



ISSUE 5 | SPRING 2021

## **A year in lockdown**

Hello and welcome to this edition of Northern Recovery News. We know our students in the past have enjoyed reading our newsletters, and thought this was a good way to update everyone on what has been happening in the College over this past year. We have titled this edition A College in Lockdown.....

Similar to many of our readers, this year has been like no other for the Recovery College. Who would have thought in March 2020 when all our community sessions were suspended that we would still find ourselves in a very similar place, certainly not us! The closure of many of our community venues along with COVID restrictions in relation to numbers meeting, forced us to think differently about our sessions, and how these could be delivered virtually via zoom. All courses were re-evaluated and co-produced (virtually), allowing us to provide a full timetable of courses for the academic year 2020/21. With a move to online courses, both our students and facilitators needed to develop new skills and build confidence in working in this very different way. We have been overwhelmed by all who have engaged and learned alongside us online. Along with our online sessions we worked hard to stay connected with everyone sharing weekly themes, positive affirmations, facilitator videos and more recently our Music Mondays via our Facebook page. We have also marked significant dates such as World Mental Health Day and hoped our students have enjoyed receiving some treats. In this edition we share thoughts from both facilitators describing their experiences in connecting and engaging with the Recovery College and some of the tools they have used in order to promote their own wellness. We have also highlighted the topic of self-care, as this is a central part to everyone's recovery journey. Although self-care is uniquely personal, we will share some themes and common tips on how you may promote self-care within your own life. As we move forward from what has been an extremely challenging year, it is important to remember to do the things that we can to keep ourselves well, to build confidence and develop personal resilience – this includes Self-Care!

Finally we ask everyone, as we slowly move back into more normal times, to remember the recovery principles of hope, opportunity and control. Hope that things are changing, and as restrictions are relaxed we hold on to the hope that we will soon get to do and see all that was important to us before. Throughout this past year we have had the opportunity to step back and focus on what is important to us. This time has provided us with the opportunity to learn lots about ourselves and the world that we live in. And finally control. Although lots of things have seemed very much out of our control for a long time now, we now have the control over how we move forward and the new goals we set.

We continue to miss seeing you all face to face and hope that we will return to some level of normality in the not too distant future!

*Janice, Recovery College Manager*

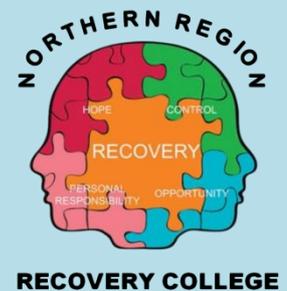
# Recovery College

While this year has been very different for us all, we have still had maintained some positives throughout. In this academic year so far we have:

- Registered 349 students
- Facilitated 31 courses over 127 online sessions
- Added 10 new courses to our library
- Revamped every other course to suit Zoom
- Had a total of 1220 student contacts



## Useful contacts



# Staff & Students Reflections

As much as it has been tough over the past year I have to say that I really can't complain. So many people have lost loved ones that in comparison a bit of inconvenience is little to give out about. Yes I have found it tough but I reckon everyone is in the same boat.

I live alone so there was always the potential for me to feel lonely during the various lockdowns. I was aware of this risk from the beginning so I tried to be proactive in relation to my daily activities to keep me up and motoring. I took up a new hobby of upcycling some furniture. That alongside of doing a bit of decorating kept me focused and distracted. Now that it's coming into spring my attention has turned to my garden and I'm sure that there is a good lot of work needing done there too.

I was a bit of a late starter with the whole facetime/zoom etc. I reckoned that lockdown would be short lived and we'd be back to normal sooner rather than later so I neglected to learn how to use the technology – but it became apparent that the virus was here to stay for a while so those facetimes etc. became really important.

I guess I learnt a lot about myself over the last year. Without the busyness and rushing about from A to B I had proper, quality time to think. I took time to appreciate the small things. Rather than texting friends I wrote them wee letters. I feel I just had the space to 'be' with many responsibilities removed from me just for a time. I now know better than before what my wellness tools are – those things that you can do to help improve how you feel.

Of course I want things to be back to the normal pace of things, but I think that I've learnt that having a bit of quality time off our normal roles and demands, help us to breathe, and refocus.

**Gwen Blackwell, Recovery College Trainer**

## **Bobby, Recovery College Student**

### **How did you find out about and become involved with the Recovery College?**

I was admitted into Holywell for 2 weeks, I found out about the Recovery College through walking to the games room with my nurse. They explained a bit more about the College and I decided that when I was discharged that I was going to get involved and do the courses on offer, due to the pandemic I found out the courses would be delivered via Zoom. I then registered with the college and I haven't looked back since. I am currently doing my second year with the college, you may ask why are you repeating the courses, this is because every time I repeat a course I find out something different that I may not of picked up during the first course, which is incredible as your constantly learning. To me knowledge is key. If you have the knowledge of Mental Health issues you will become stronger on how you deal with daily issues if they arise.

