leads to strengthening hope and skills for social inclusion.

**Finance as Part of the Recovery:** The course aims to answer questions about understanding one's financial situation and how to deal with it, how to improve the economic situation, how to avoid financial difficulties, etc.

**Self-Presentation:** The course deals with issues of openness to the environment. It encourages students to manage how they present themselves externally without stress (including a strategy of how, when, with whom, and to what extent to talk about their sensitive topics).

**Mental Health on the Internet:** The course supports participants in socializing as part of their recovery. It teaches them an accurate perception of the social network environment and safety rules when communicating on the Internet.

**Stigma and Self-Stigma:** Prejudices, social stigma and self-stigma lead to discriminatory behaviour. The course supports students in recognizing the issue of stigmatization and in a proactive approach to overcoming it through their behaviour.

**Interpersonal Relationships as Part of Recovery:** The course promotes mutual understanding and early help in close relationships of a person recovering from mental health problems. It is also open to loved ones.

**How to Communicate with the Doctor about Medication:** The course focuses on open communication about medication, side effects and possible safe discontinuation of psychotropic drugs.

**Literary and theatre workshops** are socio-cultural activities of a low-threshold nature, providing a creative space for meeting people with mental health problems and other members of the local community and supporting participants in creative development and self-knowledge through art.

### **Literary workshop**

*"Do you want to create new worlds or immerse yourself in one thing? We will work in a group or individually. Each participant will have the opportunity to find their voice. "*

The workshop is intended for all those interested in literature; experience with mental health problems is welcome. Under the guidance of two lecturers, an expert by experience and journalist Tomáš Vaňek and a poet and translator Jan Škrob, the participants devote themselves to poetry and prose, talk about writing and write, read and share. Every two months, there is a literary evening in Prague's cafes. The imaginary culmination of these literary encounters is the publication of the collection of the magazine *Zámezí* with selected works.

**Tomáš Vaněk, an expert by experience in creative writing, writes about the Community as follows:**

**Help with writing - a shift in life?**

*"We simply gave it a try. There was a bold idea at the beginning and exciting speculations at the end. Last autumn (2020), we decided to launch a mini-project in which our editors, experienced authors from our contributors and our literary evenings' guests would individually support people from the recovery college target group in developing their writing. Creative pairs were formed – one of them had the role of a lecturer, and the other was a supported person. And the first questions arose. Is it possible to push someone somewhere based on the position of authority in such an immeasurable thing as writing? Isn't writing a very personal process that can't withstand such interventions? It was a bit like therapy, but it shouldn't have been. We reminded everybody of that in the very beginning. Therapy aims to help someone cope with their life and mental problems and lead them to a happy life. The therapist acts as a catalyst which reduces his role in the conversation with the client to enable a healthy one-way effect.*

*In our case, however, the situation was even more thorny. In my opinion, if a person advances in life, it will somehow be reflected in their writing. But reversing the order and influencing life through improved writing is a challenge. When I reflect on the project that has just been completed, I ask if we have succeeded at all. And I must say that we have. Despite the impossibility of the original intention, we achieved actual results, although contradictory and sometimes embarrassing. Some new friendships were started, and poems, which would otherwise remain hidden in somebody's soul, were written. Things that would otherwise remain unspoken were said. I want to thank all those who embarked on this adventure with us, especially for their energy, hopes, and manifestations of melancholy, which proved to be very creative. And even more thanks go to those who contributed to our journal with their reflections or texts. "*

### **Theater workshop**

*"Come with us to seek freedom in the game. Find your voice and speak, improve your psychosomatic condition and express your topic with the whole being. By increasing sensitivity to others..."*

The main goals of the theatre workshop are self-knowledge through action, the acquisition of stage speech and the development of verbal skills through improvisation, the development of prompt action and the training of reactions to new (imaginary) situations. It offers space for strengthening interplay, empathy and mutual inspiration, which will result in the preparation of public performances. The workshop is led by an expert by experience and former head of the LSD theatre Michal Kašpar and a theatrical artist and expert in dialogue negotiations with internal partner Kateřina Daňková.

### **Stopstigma**

*"Recovery from mental health problems is possible if the sick person receives proper care and support."*

The website [www.stopstigma.cz](http://www.stopstigma.cz) has been used since 2004 to raise awareness of mental health problems through published texts on mental health problems, recovery, stories and works of art on the disease and, last but not least, by operating a unique psychiatric and psychological counselling centre involving counsellors by experience. These people have their own experience with mental health problems, manage them successfully and offer their experience as an enrichment to others. As part of the current project, we have focused our activities on providing barrier-free internet counselling and developing support in mental health care. Another activity is updating texts on mental health problems and publishing comments on articles on mental health from the daily press. This site

aims to inform about mental health and mental health problems, give hope, and change the attitudes of the public, professionals, and those who have some problems themselves. We aim to increase awareness of mental health problems and reduce the stigma and negative "labelling" of people with mental health problems, their loved ones and the whole field of mental care.

### Cooperation with Great Britain

*"We are constantly improving our services: our goal is not a patient using our services, but an individual living a happy life."* (RWC staff motto)

*"Be the change you want to see."* (Gandhi)

In July 2017, we participated in an internship at the Recovery and Wellbeing College (RWC) in London within the Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust.

"Recovery" in the name of this institution means the process of change, in which the individual improves his health and wellbeing, lives his own life and strives to use his potential. RWCs have been operating since 2012, when they were established on the principle of changing the relationship between professionals, service workers and those who need them, mainly through shared decision-making at all levels. They started with about ten smaller courses, and now they offer about seventy (of which twenty are certified). The courses are divided into six areas:

- how to understand health problems and ways to manage them;
- how to take care of your health and wellbeing;
- how to understand yourself and develop;
- how to gain control over recovery and your own life;
- how to develop recovery practice;
- how to get involved, employment and work topics.

There are now about 30 recovery colleges in the UK; about five are in London. RWC operates in several places (several courses run in parallel), and each course is led by two lecturers (co-production of professionals and experts by experience). These are half-day, one-day or even multi-week courses and workshops, and also, for example, "micro-courses" in hospitals. Some are so-called basic, and others are advanced (for professionals). The state funds the courses (through the NHS Trust). Training is free for NHS users, with other course attendees contributing according to a set schedule. Clients (not patients) usually find out about RWC from their GP. The motto of the London Recovery College is *"Welcome, you have taken the first step. You will learn what we can do for your recovery or for you to help your loved ones recover."*

Three main principles define recovery: **hope** (in the same sense as we talk about recovery) - **control** (the goal is to increase control over the disease, over oneself, over one's life and the environment) - **opportunity** (expanding knowledge, information, skills, planning, relationships, looking for job opportunities, free-time activities, finances... *"everything I want for my life"*). Other principles include accessibility (to all... minorities, ethnic groups), flexibility (RWC must continuously adapt to the people it serves), and change of terminology - from clinical recovery (formerly) to personal recovery (today). Rather than passing on knowledge, the courses focus on promoting self-expression. The general benefits are anti-stigmatization, confidence building and empowerment. Every student has their own tutor, so students feel that they belong somewhere. They no longer feel so much "lost" and excluded from society.



## Mental Health and Recovery

Mental health is a concept that has been gaining importance in recent times. Despite covid-19 pandemics focused the world's attention to physical health in first place, very soon we found out that "no health without mental health" is not just a popular claim. This experience got people in touch with their vulnerability (including mental health vulnerability) in an unprecedented way.

The notion of Recovery has a long (hi)story in the context of mental health services. It started as an anti-psychiatric protest movement in the USA, but soon established also a more positive approach to mental health issues both in the States and in Europe. To the Czech republic it was transposed from the UK and Netherlands. This is a Recovery of mental health services initiative and has both its benefits and shortcomings in comparison to the direct protest movement, which laid in the origins of Recovery notion. In these countries a good praxis was established by hiring peer workers for direct work with clients, but also for education, research, advocacy etc. Peer workers in mental health context are people with direct experience with psychiatric care and some sort of mental problems. Often these people know what does it mean to face both stigma and other social consequences of mental illness (like extreme poverty or the tendency to belittle opinions and worldviews of mentally "ill" people) and of course also the direct effects of the mental problems itself. The second may comprise questioning ones own value, severe indecisiveness, extreme grief, loosing social context, hearing disturbing voices, having special personal beliefs... and also the somatic problems with breathing, sleeping or eating resulting from it.

