

Effective thinking

Some things you can control and some things you can't – fully realising this can be a huge step towards recovering from mental health problems. That's according to the self-help organisation Recovery International. Margaret Hawkins reports.



Worrying about what people think of you; anticipating bad things happening – these are the kinds of concerns that can get us all down at times but we can re-train our wills and minds to stop letting such feelings overwhelm us.

While we can't control people, events, the past, the future, our feelings or our sensations, we can control our thoughts and choose how we are going to act. This is the teaching of Recovery International.

PADDY *

Paddy, a Midlands reader in his 40s, has seen the value of this method over three years of attending Recovery support meetings and studying its literature. He now feels much better able to cope with life.

"I was a nervous, sensitive sort of person all my life," he says, "but the improvement in me over the last three years is bordering on a miracle. I now don't take life so seriously and the panic attacks that used to happen are almost a thing of the past. Now when one starts I know how to cope with it, using the methods I learned in Recovery to change my thoughts."

Paddy found the panic attacks very frightening when they oc-

curred: "I'd be sweating and feeling like I couldn't breathe and afraid that I was having a heart attack and I'd be thinking all sorts of crazy things like that I was going to die," he says.

"I got so afraid of a panic attack happening that I'd often stay at home for fear of having one on the street."

Going to church was a nightmare for Paddy too: "I'd always have to stay near the door in case I had to leave quickly. It was an awful restricting way to live. While the panic attacks themselves didn't happen that often, I was always afraid that they would."

Paddy worked as a barman and in a factory for a few years but joined a religious order in his late 20s: "The panic attacks were still happening, especially during times of change.

"Change was always difficult for me in the past but now I can manage life better."

ALCOHOL FUELLING THE PANIC ATTACKS

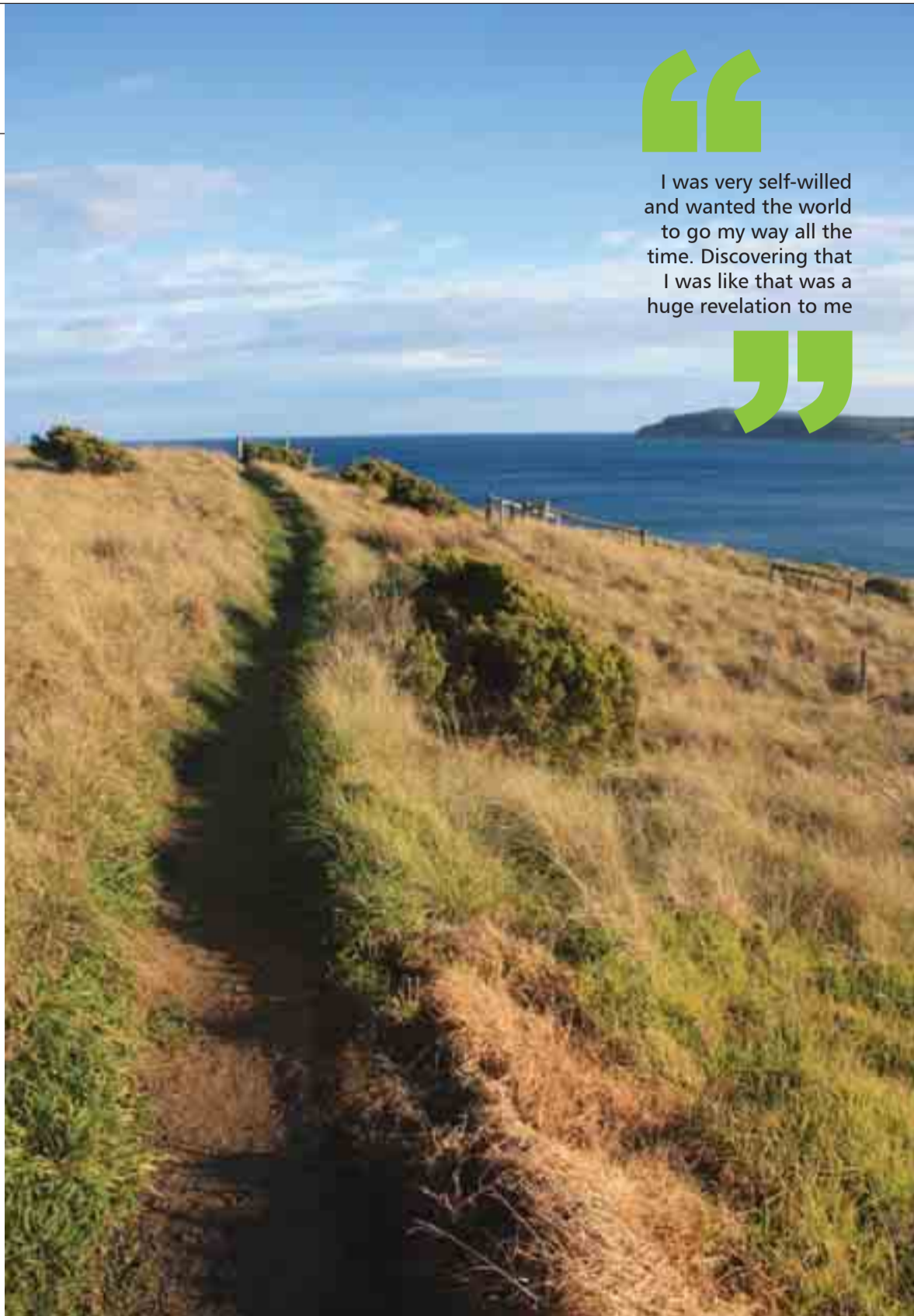
Developing an addiction to alcohol over his years with a religious order also worsened Paddy's problems.