### **What courses did you attend? Which one was the most useful?**

Numerous courses, Understanding stress, Understanding Anxiety, Building Resilience, Assertiveness, 5 ways to Wellbeing and Being Mindful Every day to name a few. The one I found most useful is hard one to choose as they are all extremely important in our day to day lives, but if I had to choose one it would be Anxiety, the reason being is that it's not only me that has it, everyone will experience Anxiety in their lifetime. It's good to talk about it and what's bothering you get it off your chest can help. Deep breathing exercises, close your eyes and relax and just focus on your breathing on the 'here and now', I fall asleep every time I do this exercise which shows to me that it works. Also that most importantly be kind to yourself, acknowledge that ok I am suffering anxiety here what can I do to overcome this feeling and try some of the techniques and see how you feel afterwards. I HIGHLY RECOMMEND THIS.

### **Has the Recovery College supported you over the last year?**

The Recovery College has been an immense help for me and a real inspiration to me, which is why I want to now follow the path and help others in need of help. Everyone in the College is so open and welcoming, not a bad word to say about them. Folks out there whom are struggling give the Recovery College a go, the results will help you, now bear in mind this is not an overnight cure. It takes years but the more you put it into your daily life the more happier you will be.

# **Audrey Montgomery, Peer Recovery Trainer**

## **1. Tell me how the past year has been for you?**

What a year we have just been through... It's so hard to believe the disruptions Covid-19 has brought to all of our lives. March 2020 seems like a distant memory now and at the time I faced some really dark days, but, on reflection I am really proud of the resilience I showed and my ability to bounce back despite the difficulties I was facing. The first lockdown was so tough and I felt the most isolated I've ever been. I was living alone and like everyone else I wasn't allowed to see family and friends due to the strict lockdown conditions. We also were working from home for the first few weeks so I literally had no face to face contact with anyone apart from the cashier at the supermarket when I did my weekly shopping! For someone who is usually quite sociable this was really difficult for me. My mental health took a massive dip. I was feeling really low, crying all the time and extremely anxious. I wasn't getting dressed any day, my diet was poor and I generally didn't care about anything! After 3 – 4 weeks of wallowing I realised that we weren't coming out of lockdown any time soon so I needed to take personal responsibility to get back on track and take charge of my wellness again. I thought back to all of the courses I have co-produced and co-facilitated and forced myself to practice what I preach and I'm so glad I did!

## **2. What coping techniques have you used to manage your mental health over the past year?**

I started using my wellness tools (for those who maybe don't know what a wellness tool is, they are simple, safe, non-invasive things you can do on any given day to promote your mental health and wellbeing.) Some of my wellness tools/self-care methods include walking, reading, watching movies/TV, having long bubble baths, cooking, connecting with friends/family over video calls, phone calls and messages, attending zoom book clubs, quizzes and online exercise classes. All of the online activities haven't been the same as in person but it's definitely been better than nothing and has helped massively with my mental health and wellbeing.

## **3. What's have the positives been when facilitating courses on zoom?**

As a facilitator with the Recovery College, one of the things I love most about my job is being out and about in the Northern Trust area meeting and connecting with all of our students who attend our courses. Last March all of that changed and we were no longer able to facilitate courses in the community. Naively, as a team, we thought we would only be away from the community for a couple of months max! Oh how wrong we were!!!! We had to come up with a plan to reach all of our students and zoom was it! Originally I HATED zoom... it felt so unnatural and it was difficult to have the same amount of interaction that we would have had in the community. After a few weeks we all started to find our way with online ways of working. On reflection of the past year I've realised that zoom has actually been a really positive experience for both students and facilitators. We have been able to reach so many people that pre COVID would maybe not have attended due to work/family commitments etc. Courses are accessible to those who are shielding or to those whose mental health would have meant that attending courses in person would have been too difficult for them to attend in person courses. Our students don't have to wait for a course to be in own locality - no matter where you live you can access all courses. Our zoom courses are shorter which gives us gives us more scope to add in more courses if we have waiting lists. In light of COVID and current restrictions, online zoom sessions have allowed our service to remain functioning over the past year.

