

## **A Single Mother, Her Family, and Recovery Inc.**

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The following is a case study based on client emails (with client permission). This is a unique case because it is primarily based upon bibliotherapy (based on Recovery Inc. principles) and parent consultation with a mother to help her young son with personal problems affecting his behaviour at home and school. The readings in question were from the book *Peace of Body, Peace of Mind* by Rose VanSickle, a study of Dr. Abraham Low's cognitive therapy method of helping his psychiatric patients. His method was a group method involving adults only. What makes this case study unique is this mother was able help her son who was still a child with his problems, directly from what she read, and with no group involvement.

### Recovery Inc. and Neuropsychiatrist Dr Abraham Low

In 1925 Dr. Low joined the staff of the University of Illinois Medical School having previously studied at the University of Strasbourg in 1913 and later on in Vienna. He also served in the Illinois State Hospitals. By working with patients he developed a Method employing simple cognitive techniques. The Doctor and his patients evolved an organization called Recovery Inc., which proved to be a potent form of self help group therapy - a novel experiment for the 1930's. Sadly, Dr. Low died, but Recovery did not die due to the continuing efforts of his widow, Mae Low and his former patients. The little organization not only survived but spread to many countries becoming the largest psychological self-help organization in the world. Many of his patients became well and have gone their way. Others have stayed to act as leaders in order to help others as they were helped through the group meetings.

The group meetings are weekly, last two hours and each meeting has a similar structure. After reading a portion of one of Dr. Low's books members volunteer an example which must be a triviality of everyday life. For example: "someone forgot to fill the sugar bowl". This is presented in steps and "spotted" in what is known as "Recovery language". These are usually short descriptive phrases which will be highlighted in **Bold** print when used in this paper. **Bold** print will also be used to highlight other points of significance.

The family which I am going to discuss is one which I have known personally for a number of years. For the sake of their privacy the names and important details will be disguised to conceal their identity. The family consists of four people: the mother Dora is in her late forties; a daughter Bev, who is twenty six ; a second daughter, Laura, who is eighteen; and a son, Brad who is ten years of age. The mother has been widowed for over twenty years and self-employed doing cleaning and housekeeping for a number of families. She is able to make ends meet but it is a struggle and quite stressful for her.

*May, 2004*

Dora called me very upset as Brad had been diagnosed by a physician as perhaps having Tourette's Syndrome. Dora described her problem as follows:

Brad started off by having a lot of anxiety and his behaviour was full of different body tic's and verbal tic's. He had trouble going to sleep which never before had been a problem for him. He would have me repeat everything to be sure he had heard it right. He often looked frightened. He would think he was going to choke on his food. He thought there was something sharp in it which would harm him. It happened most often with pizza. He would wave goodbye to me until we were out of sight from one another and that after kissing me over and over in a sort of pattern. This later turned into repeating gestures such as putting a glass down on the same spot twice, or turning the light off and on and then off again. He began to crack his knuckles, even during a soccer game. It was very difficult on the family. It could be very frustrating as well as a big worry!

I arranged an interview with Dora and Brad and I felt differently about his condition. There was talk about the different labels the doctors had given him and the possibility of going on drugs. He was scared and wondering what was wrong with him! At this point I felt that Recovery Inc. might be of help. There was no Recovery Group close by to which I could refer her. However, I had a copy of Rose VanSickle's book: **Peace of Body, Peace of Mind**, which I lent her. I also let her know that I thought both she and Brad were nervous people and that Brad's problem was that he had a number of bad habits with which Dr. Low's Method might help.

*July 16, 2004*

Dora gave an update on how her readings on the Recovery Method had helped her with Brad:

**Reading the book on Recovery was my first step to really helping him.** Until then I didn't know what to do or which way to turn. There was something really wrong with my son! It would come and go, sometimes showing up in an altogether new way. And his sister and I would think, "What now!!?"

I worked hard to try and get him to **change his thoughts**, to control his body. Take charge. STOP! **I would be very calm with him!** That was my biggest move in helping him and helping me! I let the worry go. And paid less attention to him when he did these things. Of course that was after a lot of work and some positive changes! I would tell him he can do it. **Practice!** And we worked on it together. As well his sister learned to be calmer with him. No yelling or name calling. When I used the words "**bad habits**" to him, it was like a bell went off. Like "oh, that's all that's wrong with me? I can do this!" When he would go to crack his knuckles, I would gently put my hand on his and smile. When he would and still does ask questions which seem to be a little anxious, I calmly answer them. When he wants me to repeat what I just said, I answer him but don't use the same words. And don't act as if there is anything wrong. He gets it. And feels safe with that. **He has learned that he has choices** and continues to build self-confidence.