"Even thinking of drinking would nearly relax me – if I knew that I was going to get a drink in an hour's time that itself would calm me down but the alcohol only fuelled the panic attacks. Eventually the day came when I knew I needed help."

That began a succession of events that led Paddy having the recovery he has today, he says.

"I gave up the drink with the help of AA (and am still abstinent after 16 years) but the panic attacks still had to be addressed.

"They got worse again after I left the order and came home so I knew I had to get help somewhere. While my GP had put me on mild



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Dr ABRAHAM LOW SELF-HELP METHOD

The Dr Abraham Low Self-Help Method is based on these concepts:

1. TEMPER HAS TWO FACES

Angry temper: the judgment that the other person is wrong or has wronged me, eg, irritation, resentment, impatience, hatred, disgust, rebellion.

Fearful temper: the judgment that I am wrong, eg, worry, feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, fear of damage to your reputation, sense of shame.

2. ENVIRONMENT HAS TWO SIDES

Outer (external) environment: everything outside yourself. You can't control these – people, events, the past, the future. Inner (internal) environment: everything inside yourself. You can't control these – feelings, sensations. But you can control your thoughts and impulses

3. USE YOUR WILL

You have the power to choose:

- How you are going to act.
- What you are going to think.

4. FOCUS ON EVERYDAY EVENTS

Most things that upset us are the routine events in everyday life. The Low Self-Help Method helps people to deal more positively and peacefully with the frustrations, challenges and upsets of daily living.

5. PRACTISE SELF-ENDORSEMENT

Giving yourself a mental pat on the back for any effort:

- To spot and control your temper
- To control your thoughts and impulses

tranquilisers, I knew they weren't the long-term answer.

"It was then that I heard of Recovery International from someone who was attending them and finding them good. She gave me Dr Low's book *Mental Health Through Will Training* and I eventually took it down off the shelf when things got very bad. While I found the first meeting difficult to follow, I eventually decided to go regularly. I think it was a case of it taking me a while to swallow my stubbornness and pride

and give it a real go."

As time went on, Paddy began to understand the methods used by Recovery.

"I discovered something new about myself," he says.