However, peer workers are said to be on the way to Recovery, that means, they are not only suffering from above mentioned problems but they also feel hope and are able to convert their experiences into something valuable. Recovery itself is both a final destination of such a work on yourself and a tool which they use to overcome their difficulties. Such a tool consists of story understanding and story-telling, radical shift to personal assets like strengths and virtues and learning how to feel enough hope. It also values well-being in opposition to medical "cure". If you feel well, is it more, than you should ask from your life?

*„Whatever gets you through the night It's all right, it's all right“*

*(from a song by John Lennon)*

Being both a progressive movement and a bit of mess in terminology, a hackneyed swearword, **Recovery** has often to prove its own existence against its more-or-less opened critics. Ironically enough, the background of Recovery is insomuch doubtful as the background of the *psychiatric diagnostics*. Neither of these two is validated through a research. On the contrary, it is validated through the effects on society, community, mental health patients and other stake holders in the mental health scope. So we can root out the concept of *recovery* as we can root out the concept of *schizophrenia* or *bipolar disorder*, but that does not mean anything for everyday life with antipsychotic drugs, with being labelled, or with hope emanating from the recovery terminology. The results of both medical approach like psychiatry or a social innovative approach like Recovery movement are clearly to be seen in the real world.

As the most important effects of Recovery movement we can see these (turning points):

- Help is focused on the person. The person is more important than any "real-truth" concerns.

- Mental illness is only one of plenty information, the person is getting from world about his or her life.
- Mutual support of people with similar experience! That means: understanding of everyday issues like sadness, cooking, signing, walking with a dog etc. is not less important than big truths of medical science and praxis. Thus the promotion of well-being and **“normality” of human concerns** are very important to recover from any isolation or guilt feelings.
- Mutual sharing and the peer work helps not only those, who are labelled and disabled as mentally ill. On the contrary. Peers are in the community services also to emancipate the mental health professionals to adopt more open approach. These professional workers are encouraged to incorporate their own life story to their work with clients. They are understood as people with their own valuable experience, having not only professional expertise, but also personal expertise to help their “clients”.

In 2013, ten new colleagues, future experts by experience, became team members of the Centre for Mental Health Care Development. As part of their training, we introduced them to the concept of recovery and topics such as stigma, self-stigma and discrimination. They also learned to deal with these topics in everyday life. The new colleagues’ reactions, like “Ah, so what we are going through has a name and some way out, and there is hope for improvement.” were surprising and very positive.

Presenting recovery as a non-linear process under their control and, despite problems, leading to a happy life was new to the colleagues. Michal Kašpar expressed it as this “my life has somehow blossomed”. We wanted this experience to be transferable to allow other people with mental health problems to benefit from it.

“Recovery” became a standard part of the mental health service providers’ vocabulary in 2022, and it might seem that teaching this topic in recovery colleges is no longer necessary. However, there are several good reasons to do so. Most importantly, recovery is the leitmotif of the entire concept of recovery colleges. Therefore, if we want to talk about recovery in the environment of recovery colleges, we should not mean empty and sunlit clichés about hope. We should offer concrete, evidence-based and information based on the lecturers’ experience. We should provide a safe environment for sharing and discussion where each student, based on sufficient information, can realize what recovery means to them personally and get the opportunity to understand it through their own experiences, possibilities, wishes and dreams.

## Recovery College principles

For inspiration, we offer below a description of the principles that are key to the functioning of the Recovery College. These are values that appeal not only to the people who run the Recovery College, but also to its students, staff, the public, and increasingly, it seems, to mental health service workers.

To make this work, the principles need to be truly lived. Not just written down.

### **1. Co-production – co-creation, shared decision-making and learning from each other**

Recovery colleges combine lived experience with mental health problems and expertise and put them on an equal level. This is reflected in all aspects of the recovery college, from its initial planning, through the development and design of curricula, to the creation and development of courses, workshops and training, their implementation, lecturing and quality assurance.

Co-production is the heart and soul of the recovery college.

The aim of co-production is the mutual support and removal of barriers between professionals and people with lived experiences of mental health problems. It is essential to realize that this is not a single matter but a challenging and relatively long-lasting process aiming to create new things based on equality and reciprocity for all involved – for mental health professionals, those who use these services, their families and the community. All participants are beneficial. They can be helpful to others and, in return, get experience from others. They are all equal partners.

***What is a co-production:***

- above all, a space for joint creation, listening and learning from each other;
- recognizing that everyone can benefit the community;
- building on what everyone can do and offer now, without any special preparation;
- promoting reciprocity – what we can do for the benefit of the community and each other, what the community can offer us;
- development of mutual support – establishing contacts with others who are in a similar situation – learning and supporting each other;
- removing barriers between professionals and recipients of mental health care services;
- trying to facilitate and help people connect rather than doing something for them.

***What is not a co-production:***

- Dividing into "us" and "them". It is a matter of working together and using the talents and abilities of everyone who wants to get involved;
- it is not necessarily a consensus, but the variety is fine, and learning is about making mistakes;
- the goal is not services managed by users but partnerships between people with different experiences;
- The aim is not to reduce healthcare costs either – even though this is happening in the context of recovery colleges.

## **2. Focus on recovery and strengths**

"Hope – control – opportunity". Recovery college works with these cornerstones in every course and workshop. Hope means believing that change for the better is possible. Control means having your life in your hands, increasing control over the problems, yourself, and your life and environment (getting involved in the community, negotiating your needs with the family and those who support you). Opportunities mean seeing, creating and using options offered to you (having relationships, joining the community, taking advantage of job opportunities). The emphasis is on personal experience.

Recovery college does not prescribe what people should do. On the contrary, it provides a safe environment that creates opportunities for people to build the skills and strategies to live the life they want to live. In this respect, recovery college focuses not only on the content of the course but also on the physical environment so that there is hope and one feels safe in it. Recovery college also strives to project this attitude into its language – i.e. emphasizes students' strengths and opportunities, not what they lack or where they have problems.

The key values of this principle are:

- confidence in the ability and potential of people to overcome obstacles and recover;
- mutual trust and reliability. To make everything work and the principles be fulfilled, it is necessary to know that I can rely on the other. Both in cooperation with students and the team.

### **3. Functioning on the principles of a real school**

Recovery college should work the same as all schools – i.e. on the principle of education. Recovery college can have a portfolio of courses on offer divided into semesters. Students can receive a study record book. Recovery college has some physical base/place/space where students can come and attend the course offered.

### **4. Openness to all**

Recovery college is open to everyone without distinction – age, gender, culture, abilities, disability, diagnosis, expertise, and community from which the student comes do not matter. The courses are attended by recipients of mental health care services and their relatives, employees of these services, and persons outside the field of mental health care – i.e. people interested in or affected by the topic. Everyone learns from each other.

Students are not assessed for participation and are not referred to the college based on any medical recommendation. They come there of their own choice. They choose the courses themselves, based on their interests, needs, wishes or goals.

### **5. Focus on growth**

Recovery colleges actively support students in thinking about themselves and their lives. The aim is to allow them to move forward according to their own choice and at their own pace while benefitting from their progress in the recovery college courses, which help them achieve their goals, and from finding other options beyond mental health services. The aim is to think about what will happen when the students leave the recovery college. It is essential to encourage students to think about where they want to go after completing a recovery college course. Ideally, each student has a study advisor who helps them develop further and realize their goals and desires. It allows them to choose where they want to go next.

### **6. Connections with the community and mental health care services**

According to the classic British model, recovery colleges should be part of both community and mental health care services. They can then serve as a bridge between the two worlds. They try to change services so that they are more focused on recovery, and they support a change in the community's attitudes so that it can accept everyone.

### **7. Recovery colleges do not replace treatment or therapy offered by professional mental health care services**

Recovery colleges do not replace professional examinations or psychiatric treatment. They are not intended to compete with or oppose other mental health services. On the contrary, recovery colleges are an excellent complement to other services in the comprehensive care system. It is about creating

a space where it is possible to recover, to have a different role than the recipient of a service. Recovery colleges offer one way to set on a path to recovery. It is certainly appropriate to inform students sufficiently about the possibilities of professional treatment to have the necessary information and make their own decisions.