He is now sleeping in his own bed every night! He is beginning to make better friends and make better choices. The fear has been lifted and he is learning to deal with his "bad habit's". I'm no longer worried, where at one point I was frightened out of my mind! So

was he! If and when he has issues, we'll deal with them. We now have the tools to do so. It took time but the results are worth it all.

She occasionally would phone or I would phone her in relation to the **triviality** she was handling. It was about this time that I became aware that she was using **Dr. Low's Method** in her relationship with Brad. In turn, when on the phone to her, I used **the Recovery Method of Mutual Aid** which involves helping her to identify the problem or in Recovery language **'The Triviality.'**

Brad began the school year quite well and completed a major project most successfully. However this was not to last.

*November 18, 2004*

Well, I once again need to share with you (I hope you don't mind!) Brad's goings on. He has been having a hard time in school. A hard time settling down to work, full of extra energy, and last night he came home quite upset. He said he had a very bad day. That everything went wrong. He cried later in the evening, and then talked about his day with me. He feels he's being picked on for every little thing he does. I talked with his teacher this morning who told me that Brad is making some poor choices and is having difficulty focusing on his work. He is just so full of energy. It's been like this since around Halloween the teacher said, though before that too. Just worse now. So I don't know what is going on. I just know I want to help Brad and feel very lost and unsure of how to deal with this and what may be causing such a set back.

*November 30, 2005*

Dora here to say hello! Brad is doing ok at the moment. More or less. I read the Recovery book each night before I go to bed. I work on practicing the method so it will become more natural to me. Thank You!

*January 11, 2006*

Just to let you know I feel finally much better! Yahoo! And to let you know that Brad is doing very well. Even his teacher commented on how well he did returning to school after the Christmas holiday. And his behaviour at home is good too. A great start to the new year. He seems to get better and better all the time! He's come a long way baby!

*March 20, 2006*

We've been busy here but all going well. Celebrated Laura's 19th birthday and Brad's 12th birthday. We went out for dinner and bowling. Next year Brad will be a teenager and Laura went WOW! As I said on the phone, Bev is doing so well. I mean, she has really matured, grown up and has this wonderful job. Getting this job was a blessing!

She now has a focus and is determined to make a good future out of it! She is a changed woman! I have actually used some of recovery with her. When she has had a dilemma, I have said things to her such as **"take the danger out of it" or "change your thoughts" "Take control of your body and the situation" "We have choices!"** She listens and solves the issue just fine! It's wonderful! It is so good having the knowledge to say things that actually help and take away the panic, the fear and the stress!

As for Brad, there were some issues at school with his teacher and his behaviour with class mates. Brad felt left out, picked on, and unhappy. The teacher even suggested getting his ears tested. So I went to the Doctor just to show his teacher I had done so. The Doctor said the cost to have these tests done is extraordinary, checked his ears and gave me a note saying they looked fine. So I had to think hard about this. He can hear but why isn't he paying attention. Again I started using Recovery. About the whole school situation and his behaviour. I worked with Brad making sure he handed his agenda in each morning and when he didn't, I talked about making it a habit to do so. A **good habit**. I talked to him about how things can change with his teacher and his class mates **if he makes better choices**. Not that everything was his fault but that he can have **control of his actions and work towards good habits**.

We got him a tutor once a week for math. Brad was so grateful and couldn't believe it. He felt that his teacher would like him better if he did better work. I had Brad look at how he would feel about himself if he did better work. It would be easier for the teacher to teach him if he were to pay attention and do his work. So it all blended well together and he came home one day saying, "Mum, I'm not the bad boy in the class anymore." It's sad that he felt he was a bad boy. Unfortunately this teacher does pick on certain kids. And Brad wasn't responding at all to her because of it and had almost given up. So I went to the teacher and told her how he feels, what my concerns are, told her we got him a tutor, and asked her how she can help. We have been meeting every other Wednesday for a while now. After each meeting we have set a goal. So with my knowledge of Recovery, I have used these skills to help Brad with each goal. He has made great progress. When he forgets to hand in his agenda, I simply suggest he tries again tomorrow, **working towards making it a good habit**.