"I always thought I didn't have a temper but I did really, in that I realised I was very self-willed and wanted the world to go my way all the time. Discovering that I was like that was a huge revelation to me – a real liberation, really. Dr Low talks a lot about temper."

SPOTTING

"If I was getting panicky now I would immediately 'spot' [think/have an insight] that while these feelings are distressing, there is no danger involved in them at all. I'm not going to have a heart attack or die. Thinking that can bring about a total U-turn in my emotions and I begin to relax.

"I'd remember, too, a lot of the Recovery sayings and affirmations as well like, 'Nervous symptoms and sensations are distressing but not

WORDS OF LIFE

Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.

Isaiah ch. 55 v 6

For more information about Recovery International Ireland see www.recovery-inc-ireland.ie

RECOVERY INTERNATIONAL SLOGANS

This is a list of some of the basic Recovery International tools (slogans). They are quoted or adapted from Dr Low's books *Mental Health Through Will Training* and *Manage Your Fears, Manage Your Anger*.

- People do things that annoy us, not necessarily to annoy us.
- Feelings are not facts.
- Fear is a belief; beliefs can be changed.
- If you can't change a situation, you can change your attitude towards it.
- Be self-led, not symptom-led.
- Nervous symptoms and sensations are distressing but not dangerous.
- Calm begets calm; temper begets temper.
- Helplessness is not hopelessness.
- Do things in part acts.
- Endorse (praise) yourself for the effort, not only for the performance.
- Decide, plan and act.
- Muscles can be commanded to do what one fears to do.

The Recovery Method of Will Training for improved mental health and for control of nervous symptoms consists of:

1. Reading and studying *Mental Health Through Will Training* and other literature.
2. Regular attendance at Recovery Meetings.
3. Practising Recovery principles in one's everyday life situations.

You can contact the organisation by post at Bridge House, Cherry Orchard Hospital, Ballyfermot, Dublin 10, call them on 01-626-0775 or send an email to info@recovery-inc-ireland.ie

At present, 15 Recovery meetings are held in Co Dublin and one each in Ballyjamesduff, Bray, Cork City, Enniskillen, Letterkenny, Longford, Navan, Newbridge, Newry and Omagh.

Note: Each member is at all times advised and expected to follow the authority of his/her own doctor

dangerous.' These sayings sink deep into the subconscious over time and you say them to yourself when things are difficult. You learn a different attitude to everything with Recovery. It's like your inner self that no one knows about is actually transformed."

Paddy stresses that you have to give your recovery time, however.

"The thing is to keep going to the meetings," he says. "It's a very structured method but it does work. A lot of people like myself love to keep talking about themselves, about symptoms and feelings and so on, but in Recovery that's not looked upon as being a good idea because you are actually feeding yourself with drama.

"With Recovery meetings you're given a method to use when negative thoughts come into your head and that turns your life around. For me, it has made everything change for the better."

JACQUELINE *

Jacqueline, from Clontarf, has been attending Recovery International meetings for six years and now values her mental health, she says.

"I have it because I practised Dr Abraham Low's method to get it," she says. "This includes self-spotting [insights into your own behaviour] and listening to how other people used the methods to cope with situations. I now have more hope and motivation than I could ever have imagined."

Jacqueline first suffered from depression after her marriage broke down.

"I had days of staying at home and thinking inner dark thoughts," she says. "I was also bullied at work so I had very low self-worth and

self-esteem. I had those feelings of fear and inadequacy for years. I was also exhausted, depressed, anxious – there was no spontaneity in me at all.

"I also hated being in crowds and often I stayed in bed and moved only when I absolutely had to. Some days the effort of trying to decide what to eat or making school lunches for my daughters was so overwhelming. I was on anti-depressants and I felt like I was living in a fog. I remember telling a counsellor that I was having a breakdown. This understanding person told me about a self-help organisation called Recovery International in my local area.