## **4. How will you manage your wellness if there are further variants or surges of COVID-19 cases?**

I've had many ups and downs over the past year and I'm sure I will continue to as life still remains quite uncertain, however, I know the importance of self-care and looking after my mental health and wellbeing. Even on my toughest days I will be utilising all of my wellness tools. The possibility of further variants or surges is there, however, life does seem much more hopeful this year compared to last and I'm holding on to the hope of better days to come for us all. We also have hope with the vaccine programme being rolled out to our communities.

## **5. What's the best thing to come out of the past year?**

I've realised the importance of staying connected to people and have found that my connections have been much more meaningful from the beginning of the first lockdown. I've embraced the quieter pace of life by not having places to go or visit – I'm able to take time in the evenings to completely relax guilt free. Most importantly I've realised how precious life is and how quickly it can change and I'm so thankful for all of my blessings.

## **Sarah Jane, Recovery College Student**

### **How did you find out about and become involved with the Recovery College?**

I found out about the Recovery College from my key worker from the Mental Health team. I linked in with them on their Facebook page. I applied for a lot of the courses being run.

### **What courses did you attend? Which one was the most useful?**

The first course I attended was the Personality Disorder course. Since then I have attended a lot of courses including: Reading for Wellness, Stress, Anxiety, & Building Resilience to name a few.

### **Has the Recovery College supported you over the last year?**

Yes! Absolutely!

I find the courses encouraging. In the space of an hour you can get some hints and tips. It also helps with loneliness.

I have recommended it to others in the past and will do in the future.

## **Paul McCarroll, Peer Recovery Trainer**

### **1) How has your role changed within the last year?**

Pre-COVID, the recovery college delivered courses within local communities. This is something that as a trainer I really enjoyed, as I could connect face to face with our students and build relationships. This changed completely as we then moved to delivering courses via Zoom, and interaction with students was reduced and via a computer screen..

### **2) What have been the difficulties associated with this new/different way of working?**

Initially, it was challenging moving from working with students face to face in a community setting to working with students virtually, with less interaction. It has taken a bit of time to get confident in using Zoom; to being on camera, to making sure the technology is working well, the lighting is good and that the presentation are easy for the students to see.

### **3) What have been the positives of working this new/different way?**

I believe that I am a lot more confident and competent in using the technology we need for our online sessions, so for me a positive was developing these skills for online delivery. We have been able to reach new students online, students who may not have been able to attend courses in the community. Another positive has been receiving all the lovely feedback from students and knowing that we are all offering support to each other through this difficult time.

### **4) What personal lessons have you learned throughout this past year?**

It has undoubtedly been a challenging year of us all; however I feel that there have been some personal lessons I have learned. One example of this is adapting to changes in being social. I realised being social and being with other people was something that was very important for my own wellness. I have missed being social - sitting in a nice coffee shop or going for a night out with friends. But I have also learned that I can still 'be social' such as going for walks and getting a takeaway coffee. I may have not been able to see friends as much in person, but I feel I have continued to maintain my close friendships using apps such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

## **Lisa, Recovery College Student**

### **How did you find out about and become involved with the Recovery College?**

I was going through a very difficult divorce at the time that I found out about the Recovery College. I was in my library on my weekly visit as I was diagnosed with Randal's plaques disease and unfortunately I had to give up my job as my condition was getting worse. I love to read and at this point in my life I felt so low and depressed that reading was my only escape from reality at that time, but then no matter how many books I read left me feeling like a hole in my life. I suffered with mental health problems in the past and I was already on antidepressants so when I saw the leaflet for the Recovery College I thought 'RECOVERY'. That applied to many different situations in my life and falling out of love also meant I fell out with myself in many ways, I didn't love myself, I felt guilty, couldn't sleep etc. So I thought I've nothing to lose and it was the best decision I ever made. I've been involved with the Recovery College for 3 - 4 years until the present day and I'm still eager to learn.

### **What courses did you attend and which one was the most useful?**

When I decided to take part in the courses I was hooked! I loved the faces, you had a date in your diary and that give you a reason to keep positive and better myself. Before lockdown there were different locations for different courses, now it's all done over zoom - you're getting the same out of classes - only you can do it from home (in your PJ's if you wish). Meeting people in class or over zoom is great because you never feel alone (apart from the opportunity to make friends and develop relationships)! Other people are going through the same things or something similar. You never had to worry about confidentiality as we all make that agreement together as a group. I've done almost all the courses and they are all very interesting and informative. They are also very relaxed so you feel comfortable and safe. I've gained so much through the different variety of courses the College provides. Each course has a name like Building Resilience or Reading for Wellness and this give you a chance to pick the courses you're interested in. The classes have their own unique benefits and aspects to try in your personal life. I personally found the Reading for Wellness course very suited to me as I love reading. Taking part I got to read aloud which I greatly enjoyed and it

boosted my confidence. The way we all take part in the dissecting of the poem or short story is always very interesting as it gives the chance to all of us to individually express our thought processes and feelings about how the poem or short story was written, laid out and the wording etc.