Brad couldn't even watch TV at night or watch anything a little mysterious without getting very anxious. Or even go to a movie theater without being anxious. But he now has no problems with it. He can focus, change his thoughts and he realizes by using these skills, he doesn't have to be uncomfortable. We even went up the CN tower! I was really worried though I didn't let on. I thought, what happens if we're in the elevator and he has an anxiety attack! Well, for the first few seconds in the elevator, he looked really worried. His heart was beating so fast and I thought, "Oh no!" But **he calmed himself right down** and said, "this isn't so bad" and enjoyed the ride. Even in a crowded elevator with ears popping! Now that is progress! He walked on the glass floor too! At one time I was so worried about him, I honestly didn't know what was wrong with him or what I was going to do, along with what kind of future he was going to have.

My biggest worry at the moment with Brad is that he doesn't clown around in class when he needs to be focusing on his work. The tutoring has helped with that so much because he has one to one help where he may have had a hard time catching all the information in class and knowing what it is he is suppose to do. He does have a bit of a problem, I'm not sure how to word this, registering the information, sorting out what is being said, and retaining the information. This is why the teacher thought he had a hearing problem.

If it hadn't been for what Recovery taught me and all the hard work Brad has done to make these changes, I don't know where he'd be. His teacher has commented on his progress. But we still have to give him reminders, but like you say it's something we learn and **we continue to practice** all of our lives. Sometimes we slip and we need

reminders. Believe me, I am thankful when you tell me I've slipped and you say the words I need to hear. Then I get right back on it and my life improves again. I guess that is one of the biggest lessons for me is to remember, if I start to feel "off" I must get my book out or remind myself to take control of my thoughts and the biggest one for me, **"TAKE THE DANGER OUT OF IT." It not only helps me with Brad's issues, it helps me with my own anxiety.** And as I said, I've used it to help Bev, and wow, does it work! She's a different person.

Our lives have changed for the better so much. Bev was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive behaviour last year at the Clinic. She did not want to be on medication, didn't like how it made her feel and didn't want to end up on disability. She went off the medication and worked on her issues. It was hard work! **And I truly believe she learnt a lot from watching and listening to me with Brad and seeing how far Brad came!** So all this hard work with Brad, and great family support has given Bev a future where last year she attempted suicide! I'm so happy with the changes. And all done without medication for both my kids! We will continue to work hard and use Recovery. This is living! Thank you! I wish I had the words to truly thank you enough. And thanks for standing behind me and giving me the skills (and kick in the butt when I needed it) to have happiness. I will keep working on it. Because I am aware, it's a life long skill and awareness! I hope I've not gone on too much but I wanted to write and fill you in. Brad is also taking guitar lessons and loving it! School is back today after March break so there may be some issues again getting back on track. But we can do it!!! His tutor comes tonight too so that's good as he'll need to refresh and I'm sure there will be lots of homework!

In looking back at the previous emails, the changes made by Brad are impressive. However these changes are closely related to the changes in Dora. She is now using **Recovery language** in dealing with Brad's behaviour, for example her favourite expression **"Take the Danger Out of It."** What is particularly important is her increased self confidence. This confidence is felt by her children who find that she no longer responds to problems with panic or anxiety. When she thanked me for helping I advised her that she had made the changes through her use of the Recovery Method and reminded her to **endorse herself for effort.**

*April 5, 2006*

As I said on the phone last night, the changes I have had to make to get through the issues with both Bev and Brad have made such a big difference. I changed my behaviour and they learned from that. For one thing, I have always been a very anxious person. So all of the things I have been doing to help them, have helped me big time. I think we've all learned how to change patterns and **break bad old habits.** And work harder at good habits. I've learned you must have **the "will" to do so.** And Bev has proven that after being in the Hospital and being put on drugs, hating it so much and feeling it was not for her. She felt like a loser. The side effects, and the Doctor's thinking they knew what was wrong with her and she believing she knew what was wrong too! She just had to find **the "will" to change** and work on getting healthy with making better, healthier choices. By **changing her thinking** and facing issues instead of being frightened by them is a good start. Having the attitude, "I can change".

Brad was such a mess and I was terrified, terrified! The Doctors were trying to diagnose him with Tourette's Syndrome then O.C.B. (obsessive compulsive behaviour) and there was talk of medication several times. At one point it was suggested just to put Brad on medication to see if it helped. I asked "what for? What is it we'd put him on medication

for?" The one Doctor. said, "Oh just to see if it makes a difference." Well thankfully I had enough sense to say "NO WAY." And Brad has never been on medication and he is living a totally normal life and he's fine. We worked very hard through difficult times with the Recovery approach. Your coaching me all the way.

Life is good! Brad is going on an over night school camping trip! A year ago I would never have believed this possible or even thought of consenting to it. I have paid for it and signed the papers. He's going this April 19th through to the 21st and he is so excited!