"I went along to my first Recovery group meeting in Clontarf and was immediately taken with the support and understanding I found there. Meetings are a place where peace and calm are fostered. Reading Abraham Low's book *Mental Health Through Will Training* is the fundamental resource of Recovery International. Gradually my fears changed from hopeless to hopeful."

Jacqueline has now completed a third-level degree and postgraduate course and is the assistant leader of the Clontarf Recovery Group.

"I am more confident and less fearful," she says, "and I have much greater self-esteem. Most importantly, my daughters are my life's greatest achievements.

"It takes time to learn the method but Recovery International has taught me to do one thing at a time – it's called breaking everyday life into part acts. Recovery is hard work but my quality of life is improving every day." **CL**

* Names known to editor.

FIONA HOBAN

www.fionahoban.ie

Tick stress off your list

When I rule the world it will be incumbent upon all citizens, from a very early age, to be proficient at writing things down in an effective manner.

How many times have you given your order to a waitress who simply nods and says: "Sure, no problem," and deep down you know that while she might remember you ordered the steak, she will not remember that you asked for the sauce on the side. Why? Because she didn't write it down. "Can I please have a glass of water with that?" "Sure." "But, please, no ice." She doesn't write this down either and sure enough when your glass of water arrives (assuming she remembers it), it's filled with ice. Grrrrr.

And what about when Joe Bloggs looks you in the eye and says: "I'll get that to you by Friday." He may put an X on his hand, or scribble something on a slip of paper, a cigarette packet or shopping receipt. I always think to myself: "Not a hope, never gonna happen."

However, I know how to deal with these people. Oh yes, indeed I do. I write down what they themselves will not. I take out my diary and make a note on Thursday's page: "Remind Joe Bloggs that he needs to get that to me by tomorrow."

You might have guessed that I am a writer of things. It is one of the most effective stress-reducing tools I know. When you don't occupy your mind with having to remember every little thing, you become less stressed and it becomes easier to think clearly. It frees up head space.

This, in my opinion, is one of the most important reasons to write things down. Feeling calmer and more relaxed does not only improve your health, but also makes life easier and more smooth and effective.



Do yourself a favour, invest in a proper diary or notebook – one that has enough space to take numerous notes and reminders.



Most people fail to write things down because they believe they will be able to remember all of the important things they must during the course of the day. This, however, is a false idea.

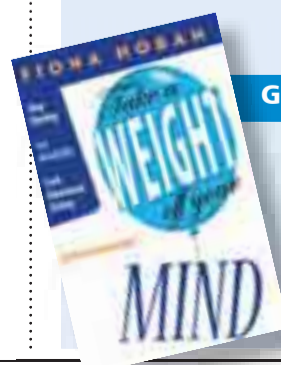
We find it difficult to remember all of the things we must because we are so busy. Generally, the phone rings, people interrupt and you're trying to handle six tasks at once. We try to move from task to task. New thoughts pop into our minds all of the time. We are incessantly interrupted before we can complete a task.

When we do write things down, we do this on small scraps of paper that will eventually become lost. Writing things down in the correct manner can put an end to all of this insanity.

So, do yourself a favour, invest in a proper diary or notebook – one that has enough space to take numerous notes and reminders. Keep it with you at all times and get into the habit of writing things down, no matter how trivial.

Not only will you become more effective in your day-to-day life, you will also lower your stress levels. And as a bonus you will enjoy that wonderful sense of satisfaction gained from ticking things off your to-do list.

Writing things down takes the stress out of having to remember them



GET IN TOUCH

Fiona Hoban works as a counsellor in Westport, Co Mayo and also lectures with the National Counselling and Psychotherapy Institute of Ireland (NCPII). She delivers wellbeing and motivational talks at various conferences and workshops throughout Ireland. For more details go to www.fionahoban.ie. If you would like to get Fiona's advice or insight on a particular subject please email info@fionahoban.ie or write to Fiona Hoban, Irish Country Living, Irish Farm Centre, Bluebell, Dublin 12.