## **8. Recovery colleges do not replace common/mainstream schools**

Recovery colleges do not replace ordinary schools or university education. They can organize various courses to help people find out what they would like to study and allow them to get involved in mainstream studies. Recovery colleges enable people to become confident in better managing their mental health problems and participating in mainstream education. They also provide helping professionals with space for personal and professional growth.

### [How do experts by experience think and talk about the principles of recovery college?](#)

#### **Barbora Vráželová**

"For me, recovery college principles are above all: anti-stigma; assistance and support in the recovery process; promoting integration into everyday life (outside services and disease-related environments); empowering and developing competencies; support of self-confidence and personality development; daily routine support; support to realize my own worth and find my way in life.

The very name, "recovery college", is attractive and arouses interest in mental health and the student. All of this, in my opinion, makes recovery college a recovery college.

It is impossible to have a recovery college without students, without people who have experience with the recovery process and want to pass on that experience. Furthermore, it would not work without a professional team that can give the college an authentic image.

For me, the low threshold for students and the quality and efficiency of the courses are important. "

#### **Tomáš Vaněk**

"I see recovery college as an exciting concept. As an expert by experience, I consider some pillars essential, and I cannot imagine such a college without them. One is about sharing mental health experiences in general. It also includes some complex issues such as stigma, discrimination, internal insecurity, self-acceptance, finding paths to recover, etc. Another vital pillar of the recovery college is a kind of democratization of thinking and the learning process. It does not matter who the lecturer is and who participates in the course. The student's newly acquired knowledge is not tested; he is there for himself; he comes to the course because of himself and leaves it like that. He receives the certificate primarily for active participation and should not be pushed anywhere or manipulated to adopt healthier attitudes. In short, the student did not receive any expert training, but he spent time in an environment that was receptive and open to issues that he might have to avoid in his environment. In my opinion, the third pillar of the recovery college is independence, but I am not sure to what extent we have achieved it. To sum it up, the pillars are: sharing experiences, democratizing thinking, inspiring openness and, finally, independence from any other institution. "

### Lenka Flášarová

"A sense of belonging, partnership, informality, flexibility, openness, trust."

### Magda Dosbabová

"In my opinion, the primary recovery college principle is the name itself, expressing both the origin of the idea of its establishment and the meaning of its operation.

The most important part of a recovery college for me is the unconditional acceptance of the person as such.

It is a form of support for recovery from a difficult period in life and is a guide to further regeneration.

How did I get to the recovery college?

When I was down, I started looking for help on the website. At that time, it was the only means of communication for me. This way, I got to the website at [www.cmhcd.cz](http://www.cmhcd.cz), where I got acquainted with the recovery college.

The idea of recovery was new and completely revolutionary for me. I was happy to set out on this journey. I wanted to help people who had been through a difficult period in their lives like me. At the time, I had no idea how much the recovery college principle would help me because I started working as an expert by experience and counsellor at the Stopstigma online counselling centre."

### Inspiration also from the Netherlands

Nei Skoen Recovery College (translated as "New Shoes") from Netherlands is constantly striving to create new opportunities for socially and psychologically vulnerable people who have to deal with various constraints in their lives. It focuses primarily on strengthening self-help and sharing experiences.

In Nei Skoen, the principles are called "traditions".

### Traditions of NEI SKOEN<sup>2</sup>

The traditions of Nei Skoen are based on the rules of self-help groups and are used in Nei Skoen as a **Community for Learning, Development and Recovery**:

1. Our wellbeing comes first. Personal recovery and development can only succeed in a safe and pleasant environment with people who support us.
2. Nei Skoen's Recovery College has one goal: to create a refuge/free space where people can be who they want to be and work on their hobbies (what fulfils them and their passion).
3. To become a Nei Skoen participant, you only need the desire to work on your hobbies and the willingness to use your abilities to help others.
4. Nei Skoen has no leader. Our "leaders" work on the basis of the trust that the participants have given them and do not rule them in any way.
5. Nei Skoen is entirely autonomous, and the same goes for the self-help groups there.
6. The Recovery College does not fund other facilities or organizations; problems with money or background (financial security) will not stop us from fulfilling our goals.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://neisko.nl/tradities-nei-skoen/>

7. The Recovery College is fully autonomous and based on self-help. It, therefore, works fully on mutual help. Everyone is introduced to a basket of 7 traditions during the activities and can contribute to it.
8. Self-help principles will always come first in a recovery college. Professional positions are not created. The college is and will remain completely "unprofessional", although there is a possibility of paid posts.
9. Nei Skoen does not engage in public debates outside Nei Skoen, is not part of public commitments and does not become involved in such commitments.
10. Anonymity is the spiritual basis of all our traditions. Let this remind us of the need to elevate and glorify traditions above personal interests or ourselves.

### Experiences with principles from Open to your communities project

In this chapter, we will look at the principles of community collaboration, which are the result of the joint work of the international team of the Open to your communities project. The team met in June 2022 in Prague.

#### 1. TEAMWORK "NICHE"

**Aim:** Create a team work „niche“, a safe and favouring place and atmosphere to support team work and individual commitment.

Means/activities done to achieve this:

- the training was held in a situation, in which it was safe to meet face to face, as its aims wouldn't be achievable in online format,
- all three days were dedicated to the training and participants were asked to respect the timeframe and organize their travel so, that they could be present during the whole training,
- the training was held in Prague, far from the usual work environment of most participants, that enabled them to cut off from their everyday work worries,
- the Recovery college principles were applied (see respective aims),
- activities were chosen and set up to bring experience and mutual inspiration instead of lectures and theory (no single Powerpoint slide was used at all),
- teams were mixed up and mutual support in translation was empowered.

Feedbacks:

- "I thought that the word 'training' means power point, taking notes, theory, school environment etc. The whole methodology was a total surprise for me: teamwork and freedom. This way too, we learned a lot, got to know the organization etc. I didn't expect to work in mixed groups so much, first I was frightened but finally this was that I enjoyed the most."
- "I really appreciated the live meeting - it was extremely important to meet in such a diverse group in person."
- "I expected more formal training with PP presentations and I was afraid about multilingual barrier but our meeting was very familiar and very engaging, intensive and substantive. The form was perfect."
- "I expected to hear lectures and it was a good surprise that it didn't happen this way"

- “I felt deepening and understanding. It was great to have the opportunity to deal with only this topic for days – at home we don’t have this possibility. We had time, which very much supported understanding.”
- “I didn’t expect to work in mixed groups, I was afraid that I would feel uncomfortable, and we would not be able to transfer our thoughts, but this was solved.”
- “I was afraid of language barriers that I would not understand things well enough. Thanks to the translation help as well as the way group work was organized, this problem solved, I didn’t feel excluded.”
- „I was happy that everything went so well. I expected at least some misunderstandings or organisational lapses. But there were no such problems apparent, probably thanks to the tolerance and wisdom of all.“
- “We felt taken care of, the training was organized with great attention to our needs. This was very helpful in working on our concept.”

## 2. CO-PRODUCTION

Aim: Explore the recovery principle of CO-PRODUCTION by directly experiencing it in the training.

Means/activities done to achieve this:

- through creating space for co-production (preparing the training as a set of open possibilities) and setting up all activities in a mode enabling participation of all participants,
- joint creation of a framework for a feel-good group culture,
- joint presentation of team projects (participants mixed across “national” teams) using dreams, dragon and wizard symbolics,
- joint approaching Recovery college principles and co-creating ideas and inspiration on how to put them into life in projects,
- inviting and involving participants into decision-making,
- joint reflection on the training through creating “Potok”.

Feedbacks:

- “Everyone’s opinion has really and indeed been considered.”
- “I also appreciate the very friendly atmosphere among the participants.”
- “We came much closer to understand the project itself (mainly via the dragon-princess-magician task) and we got to know the project team much better.”
- “First, I didn’t understand why we don’t have concrete rules. Then I understood why it is important that everyone feels good and comfortable, mainly through the example of the people with mental health problems: everything is much less plannable, attention is of basic importance. We don’t pay quarter of the attention experienced here to our service users.”
- “We again worded for ourselves that it is very important to cooperate with the NGOs and other service providers of the settlement. Our new idea is to set up a consulting committee.”
- “Joint workshops in mixed groups stimulated my creativity the most; thanks to them we were able to specify the goals of the project and design tools for its implementation.”
- “The exercise with metaphore of dream, dragon and wizard was the most creative for me. It opened our minds.”
- „I was really happy to experience that our team preparations, which were based on RC values, worked well and helped to create an atmosphere of mutual sharing and coproduction.“



- “I was surprised at how much we have in common.”