### **Has the Recovery College supported you in the last year?**

From day one I found that the Recovery College was different. The people delivering the classes were speaking from their own experience and were very open and honest about what they had went through themselves. The trainers were all very informative and professional but made you comfortable enough to trust them to talk too. I've been with the college now 3 - 4 years and last year I took very ill and was in and out of hospital, quite often but the College were very understanding about my different health conditions.

They are brilliant, if you have a problem or you want information they will post it off. If you email they are quick to answer, and if you need to get in contact with them nothing is ever a problem. They have also included COVID19 and its problems in many classes to give reassurance. Since I started attending myself again, I really appreciate all of the chances and opportunities the College has provided me with. They have given me a whole new different outlook on life. They have really helped me appreciate everything in my life and to always look for the positives. My confidence has grown and I'm more outgoing due to the College. I also practice mindfulness every day to remind myself just how lucky I really am and to remember everything doesn't have to be perfect, as imperfection is how we learn and grow in life.

Taking care of myself  
doesn't mean  
"me first"

It means "me, too"

-L.R. Knosts

## Personal Reflection

It was only in the dark days when wellness had been taken for granted. A time when you are pleading to get back to the person you were before. Was this person actually the best person you could be? Did you embrace life like every day could be your last? Or where you like me, an auto-pilot, going about the day fulfilling roles and responsibilities, conforming to expectations of society?

This is when I realised my illness became my blessing, my friend. My reason for making change happen, the thinker became the doer. Life is a gift and it's up to me to embrace it.

Life had to be taken into perspective. What did I want to do with this one important life? Who around me were radiators and drains? This was an important time to sack the people pleaser, and become the number one person in my life, the person who deserved to live a life of contentment.

Difficult decisions had to be made for change to happen. It was time to be ruthless. My circle of friends became a triangle. Time with these people brought out the best in me, good people, naturally makes our strengths and qualities thrive. I started to feel uplifted, enjoying mates coffee dates, allowing myself some quality me time, self-care allowed me to become the best version of myself.

In my home life, I recognised that my partner and I had outgrown each other. It was time to let go of the past, and set him free to roam free as he pleased. To be free of this relationship enabled us to become the best parents to our children and flourish a friendship of mutual support, for the benefit of us and our children.

This also gave me the opportunity to get to know me. Someone, who now loves early nights with a book in bed, sleeps well, with no worries or distractions. The person who instead of running around cooking, cleaning, setting her children in front of the television, now enjoys sitting with her children, doing crafts, puzzles, talking, whatever, allowing the washing to wait till kids are in bed.

The person who tried to do what she could for everyone else's happiness, finally changed her outlook, it's not up to me to fix others problems. It was up to me to fix mine, and mine alone!

This journey began with illness, being unwell helped me to take perspective of my life choices, built my resilience and helped me to embrace life again. This is why Illness is my friend. It helped me to change my life, embrace it and have gratitude for all that I have.

Attending wellness courses through the Recovery College, listening and learning from the experiences of peers and Mental Health Professionals, helped me to realise I wasn't alone, there were things I could do to help myself, making self-care priority and opened my life up to new opportunities.

I now take pride in sharing my experience with others as a Recovery Peer Trainer, to inspire others to take perspective of their own lives and embrace their journey of recovery and change.

**Margarette O'Donnell, Peer Recovery Trainer**

*Be gentle with yourself  
you're doing the best you can*

## Making self-care our priority

Self-care is a term we struggle with, as in sequence, self comes first. Traditionally we have been led to believe it is selfish to think of our own needs and as a result, we are more inclined to think of others first.

Self-care is **“something that refuels us, rather than takes from us.”**

*psychcentral.org*

Taking time out to care for yourself can remind you and others that you and your needs are important too. Many of us have so many roles and responsibilities that we tend to forget to take care of our own personal needs. Self-care helps us to cope with stress and to prioritize what is important to us. You will be better able to take care of others when you take time to care for your own needs.

It is important to make space for self-care. It needs to be a priority for each and every one of us; to enable us to feel important, worthy and valued.

**‘You cannot give to others what you don’t have yourself’**

Self-care is important for our mental and physical health, encouraging happiness and personal resilience.

What can i do for my self-care?

-  Good sleep routine
-  Hobbies & interests
-  Get fresh air
-  Balanced diet
-  Be organised
-  Support us to support others
-  Keep hydrated
-  Say no to others, say YES to yourself!
-  Exercise

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