It has been a year since Bev was admitted to hospital and her life would still be a mess if she had stayed on medication and allowed herself to fall into the category of 'Gone on Disability'. Instead she has a full time job and works hard in a great company loving what she does and taking it very seriously! They actually diagnosed Bev with O.C.B. and said she couldn't function without being on medication. Well, she's never been better in her life than she is now! I refer to the Recovery book often. Anxiety still comes and goes with me but I know how to change my thoughts and have a better life, better relationships, and I'm happier.

*April 20, 2006*

Brad spent his first night away last night on the school trip. I had no call, so things must be going well! He was very excited. Hasn't he come a LONG way? Haven't I, to have let him go on this trip and not panic? Laura and I will go to the camp tonight for family night.

This morning Bev told me her chin and lip and that area of her mouth when she brushed her teeth had been numb since Monday. (She didn't want to tell me because I worry) I was very pleased with myself. I stayed calm and didn't jump to all kinds of horrible conclusions. (Some of her friends were saying things like, "it could be a stroke.") I kept focused and suggested it may be in her gum area of her mouth and may be an infection. She began to play an old game. She said that she was almost dead last year at this time, so who cares. Then she said she's pretty much been dead for 26 years of her life. (She is now 27.) I said to her "Isn't it wonderful how alive and well you have become this year?" She then said she was going to go to the walk-in-clinic before work and she did. She told me not to worry, that she is 27 and she'll deal with it.

She called to tell me the Doctor said it may be an infection. So, look at how well this was handled. She stopped feeling sorry for herself and pitying herself because of her past , came around to the present and got herself to the clinic! Called me to tell me what the Doctor said and went to work. Last year she would have stayed in bed, not gone to the Doctor and definitely not gone to work. I felt good that I was able to stay focused and keep her in the present. I did not let her pull me into how horrible her life used to be. My actions were concern but not panic. **Stressful but not dangerous!!** She followed my lead, and dealt with the issue. To be completely honest, my first feeling was panic and fear. But I didn't let it take over. And a situation which could have been out of control, was manageable! WOW!

The information about her eldest daughter came as a complete surprise to me. I knew of her problems but had no expectation that she was learning the Recovery skills from what was happening to Brad. I think this an important point to note, that is Recovery Skills can be picked

up and used by other members of the family although they are not part of the planned learning experience. The following e-mail from Dora e-mail relates to this point.

*May 5, 2006*

As it goes for Laura, she has been the least of my worries however there is never anyone who can't benefit from the Recovery approach. Our relationship has improved, we are calmer and we deal with issues much better. Again, **Taking the Danger Out** of situations is one I stand by. We can laugh more and be less angry. Anger was always a big one with me and has been for Laura it takes up so much energy being angry! And is quite a waste of time. Not that anger doesn't have it's place, it does. But not letting it take over, boil over and destroy us! Doing the best we can and knowing we are **endorsing ourselves** and staying focused is important. We came in the other night and found the dog had vomited a lot of grass. He had eaten a lot of grass on our walk earlier and I knew this would happen. There was just no use getting furious and having a fit about it. In the past we would have. No one was hurt and it could be cleaned up. Laura and I had a lot of tension a few weeks ago. She was really quite rude. But because of the way I handled it, and that being that I kept it in perspective, it wasn't nice but it wasn't dangerous. I knew she had to deal with whatever it was bothering her and I did not take it personally. I did not take responsibility for her actions, nor try to fix it for her, nor feel sorry for her. I actually told her to stop feeling sorry for herself. When I was visiting you last, we talked a little about how I was feeling. You kindly and sensitively mentioned how we get into feeling sorry for ourselves. Some of this about my Mother dying. But I didn't take offense because of how you worded it. I used that guideline to help Laura and it worked. Being able to detect why we are feeling a certain way and what our actions are can help a lot. It's ok to feel sorry for ourselves. But acknowledging it can help us by **patting ourselves on the back for the hard work we do** and then the feeling of feeling sorry for ourselves lightens and our focus is on the here and now.

Laura is doing so well. And I find she picks up my positive attitude. My car wouldn't start. It was a worry yes. But I dealt with it and stayed calm. **I kept telling myself it will work out.** Kept it in perspective. When Laura gets upset, I do this and she calms down. I have learned to talk quietly, especially when others are talking loud. It not only calms me down but others in the room as well. I have learnt the importance of staying calm. Save the energy for when I need it!

Brad had a great trip with his school. No problems at all! He did it. A year ago he wouldn't have been able to go. Bev goes into work when called in early. A year ago she would not have gone and would likely have lost her job!