### **3. OPENNESS TO EVERYONE**

Aim: Explore the Recovery college principle of OPENNESS TO EVERYONE by directly experiencing it in the training.

Means/activities done to achieve this:

- supporting teams to include experts by experience into their teams,
- though English was the main language used in training, participants with no or limited English language skills were equally included in the process,
- the Recovery workshop was held in Psychiatric hospital in Bohnice and was intentionally set up to enable participation of people currently hospitalized in this place.

Feedbacks:

- “I understood that besides being a pensioner, I can still be a valuable person and can be able to offer valuable things for my community.”
- “It was easy and good to let my bad concerns and not worry about my English.”
- “The fact that not everyone spoke English was not a barrier, it was even very positive, no one judged anyone and we were able to listen to another language.”
- “For me it was very special to experience people from the psychiatric hospital community joining our workshop - and at the same time - it was very special to see the group welcoming them warmly”.

### **4. FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS AND RECOVERY**

Aim: Explore the Recovery college principle of FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS AND RECOVERY by directly experiencing it in the training.

Means/activities done to achieve this:

- activities intentionally set up to highlight strengths, experiences and inputs of participants (not the ones of the trainers),
- activities pointing out that recovery is not connected only with mental health, but with personal vulnerability in general, through focusing on participant’s own experiences,
- using the Peer club “genius loci” as an example of place, where the principle of focusing on strengths and recovery is kept alive.

Feedbacks:

- “We realized how important it is to focus on resources and personal strengths; these must be further enhanced and utilized so new programs and services can be started.”
- “I understood recovery and that curing communities cannot only be understood in terms of people with psychiatric problems but anyone. The community has an inclusive and curing role in any field.”
- „I myself am an expert by experience and it was really fantastic to see in the peer club that recovered people become helpers and they are much more authentic than professionals. It is amazing how much one can help after recovering from a trauma or illness and that it is possible

to turn personal experiences into professionalism in the good sense. Recovered people do not get lost but are placed in the focus of attention in a helper position. Elder people bear lots of trauma and so they can become experts by experience.”

- “On the third day I realized that using these methods, it is possible to recover not only from illnesses but also any kind of everyday problems.”
- “The method with drawing the difficulties I face in my work (locating them and then symbolically, graphically placing them in the drawing) brought clear answers and solutions to the 'traps' I fall into at work.”
- “My most creative findings were that we must build on people’s strengths and have to organize ourselves in small groups.”

## **5. CONNECTION WITH COMMUNITY**

Aim: Explore the Recovery college principle of CONNECTION WITH COMMUNITY by directly experiencing it in the training.

Means/activities done to achieve this:

- community places, that incorporate this principle, were intentionally picked as venues during these 3 days (ALTA, Mlsná Kavka, Kasárna Karlín, Peer klub).

Feedbacks:

- “I also understood how much more we could do. How great it would be to bring a real club feeling and attitude in the institution.”
- “It was very good that we could be in different spaces. For me the big impression was the hospital area and what happens there.”
- “We really understood how important involving further resources, opening towards the local community and making service users more conscious is.”
- “I learned, or convinced myself again, how the inclusive concept of working with community is important for me.”
- “It is of basic importance that old people must become valuable people. To be so, they need to create value – this will be a cook book offered for each member of the local community.”

## **6. FOCUSING ON GROWTH**

Aim: Explore the Recovery college principle of FOCUSING ON GROWTH by directly experiencing it in the training.

Means/activities done to achieve this:

- activities and training process were set up to focus on both professional and personal level,
- activities and training process were set up to raise questions and create space for reflection, rather than bringing answers.

Feedbacks:

- “I knew earlier but during the training I also lived it that mental barriers are in many cases created by ourselves and it is we who push ourselves within these barriers.”

- “The training made me a bit more free from my own limits of barriers. I do have barriers that are not prescribed by any regulations.”
- “I thought and learned about my personal recovery strategy”
- “The space for reflection after a given module was very helpful.”
- “I became more conscious how I can use these methods during my own work.”
- “I saw it with my own eyes how creative thinking can overcome gaps that words can probably not or just during a much-much longer time.”
- “I feel that I have become much more tolerant.”
- “I have learnt a lot about myself during the 3 days, both at the personal and the professional level. One of the most important experiences was connected to the presentation on day 1: acceptance and compassion for myself, the feeling that I don’t always have to be perfect. I managed to get rid of some pieces of my self-criticism during these days.”
- “It also seems to me that our experiences of working with the community at WCK could be very inspiring for others.”

## People to people. A team that invites community members to co-produce

It’s vital to bear the principle of co-production in mind from the very first steps. Usually - with the best intentions – a service or an activity is prepared and set up completely by “us – professionals” and the community is invited to join it, when it’s ready. Leaving no space for co-production leads to work FOR the community, instead of working WITH the community.

A simple (yet enormously difficult to execute) advice would be – be patient and keep your hands in pockets and keep, until the team is ready.

### Who makes up the recovery college team?

Texts on team functioning usually provide a kind of competence and hierarchical scheme. When considering whether the functioning of the recovery college team and the competencies of the individual positions could be expressed in this way, it turned out to be a tough nut to crack.

Suppose we want to adhere to the principle of co-creation. In that case, the idea of hierarchical representation in the sense of "superior – subordinate – control of tasks" is out of place. On the contrary, it is a group work of all team members, which is subject to majority consensus and responsibility, and authority can be used by those who decide to use it.

On the other hand, it must be openly acknowledged that any institution can hardly function without a definition of authority, responsibilities, and workload. Therefore, even in the context of a recovery college team, each team member has an irreplaceable and valuable position with a clear and understandable assignment of what they are expected to do and what authority and responsibilities they have. The communication of individual team members and their sense of belonging creates an atmosphere of recognition, listening, complementarity, support, and respect, where the co-creation principle is applied. Team members know each other's strengths, which also contributes to this atmosphere, and the cooperation creates a safe environment for everyone to seek help.

The team composition and the workload of its members depend on the range of activities the recovery college offers to students.

A recovery college needs someone to coordinate its portfolio and development and take care of the team and the students. Those who deal with PR, marketing and financial matters also belong to the necessary human resources. A recovery college thus needs people who provide the essential communication and background so that a quality portfolio can be offered to students and other team members can work and get paid. Given the scope of the portfolio, we can use school terminology to refer to individual departments as a "staff room", "study department", "headmaster's office", and "secretariat". Each of these departments can then be staffed by more than one person, or one person can work in more than one department.

We know from experience that the position of a professional guarantor plays a vital role in the functioning of the recovery college. The professional guarantor supervises its activities and provides consulting support to both the core team members and lecturers.

The teaching team composed of lecturers by experience and lecturers with other expertise is naturally essential. In implementing activities, both lecturers have the same responsibility and authority. The substitutability of teaching team members seems vital in recovery colleges. In the literature on the effectiveness of recovery college activities (e.g. Meddings, 2014), co-production is a key principle. The courses taught by an expert by experience (service user) and an expert (professional) are suitable for fulfilling this principle. The term "expert by experience" well documents the complexity of this role. The expert does not spontaneously tell his story. The story must be based on very well-processed experience and applied to relevant topics. The goal of sharing experience, in this case, is not uncontrolled "opening up" but achieving an educational effect.

However, the role of experts by experience is not just about sharing their experience. They participate in the professional interpretation of the topic. For this purpose, they must also regularly study and integrate innovations into teaching.

Using volunteers or trainee students from related fields is also important in recovery colleges. These people can, especially in situations where regular employees have reduced capacity, significantly help with the college operation.

It is also crucial to have sufficient administrative background (students or volunteers can help) if we want the recovery college to be available on the phone, organize and provide courses, send leaflets to students, be active in reaching new students, prepare course schedules, communicate with lecturers, evaluate feedback from students, etc. A range of activities is not visible at first glance, but they are essential for the college's good functioning and successful communication with students. All college staff should know the basic principles of recovery college in communicating with students. It is advisable that there is always someone at college who answers the phone or e-mail and that communication with students is always clear and accurate on the part of all staff. We want to prevent a situation of a student receiving, for example, wrong information about the time of the course. As a result, the student might stop attending recovery college, even if the course was elaborated carefully to the smallest detail.

