The Healing WRAP

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One formidable difficulty facing people who have experienced traumatic events is a deep loss of personal power. Frequently, we develop coping strategies that only compound trauma, leaving us with a profound sense of hopelessness that we are doomed to live out a life that moves from one traumatic experience to the next. Many of us have found new and creative ways to address these issues using WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan).

The experiences of Mary Ellen Copeland, PhD, with mental health challenges led her, along with many of her peers, to develop WRAP. Copeland’s mother, Kathryn Strouse Copeland (1912-1994), was for years committed to a state psychiatric hospital. While told that Kathryn “was incurably insane and would never get well,” the Copeland family never gave up and continued visiting their matron, even though at times she did not recognize them — and Kathryn began to improve despite the dire predictions. She eventually returned home and became a respected and loved member of her community. Later, when Mary Ellen Copeland’s own treatment with available medications at the time was life threatening, she began asking her psychiatrist, “How do people get well?” At the time, the response was, “they don’t.” She persisted in asking the question and began asking it of others facing similar struggles.

The responses she received became WRAP’s five key concepts of recovery:

- **Hope**
- **Personal Responsibility**
- **Education**
- **Self Advocacy**
- **Support**

With humble grassroots beginnings, WRAP is now a cornerstone for people who struggle toward recovery from mental and emotional issues. The thousands of us who have used WRAP as part of our recovery have found that we can apply it to any area of life in which we struggled, including substance use, smoking cessation, weight loss, diabetes, gaining and sustaining employment, fibromyalgia, and healing from trauma.

The WRAP program includes:

- **Developing a Wellness Toolbox:** Finding simple, safe, and free ways to promote our wellness
- **Daily Maintenance Plan:** Addressing 1) ‘What I am like when I am well’; 2) ‘Things I must do every day to stay well’; and 3) ‘Things I might need to do or could do’
- **Triggers and Action Plan:** Identifying things that make me uncomfortable, and taking action to stay well
- **Early Warning Signs and Action Plan:** Understanding the subtle signs that indicate I may not be as well as I could be, and taking appropriate action
- **When Things are Breaking Down and Action Plan:** Planning ways to take immediate and assertive action in order to prevent a crisis
- **Crisis Plan:** Maintaining control of oneself even if others have to act on our behalf (similar to a mental health advance directive)
- **Post Crisis Plan:** Developing a timetable for resuming activities

As an evidence-based practice, peers provide WRAP classes. Making a connection based on shared experience offers participants the greatest amount of hope, as they learn what has worked for the facilitator, a person who has similar life experiences. However, neither patient identities nor illness define a “peer” in a WRAP workshop. An essential value of WRAP facilitation is that “difficult feelings and behaviors are seen as normal responses to traumatic circumstances and in the context of what is happening and not as symptoms or a diagnosis.” In addition, facilitators as a practice avoid clinical, medical, and diagnostic language. Practicing these values and ethics in facilitation is critical to ensure that WRAP is a tool for recovery and healing from trauma. Regardless of identifying as a peer or a person in trauma recovery, WRAP is for anyone who may find quality of life benefits in taking a class.

Matthew Federici is the executive director of the Copeland Center for Wellness and Recovery. He is an advanced level Mental Health Recovery Educator and WRAP facilitator. He brings a blended perspective as family member, experienced provider of recovery services and from his own journey in wellness recovery. His career has focused on independent living services, supported employment, advanced directives, WRAP® and Peer Support services. Federici was awarded Distinguished Advocate Award in 2002 and Distinguished Career Award in 2009 from the Pennsylvania Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services.

Cheryl Sharp is the special advisor for trauma-informed services at the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare. She holds the unique perspective of a person with lived experience as a consumer and family member, as well as a provider of services. As a consultant to the NASMHPD/SAMHSA’s Promotion of Alternatives to Seclusion and Restraint, Cheryl trains and speaks nationally on trauma-informed care. She is an advanced level WRAP facilitator, a Mental Health First Aid USA instructor, and a trainer of Intentional Peer Support. Sharp practices as a life coach/mentor and is an ordained minister. She received the Lou Ann Townsend Courage Award for her contributions to persons with psychiatric disabilities.
Driving in the rain, or the smell of wet, sandy earth, was enough to drag Walter B. Hudson back in time. “If you see it, hear it, or feel it, it triggers something in your brain,” he explains. The “it” is whatever mimics the environment or circumstances surrounding a previous trauma…the car accident, the death of a fellow Army officer, or the critical head injury from a sailboat accident that extinguished Walter’s ability to complete his graduate thesis. “I couldn’t put together multisyllabic words,” he says, “I couldn’t even read a book.” Walter, a former Army Ranger and now a senior project manager in Ohio, was also diagnosed with bipolar disorder and weathered months-long bouts of severe depression. He started using WRAP® (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) while in recovery as a veteran with service connected PTSD.

“Imagine what you do every day just to feel well,” Walter explains, “Healthy things. We call those ‘wellness tools.’ It can be anything as mundane as polishing your shoes, or paying a bill.” Anything can be a wellness tool. You learn these things when you start writing them down, he adds. A WRAP addresses everything from daily and long-term maintenance tools that help you stay well, to signs and symptoms that you’re approaching critical mass.

“Let’s say I’m homeless,” Walter explains, “I have only two things on my daily list—find food and shelter. If I do that, I get through the day.” The signs are important. If you recognize them early enough you might be able to prevent a disaster. You’re not sleeping well, says Walter. You go to work, you’re irritable…you yell at someone and you get fired. You might have been able to save yourself some grief if you (or someone else) had recognized the signs a few days earlier. WRAP is like an advanced directive (of sorts) that also includes a list of people who will recognize these signs and take over for you until you get back to wellness. “Water your plants, check on your pets,” explains Walter, “everyone has a different support role.”

Walter explains that “People who've had brain injuries or strokes get frustrated and irritated because we can remember what we were able to do before the injury.” Writing a WRAP is like writing your own owner's manual, or do-it-yourself cognitive behavioral therapy, he says. “When I used to get triggered, I suffered. Now, I have a favorite meal instead. Or go to a movie, or call someone.” And it works. SAMHSA’s National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practices recently listed WRAP. Walter helps facilitate WRAP workshops specifically designed to help other veterans. “I discovered that the more I helped others, the more I was able to recover,” adds Walter.

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