### **Professional guarantor**

The professional guarantor of the recovery college should be a guarantee that the recovery college fulfils its principles and provides quality courses and facilities for students and the team. The guarantor's task is to monitor developments in recovery colleges worldwide, bring new initiatives and promote a creative atmosphere. The guarantor participates in creating new courses, updating the existing ones and evaluating the quality of recovery college. Together with other team members, he prepares presentations for the recovery college. He is in charge of professional argumentation when

preparing projects. He is responsible for the concept of development and further direction of the college and provides team consulting support.

### **Coordinator**

The main task of the coordinator, who is a kind of team leader, is to create information, theoretical and value background for all members of the recovery college team concerning its goals and possibly also the objectives of the project from which the recovery college is funded.

The coordinator ensures that everything in the recovery college works well while adhering to the basic ideas and principles of the recovery college. He cooperates with all other college employees and, together with them, forms a team of which he is a part and takes care of it. Together with the professional guarantor, he prepares literature searches on the topic of the recovery college, compiles a portfolio of courses and methodically leads the preparation of new courses. He is responsible for the final form of the lecturer's manuals for the courses and assigns professional examinations of newly created courses. He leads the teaching team from the organizational point of view (timetable, ensuring alternation if necessary, etc.) and supports and further develops it from the professional point of view.

The coordinator is in close contact with the study counsellor concerning incorporating the recovery college students' feedback, wishes, needs, and goals into its activities. He coordinates PR and financial management of the recovery college. In a smaller team, he can be in charge of these activities on his own.

The coordinator may also be in charge of communication with foreign partners and experience exchange with other recovery colleges and other services in mental health care or adult education.

Suppose the recovery college is funded by a project, grant, etc. He is then also responsible for the final form of all outputs, meeting the project objectives and indicators.

### **Study advisor**

The study advisor is a guide for students. He is the person who is the most in contact with students of the entire recovery college team.

He compiles an individual educational plan with them based on what students want/need to learn. He fills out an application to study with them based on their educational plan. He deals with students' feedback on their studies and how their studies help them on their journey of recovery. This position could be described as a "recovery coach". In our experience, this role is challenging. The study advisor is expected to provide a welcoming reception for all but, at the same time, maintain the boundaries of the study programme. Students may have a number of needs that the study advisor cannot meet. A study advisor or advisors should be supported by other team members and be able to rest and possibly request individual supervision.

The study advisor also communicates with students about the dates of courses and sends them invitations to courses and other extracurricular activities.

### **Experts by experience**

Experts by experience are indispensable for recovery colleges. Experts by experience should be involved in most of the college's activities. That is, not only to teach but together with lecturers of other expertise to prepare courses and bring new topics. It's suitable for experts by experience to be good storytellers, but that's not all. The expert by experience must be familiar with the topics of the

training programme and the portfolio of the whole recovery college, should be a partner to the lecturer with different expertise and have good teaching skills, acquired in a course if possible.

### **Lecturer with other expertise**

In addition to lecturers with their own experience with mental health problems, the college also employs mental health professionals or lecturers with other expertise. They are often experts with professional experience in the helping sphere: psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, occupational therapists, and nurses. But the courses in recovery colleges can be very varied, and there are also specialists from other fields – photographers, IT specialists, and pastors. Lecturers with other expertise should be interested in the recovery college. As we mentioned above, they should be willing to participate in co-creation. Teaching skills are, of course, necessary for them as they are for experts by experience. Like an expert by experience, a lecturer with other expertise can share his own experience. In the recovery college, it is good when boundaries are slightly blurred, experts by experience improve in professional topics, and lecturers with other expertise talk more about themselves.

#### Experts by experience - Working with a personal story

A vital tool in the expert by experience's work is his personal story. Experts by experience have this in common with consultants by experience. It's not good to consider working with a story a routine. The expert by experience adapts what he shares from his life to the topic, audience and own feelings in a particular situation. It is usual for the narrative to change over time, depending on how the expert by experience himself understands his story. In the beginning, two things are essential: preparation and courage. The rest will come in time. It is advisable to have enough time and support to prepare the story. Support can be obtained in courses for consultants by experience or experts by experience.

The expert by experience should know his story, understand it and use it consciously. He usually applies parts of the story relevant to the topic. He seldom tells his entire story. Don't focus too much on the symptoms and the problems. They are less important than what you did and achieved.

### **We want to make a few basic recommendations for experts by experience:**

- Focus on overcoming obstacles and recovery rather than problems and diagnosis.
- Be as open as you can. But not more than you want. No one can force you to return to the traumatic moments of your life.
- It's okay to say that you just don't want to talk about something (now).
- When telling your story, make yourself its hero. Focus on what you had to do to get out of the worst, grow, and renew your strength.
- Talk about who and what has helped you and is helping you recover. At the same time, it is not ideal to do direct advertising to specific people and organizations.
- Speak about other people's experiences with mental health problems (but do not name the people).
- Leave enough time for questions. You are telling your story to people who have their own experiences. Be prepared to speak with them about them. Be ready to change from speakers to listeners and learn from each other.

- Don't be ashamed of your failures, even if it's hard to talk about them. It often adds depth and authenticity to your storytelling and encourages your listeners to speak about their experiences and overcome difficulties.
- Don't blame anybody even if you have suffered injustice. Blaming specific people and institutions creates an atmosphere of confrontation and puts you in the role of a victim.
- Do not give advice. The story of each recovery is unique. What has helped you may not be the way for others. Take an interest in how other people think about themselves and their recovery.

An expert by experience can be a person who has a lived experience of recovering from mental health problems and is willing to share this experience. He should have the ability to work with information and convey that information. The specific diagnostic scope of the problems from which he is recovering is not decisive for the work of an expert by experience. However, he must be able to identify with the code of ethics of the recovery college lecturer and adhere to it in his professional practice.

#### Code of ethics of Recovery College lecturer

The Code was created in 2013 for the profession of expert by experience. At the Centre for Mental Health Care Development, we started implementing the "Involvement of Care Users in Education in Mental Health Care" project. One of the project's goals was to select and prepare ten colleagues to become experts by experience. During the preparation, we were thinking about framing this profession in terms of its values and ethical requirements.

When we founded the Recovery College in 2017, it turned out that the value and ethical framework is still valid and essential to us even after years. Therefore, we transferred this code to the conditions of the Recovery College for all lecturers. After all, this framework is applied by other workers too.

- Approach students with respect and expect respect from them.
- Provide verified information, and refer to its sources (literature, professional literature, own or other people's testimonies, media reports, etc.).
- Bring your own experience as an essential part of teaching, linking your experience with other available information.
- Be restrained in making general judgments and convictions (everyone, always, etc.), strive for balance (objectivity) in teaching, and bring positive examples – good practice and positive experiences.
- Be specific.
- Strive for improvement, recovery, and development.
- Use self-reflection: is what I say beneficial for students?
- Be honest and kind.
- Strive to break down stereotypes by bringing important information.
- Do not tell students what to do. Leave it up to them to profile their attitudes, to take their positions.
- Students have a right to know that even bad things sometimes happen in the mental health care system. They also have the right to know that good, beneficial things happen.

#### How does the team work in Recovery College?

We have described the various functional parts of the recovery college team: the headmaster, the secretariat, the staff room and the study department. A large recovery college can have dozens of

employees. However, in our conditions, it is more likely that a few people will need to work together as much as possible.

Above all, the recovery college should be a team. It should be made up of people with a common goal, a condition for success. It is suitable for the recovery college team to meet regularly and discuss what is going on, where the problems are, and how to develop the recovery college further.

The regular meetings of the executive team, consisting of the coordinator, the study advisor, and the project guarantor – i.e. the headmaster's office and the study department – should take place approximately once a week. Meetings of all lecturers – i.e. the staff room – are needed less often, but at least always at the beginning and end of the semester – four times a year.

The willingness to teach together in pairs and excitement about how the recovery college works are crucial for selecting the lecturing team members. Lecturers with other expertise are usually chosen according to course topics and other college portfolio activities. The specificity of hiring new experts by experience is the principle of opportunity. In the Prague Recovery College, it has become common for former students to become new colleagues in the team.

How do experts by experience think and talk about the recovery college team?

**Barbora Vráželová**

"In my opinion, the most important thing for the functioning of the recovery college team is the ability to negotiate; willingness to think about courses so that they are set up to support the recovery process or to meet demand; effort and desire to support each other; willingness to learn from each other and listen to each other; leaving enough time to offer help if someone on the team is weak.

I especially appreciate the lecturers' professional development, which in my opinion, is at a high level in Prague College in terms of recovery support, mental health problems understanding, and respect for individual people and their needs. At the same time, I appreciate openness and a helping hand with keeping healthy boundaries, diligence and apparent interest in students. "

**Lenka Flášarová**

"The possibility, ability to rely on another lecturer, if necessary (I'm not completely alone), friendship ...."

**Magda Dosbabová**

"The team I worked in has always been important to me. At Recovery College, I am surrounded by co-workers with a kind approach to both the students and me. It is crucial that we all feel accepted here and form a cooperating team. Thanks to an individual approach to me (even with my problems and the resulting limitations), I can participate in meaningful projects and receive feedback from people I helped. It's a rewarding job. The performance level is tailored to my current capabilities.

I have previous study and work experience from a very performance-intensive environment. In recovery college, I have learned to work with my current energy and realize my limits. "



## How do we assemble a team to be in co-production from the start?

The space for co-production can be created mainly by simply not filling it. Usually, there are many decisions to be made and many tasks to be done, from the very start of the project. Many of them must be done inevitably, but many of them can wait.

Of course the logo of your project has to be created and of course you have so many creative ideas! Great! But step back, put your hands in your pockets and wait until the team is complete and create it together.

Are you searching for the place where your recovery college courses will take place? Do you already have an idea? Great! But step back, find a temporary place to start meeting with your team and find a place together.

Leaving space for co-production pays back. Empowering your team members, building on their talents and strengths and supporting their involvement will help you create a dream-team.

## Dragon Dreaming. How to keep co-production alive

*"Dragon dreaming is for everyone who doesn't give up on their dreams and has the courage to dance with their dragons!"*

We offer you another inspiration that appeals to us at Recovery College.

Dragon dreaming is a sophisticated project management method based on participation and co-production. It offers a comprehensive system for planning and delivering projects in a way that maintains the creative energy of everyone involved throughout the process. This includes community members.

## Education as a way to support communities

There are many ways to support communities. From practical and material help, to creating pleasant meeting places where people can spend their free time in an interesting way, to education.

In this chapter, we offer a description of how we think about education and what our experience suggests it should look like. We see engaging experts by experience as key.

## How do experts by experience think and talk about the courses?

### **Magda Dosbabová**

*"The topics of the courses are diverse and tailored to the students. Students create an environment full of trust during the individual courses. Personal issues are often opened here and safely shared in an understanding and mutual respect. Students feel accepted and fully involved. Besides people with mental health problems, their loved ones, most often family members, are also enriched with knowledge and experience.*

*We strengthen students' self-confidence and support them on their path to recovery through mutual sharing. The positive effect also works for us, the lecturers.*

*My favourite course is Photo Story. Photography accompanies my life, and it is the easiest way to express my emotions. After taking the course, students appreciated this form of expression and their*

*progress in creating photos with a mobile phone. They started to view their lives from a different angle thanks to their work on the photo story. "*

### **Barbora Vráželová**

*"For me, creating courses is a great experience. Not only can I work with a mental health professional who supports my healthy relationship experience, but I also develop my recovery, abilities and skills. I also gain new information and develop my personality to support and help others. Mastering course creation gives me confidence. I feel equal in society, and I have something to offer. Creating courses is, for me, a way to recover from mental health problems. I don't think I would find this opportunity anywhere else in the Czech Republic. Every course is close to me because it helps promote recovery.*

*The most important thing for me is that I can count on my fellow lecturer not to leave me alone. The same is true for the whole recovery college, its management and its students.*

*The most significant value for me is that we have a recovery college in the Czech Republic because people with mental health problems have the opportunity to work on their recovery. When I started to have problems, no one told me about recovery. My life changed 100% only when I found out about recovery. That's why the very existence of the recovery college is of the most outstanding value to me.*  
"

## Teaching

**You have certainly experienced some education yourself, whether in a course, workshop or within the school system. Do you remember how the lesson you enjoyed was designed? What made it excellent? What do you think worked well in teaching? How did the teachers behave? Why do you remember this lesson?**

Your answers to these questions can indeed be reached by thinking about how teaching in a recovery college should be done. But what makes it specific is the involvement of experts by experience. For the recovery college, the key format is teaching in pairs, where at least one of the lecturers is always an expert by experience.

## Time and environment

We have already mentioned the location and time in the chapter on principles.

### **Location/environment:**

- accessible location – it helps when students have information on how to get to the place of teaching (practical information – there is a bell with the sign "xxx" on the front door, etc.), including good accessibility by transport, non-stigmatizing dignified designation, accessibility by phone, email, etc.;
- visible room designation;
- if possible, offer at least water, tea, and coffee. The recovery college is also an excellent place to support self-help, so we can develop the principle that "everyone will contribute what they can" and, in some activities, leave space for students to co-create the environment (but it is not necessary, this possibility is likely to be used by colleges that are more low-threshold and self-help);
- equipment - flipchart, data projector, laptop;
- welcoming! (e.g. have a nice foyer, the opportunity to sit and meet other students, have someone who welcomes you, shows you around, offers drinks, shows toilets, encourages you to feel "at home", and provides the necessary additional information).

**Time:**

- schedule, distribution of lessons into semesters – publication on the web, Facebook, leaflets, etc. It is beneficial to publish this information for a given semester well in advance and then to share the information repeatedly before the courses;
- six-lesson courses should start at 10 am;
- shorter courses should start in the afternoon;
- for the wellbeing of lecturers and students, it is necessary to think about regular and sufficiently long breaks between lessons;
- for online courses, working with time is a bit different; frequent breaks are required, and the total duration of the course should be shorter than in full-time form.

## Course guidance - lecturing skills (online and in-person)

**INTRODUCTION**

SAY WHAT IT WILL BE ABOUT AND HOW THE COURSE WILL BE ORGANIZED

GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER

**MAIN PART**

TAKE STUDENTS THROUGH THE TOPIC USING THE LECTURER'S TOOLS FOR SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

MAKE THE COURSE WELL-ARRANGED FOR STUDENTS – SO THAT THEY ALWAYS KNOW

WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN, AND WHAT YOU, AS LECTURERS, WANT TO ACHIEVE

**CONCLUSION**

SAY WHAT IT WAS ABOUT

END THE COURSE TOGETHER

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

## How to create a safe atmosphere during the course?

Courses and other activities of the recovery college are not therapy or rehabilitation. At the same time, they have the potential to improve students' wellbeing and thus change their lives, especially by creating a space for sharing life stories. Probably everyone has the experience that being willing to share their story requires an environment that is something specific. That specificity is safety. In our thinking, creating a safe atmosphere means several things.

Respect and focus on strengths. In teaching practice, these things mean that we approach students from the point of view of our belief (and lived experience) that everyone is good at something, knows something, and has accomplished something. We want to talk about these things and think about how they could be developed. We are interested in students' stories in the context of the presented topic.

We believe that recovery is possible, and we want to share that belief. We want to convey to our students that there is hope for living an everyday life even with the limits that mental health problems can bring.

A critical component that can create a safe atmosphere is an interest in what students think and how they relate to the topic - for example, through a moderated discussion. "*What do you think of what*

*we're talking about? Do you have experience with that? What did you do? "* It is essential to believe and create space for different perspectives, experiences, and opinions to be heard. The feeling of safety is strengthened because every idea is welcome, not evaluated, devalued or rejected. On the contrary, there is an interest in where the belief comes from and its significance for the given person.

The agreement made between lecturers and students at the beginning of the course contributes to the safe atmosphere. This agreement includes points that take the form of specific rules for teaching. For example, we do not talk over each other; we will handle the call outside the classroom if we need to pick up the phone; speaking is a choice, not an obligation, etc.

Being a lecturer in a recovery college also requires a certain courage and readiness to be in touch with the students on your own, not to be afraid to stand out and share something about yourself. Not only do we show that we are serious about forming a partnership and mutual learning, but we also create a more open space for others to find the courage to talk about otherwise difficult things.

### Completion of the course

Do you also have the experience that when you try and succeed in achieving something, the joy is greater than if success just fell into your lap?

This experience is also reflected in how we think about recovery college. Each course has set rules for its successful completion. However, they are not demanding at all. It is about getting involved in hands-on exercises or staying during the lessons. Students then receive a certificate of successful completion of the course and a sticker that they can stick to the course in their study record book.

The study record book is a booklet that contains all the courses from the recovery college's portfolio. For each course, its content is briefly listed, and practical instructions and recommendations are added, to which students can return even after the course. The book can also be used as a material for self-study and self-coaching. For each course in the book, there is a place for a sticker that students will receive after completing the course. We have good experience with the study record book, as it gives a greater value to the acquired knowledge and completed courses. At the same time, it is proof for the students that they worked on themselves, and they can return to it repeatedly.

## Students

### Who is a student of a recovery college

Students are an integral part of every school. It is no different at the recovery college. It should be open and accessible to anyone who, for whatever reason, addresses the topic of the courses offered. The students of the Prague Recovery College are mainly people with mental health problems, their loved ones and everyone who wants to help people with mental health problems and understand them more.

Consultants by experience<sup>3</sup> and those interested in working in this position use recovery college courses as part of their professional training.

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<sup>3</sup> The term "consultant by experience" means someone the target population can identify with. A worker by experience is a person who has been through or is still going through specific living conditions and uses his experience to support other people in a similar situation (Repper & Carter in Ďásková, 2018, p. 15).

## How to reach students

It is necessary to have prepared materials (leaflets, brochures in printed and online versions) to inform students about the college's courses. The materials will provide answers to basic questions:

What is a recovery college? What courses does the recovery college offer, and who teaches them? How can I benefit from attending a recovery college course? Where can I find a recovery college, and how do I get there? Who can I contact if necessary? What are the conditions of attendance and payment?

We recommend writing these promotional materials in simple, engaging language, short sentences, without foreign words and technical terms, so that they are understandable to everyone. The graphics of the leaflet should also be simple, underline the comprehensibility of the content and generally have a positive effect on the reader. It is ideal to accompany the information with statements by students who can describe, for example, what completing the courses has brought them based on their experience.

The promotional material should contain contact details, including telephone. Besides the address where the courses occur, it is advisable to supplement the materials with a map and directions on how the students will get to your recovery college.

Promotional materials can be placed on websites, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or other social media, depending on which group of people we want to reach. We can also distribute the materials to mental health care workers (social and health services), self-help groups, and patient organizations. When promoting a recovery college, it's good to think about where potential students might be and try to reach those places. In the case of the Prague Recovery College, these can be, for example, services for homeless people, people with addictions, etc. It is also appropriate to establish cooperation with local communities. Information about the recovery college can be disseminated orally among the target group and address to those who are not care recipients. Other places for promotion and cooperation are educational institutions, universities, and services in public spaces (such as libraries, offices, galleries, community centres, DDM, etc.)

Personal contacts and meetings work well for promotion. Therefore, it is good not to limit promotion only to publishing and sending materials but also to go out into the field. The activities of the recovery college can be presented to the staff of the mental health services in person at a short personal meeting, or a demonstration course can be organized for the clients of these services directly at the

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The job of workers by experience is support, defined as "a system of offering and receiving help based on respect, shared responsibility and mutual understanding of what helps" (Mead, Hilton & Curtis in Ďásková, p. 18). Connection with someone who has lived or still lives with similar problems can be a vital aspect of support for someone struggling with their situation (Sunderland & Mishkin in Ďásková, 2018, p. 18).

The results of many studies (e.g. Moran et al., Sunderland & Mishkin in Ďásková, 2018, p. 18) show that this authenticity helps to create a positive shift in the attitude of the person with current difficulties and leads to a greater sense of empathy and connection with the worker by experience, than in a typical client-professional relationship.

Consultants by experience are employees of organizations providing services to people with mental health problems. They are subject to similar qualification requirements as social workers are. In addition to individualized client support, they also convey the perspective of service users to other team members. Thanks to the projects of the Centre for the Development of Mental Health Care (Foitová et al. ; Paleček & Řičan in Ďásková, 2018, p. 21), these workers are included in the psychiatric care system.

place of the given service. It is ideal to use the students themselves, who can attend the meetings with you and pass on their own experience with the benefits of recovery college courses.

If you start closer cooperation with the services, they can help you publish information about your recovery college's activities on their social networks or websites and distribute information and promotional materials to their clients. Ideally, they can also offer to bring them to the courses if needed.

However, the biggest attraction for new students is the positive personal experience with the recovery college, which the students themselves pass on to other potential attendants.

### What are the possible barriers to student involvement in a recovery college?

The alleviation of barriers preventing students from participating in recovery college activities is a concern for the recovery college staff. Their task is to create conditions for courses and other activities so that the college is accessible to everyone and the conditions are the same for all students. Every recovery college has to deal with this challenge on its own. Finding appropriate solutions to remove or minimize external barriers to student access to courses is necessary. It is essential to focus on this, to keep this in mind and to ensure that all the staff of the recovery college think this way and that this attitude is firmly anchored in the college's strategy from the very beginning.

In general, people with mental health problems can have various difficulties that prevent them from attending courses. College staff need to be aware of what challenges their students face and what can be an obstacle to them. The staff need to focus on supporting them and providing them with a more accommodating approach.

Obstacles can be of various kinds: fear of the new and unknown, social anxiety, fear of having to speak in public, being in a closed room with others, the problem of getting to a particular place at a specific time, someone can not tolerate a long session, someone may be deaf or have another physical problem or disability, there may be a temporary worsening of mental health problems in general, or do not have an internet connection, if it is needed, for example, for online teaching, etc.

Below you will find suggestions for removing the obstacles we have identified from our experience. However, this is not an exhaustive list, you will probably encounter other obstacles, but you will undoubtedly find a way to remove them.

We suggest that the study advisor fills in the study application individually with each new student.

#### Poor venue accessibility

Recovery college services must be accessible. It is good to think about this from the very beginning. Physical places will never be perfect, but we need to focus on making them accessible to all students (locally, physically and psychologically). If that is not the case, let's not use them. It is desirable to bring the courses close to the community – i.e., hold them in a place that the students know and are used to. For example, on a university campus or in a neighbourhood where people work and spend their free time, rather than in the suburbs or hospitals.

We also think that the course venue should be easily accessible in terms of transport – for example, close to a public transport stop. Before the first visit, the students should know how to get to the recovery college. They should have a detailed description of the journey, including a map. It is important to keep in mind that not everyone has a smartphone, not everyone can use it, not everyone

has paid data, and not everyone likes to use it. For this reason, we recommend sending students a printed map by post. Even such a trifle can help a student get to college. If the student is still unsure, the college staff can pick him up at a public transport stop and accompany him to the course venue.

Sometimes, despite all the efforts of the recovery college staff, the students still fear that they will get lost, have a worse orientation in space, or experience anxiety or panic. In this case, it is advisable to offer students in advance that they can arrive at the recovery college with a relative or another close person or an employee of the mental health service that the student is attending. Sometimes we can try to find another student to accompany him so that they can support each other.

It is important to keep reminding students of the benefits of attending recovery college and encourage them to come to the courses.

The interior of the venue should be pleasant. It should not look like an office or surgery. Small things can also help, such as a flower in the hallway, pictures, soft cushions on the chairs, etc. But the most important thing is that the student feels safe in the place. A recovery college should provide self-study space, library, PCs, etc., if at least possible. Sometimes it is recommended to have a so-called "welcome person", who will welcome all incoming students, offer them coffee, and tea, guide them through the place and give basic information about the functioning of the college.

#### Pay attention to the form of courses

It is essential to choose suitable course topics. Courses can focus on different areas to be attractive to different groups of students: gaining information and knowledge, experience, self-knowledge and self-development, and gaining strength and energy. The topic itself can motivate many to arrive at recovery college. In the beginning, it is recommended to use simple topics that will be easy for students to understand. After understanding the concept of recovery, it is possible to embark on more complex topics. It is good to involve the students themselves in considering the topics of the courses. Ask them what they are interested in and what topics they would welcome in the offer of new courses. In addition, topics can also be suggested by lecturers, service staff or mental health professionals, etc. At the same time, we should keep in mind that we do not want to turn a recovery college into a hospital or day centre or offer existing psychoeducation programmes. All activities should still resonate with the main principles of recovery college, which we mentioned in the introduction.

It is also important to think about the right length of courses. Shorter courses (4-6 hours) with frequent breaks are ideal. It is advisable to arrange additional breaks with students during the course if necessary. However, it is possible to use other time formats based on the needs of students.

The time availability of courses for various target groups also plays a vital role in attending courses. If possible, it is advisable to prepare more time variants of the course so that a broader target group can attend the course. Some students work or study, and some find it difficult to get up early, while others like to use the morning hours for education. For example, attendance increased significantly in some courses when the format was changed to two-hour workshops in the evening.

#### Pay attention and care to the language you use

All recovery college staff must ensure that the language they use to communicate with students, whether orally or in writing, is accessible and understandable. The student must understand, for example, course descriptions, leaflets or brochures. The language must be clear and straightforward, without foreign words, to make the messages understandable. At the same time, it should be in line

with the principles of the recovery college, meaning that we use strength-oriented language, recovery, non-judgemental receptive language, and avoid confrontations or moralizing messages.

### Be careful with technologies

Some students are not sufficiently technologically equipped – with a device (computer, laptop, smartphone), a quality internet connection or knowledge and skills to handle the device, or they are only afraid of technologies. This can lead to the "digital exclusion" of some students.

It was especially evident during anti-epidemic measures in various forms of lockdowns. The availability and knowledge of these technologies are becoming an essential prerequisite for work and building social contacts, education, and taking advantage of other opportunities in the community. For this reason, it is appropriate to include in the college's portfolio of courses an offer focusing on the basics of using a computer, communication tools, using e-mail or searching the Internet, and the risks involved.

When using the course's online version, it is necessary to instruct the participants on how to join the course and give enough space to fine-tune the technique (connection, microphone, video) before starting. It is advisable to test the connection with the assistance of a recovery college employee before the start of the course. It is always necessary to provide students with a telephone contact to a person who will help them in case of connection difficulties.

It is necessary to keep in mind that some students do not have the technologies or do not want to work with them even during the regular operation of the college. Personal meetings or telephone contact are always more effective than e-mail or other forms of online communication. In addition to e-mail, the offer of courses should also be sent to students in printed form by post.

### Fees

A recovery college should be as low-threshold as possible, which also applies to its affordability. Each recovery college approaches this topic differently, according to the possibilities of financing its activities. Some colleges offer courses completely free of charge. Others are symbolically charged, either for all or only for those students who are not members of the organization that sets up the recovery college. Using a symbolic fee as an incentive to attend a course the student has enrolled in is not highly recommended. It is more appropriate to motivate students by repeatedly explaining the benefits of attending the course.

### Communication with students

Good communication is key to getting students engaged in recovery college activities. If the financial situation allows, it is recommended to have staff in charge of communication with the students. Ideally, there should be one person – a mentor, guide or study advisor who will be available to students at any time – by e-mail, telephone or in person.

Students should be aware that they can call the recovery college and that the phone will be picked up by someone they can ask about anything related to the college. Students need to have sufficient space to ask questions and get answers. It is a simple but effective strategy. Telephone and, above all, personal contact simplifies the recruitment of new students and allows each to be approached individually. Suppose this is the first contact, over the telephone or in person. Then it is advisable to



re-explain the concept of recovery college to the student, introduce the course portfolio in simple language without foreign words, and give the student course information in paper form to read at home. Furthermore, it is appropriate to explain to the student how the topics of the courses are related to his recovery and introduce him to the course format - e.g. 6 hours, frequent breaks, study materials to take home, etc. The student should be allowed to talk about his expectations so that the staff can help him choose suitable courses.

It is good to create a friendly and safe atmosphere during a personal interview and offer the student coffee, water, tea, and snacks. The student should feel that the staff are interested in his person, needs and development. A more personal relationship may be established if the student agrees to be addressed by his first name.

Suppose it is impossible to arrange a personal meeting directly on the college premises. In that case, the staff should adapt to the student's needs and meet him elsewhere or offer him that they can accompany him to the recovery college and pick him up at the public transport stop, etc.

If you want students to continue attending recovery college courses, you should maintain contact with them. Ask students how they want to be informed about new events (e-mail, telephone, SMS, leaflet sent by post, etc.) to choose the way that the students prefer. Some regularly follow the college's Facebook, others welcome a printed invitation sent by mail. Some have a problem forgetting and will appreciate receiving a reminder SMS about the upcoming course date. Others will prefer a call or talk in person.

## How did we work during the Covid-19 pandemic?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we at the Prague Recovery College observed the social climate and the impact of restrictive measures against the virus spread and the overall situation development, including the presence of this topic in the media, on people's lives. The situation was complicated and also affected the recovery college team. We had to decide how to proceed, above all, to support our students in making their lives better. And so, in Prague Recovery College, online courses were created, and other activities such as creative workshops, workshops and seminars, which had initially been designed for meeting people, were transferred to the online environment.

We have to admit that we do not know if we have succeeded yet.

First, we offered students an online course, **Recovery as Part of Everyday Life**. We wanted to encourage students to find everyday helpers - their skills, strengths, and abilities to cope with different situations. The course's practical part included an interview on "*How do my loved ones see me*", which was based on several questions such as: "*Which of my personality traits do you appreciate?*", "*Please write a list of what you know I can do and have a talent for,*" "*Please write a list of what I can be proud of*", etc. So we encouraged students not to stay locked up at home but to take advantage of the opportunities available to keep in touch with other people.

Something unexpected happened. The course was attended by students who had already been in contact with the recovery college, and we received positive feedback. But there were also a lot of new students who rated the course as beneficial. They also mentioned that they knew about the college of recovery, but at the same time, they were reluctant to come to the full-time course.

We were encouraged by this feedback, so we expanded our range of online courses and activities. The interest was unprecedented. Therefore, we have decided to take advantage of this opportunity, and

we want to include the offer of online activities as a standard part of the recovery college's portfolio. The advantage of online courses is that they are available whenever a topic becomes relevant to a person. It is also safer for some people to start working with topics and find out what the recovery college offers. In addition, they can be an excellent support for the training of social workers, as they focus on self-experience and can complement the traditional form of full-time teaching.

### Form of online courses

We found plenty of tools for online teaching, and there are certainly plenty of ways to design the courses. Those who have school children who spent almost the entire school year at home in front of the monitor because of COVID-19 can undoubtedly get a more concrete idea. In the following lines, we will share our experience with you. We believe that it can be an inspiration for you in which direction you can go.

Due to the technical knowledge and skills of the lecturing team, we chose Google Forms for self-study and Zoom for online student meetings. Other tools which could be used include Skype, MS Teams, Google Classroom, Webex, etc.

### **We have chosen the following formats for the online recovery college activities:**

- a combination of self-study and meetings with lecturers online;
- self-study;
- six-hour or three-hour meetings on the Zoom platform;
- regular two- to three-hour meetings at Zoom.

### **How should online courses and activities be prepared?**

#### Self-study - Google Forms tool

- The activities should keep the students entertained, thus keeping their attention. You can quickly tell if it works: send a link to the course to someone who was not involved in the preparation, asking them to complete it;
- use as many illustrative images and videos as possible;
- texts should be relatively shorter;
- use the lecturers' experience with the teaching topic;
- practical exercises (for students to take something from the course) must have a clear assignment;
- the role of the narrator is essential – the individual parts of the course should be interconnected in the sense of clarifying = what we have learned and what awaits us in the following blocks. This connection should encourage students to move on.

#### Online meetings with lecturers

- a moderated discussion on the topic of the course;
- based primarily on what was included in self-study materials;
- the opportunity to ask lecturers questions;
- sharing with others;
- course feedback;
- the meeting lasts 2-3 hours, breaks as needed and agreed with students;
- request for cameras to be on, microphones off;
- we don't talk over each other;

- the lecturers should encourage the participants by name to give comments, but they shouldn't be pushy;
- students receive information about how the meeting will be arranged (including technical requirements) in advance by e-mail;
- to maintain the best possible contact with students, we should keep the maximum number of 15 participants + 2 lecturers;
- we use the same teaching tools and skills. The course is the same as the in-person course, BUT:
  - higher demands on the structure and clarity of the course, preparation, time monitoring, and accuracy of assignments;
  - we use online tools: chat, grouping, voting, etc.;
  - time blocks max. 1.5 hours, a break of at least 20 minutes between them;
  - screen-sharing – presentations, videos, whiteboards – anyone can write.

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