Positive thoughts and energy, knowing we have choices, and **taking the fear out** of things helps a lot. I have always been a very nervous and scared person, all my life up until the Recovery approach. I used to take the blame for everything, or worry that everything was my fault. I felt guilty when I shouldn't have. What a wonderful feeling that is. It frees us up from trying to control everything and every situation. I used to feel like crying all the time. But now that I can **"spot"** I don't get that nervous feeling all the time, and when I do I am able to see it for what it is and let go of the worry! I am happy, truly happy. It isn't always easy, oh no! But **being able to spot, take the danger out of it and know I have choices** has made all the difference!

As I read this I am impressed with the extent with which Dora has managed to absorb the Recovery Helping Method and transfer it to her three children. Laura, the teenager, although not needing Recovery help has not been unaffected by her mother's use of the method. Dora also recognizes how much she herself has changed, making it possible to help Brad and Bev to handle their lives differently. The thing that is most significant is that Recovery is effective with persons of such diverse ages. Until recently the Recovery Method has been confined only to adults and group settings. The experience with this family suggests that the very simplicity of the method may make it effective not only with adults, but also with adolescents and children who are able to understand its simple language. It raises the question of whether Dr. Low's genius in developing such a simple Method may make it possible to be actually taught in the schools as an exercise in mental health? However, I think that the assistance of a helper familiar with the Recovery Method would be likely to ensure a greater possibility of a successful outcome.

Dora's own effectiveness in helping her family is related to the fact that she is a mother who used Recovery to change her own behaviour. She was able to present her children with a simple and effective method for handling their own lives. For this reason I deliberately avoided addressing her children in any fashion that would involve the use of Recovery, leaving Dora to employ the Recovery skills she had developed with her family. Only a minimum of input was required from outside the family. This would seem to make the Method a helpful adjunct to counseling. This mother has been visited infrequently by myself and I usually spoke to her by telephone. Most of her information was derived from Rose VanSickle's book *Peace of Body, Peace of Mind*, a book written in a simple form that Dora could readily understand. Although VanSickle's book has not been used by Recovery Inc., the basic message of Dr. Low was obviously present.

In reviewing Dora's e-mails a number of thoughts come to mind. It is recognized that this is the experience of one woman in one family and this should be kept in mind when we draw any conclusions from her experience. However, it is important to remember that this was not a planned study, but arose quite spontaneously and was reported in the same fashion by her.

The next point is the fact that doctors are inclined to give labels to human behaviour, as happened with Brad. Recovery appears to have operated for years helping individuals and not attaching labels. Although if we look at the reasons patients were referred to Recovery, there is hardly any label not used by the medical profession. A recent book by the distinguished psychiatrist William Glasser M.D. *WARNING: Psychiatry Can Be Hazardous To Your Mental Health* expresses concern that psychiatrists are over-medicating patients on drugs that have not been thoroughly tested, which may affect their mental health negatively. He does not believe that mental illness exists outside of actual physical causes such as Parkinson's Disease, etc. Dora was upset by the labels but refused the medication. As we have seen Brad has been able to handle his problems without medication and through the use of the Recovery Method and Dora's encouragement.

Before Recovery Dora was both anxious and depressed. Problems that the children might bring to her would leave her upset and fearful. Any help she might try to offer would be given through her own state of anxiety and end up not making things better, and often decidedly worse. As she began to use Recovery she began to relax and treat her children more calmly. In the case of Brad she began to actually teach him to use Recovery. The results have been most surprising for not only did Brad show improvement, but we have seen that Bev and Laura have both benefited from her change in attitude as well. The change in the parent has affected the whole family. This would have been less likely to have occurred if the help had been given by a

helping person outside the family. This suggests that the Recovery Method offered to the parent in a family would be an excellent adjunct service to the provision of Family Counseling, or School Based Family Counseling.

Low's Recovery Approach offers several advantages as an adjunct approach in mental health counseling:

1. Many parents cannot afford therapy, and Recovery offers them an inexpensive alternative.
2. Many minority families refuse to go to "therapy" because doing so would label them with the stigma of Mental Illness. Recovery offers a non-pathological alternative with its focus on bad habits that can be changed.
3. The simple Recovery language, made accessible through Recovery meetings, Dr. Low's book *Mental Health Through Will Training* and Rose VanSickle's easy to read book, *Peace of Body, Peace of Mind*, can be easily applied by parents who are not used to reading self-help psychology books.
4. Recovery self-help groups are found in major cities throughout the world making it the most "accessible" cognitive therapy.
5. Most mental health practitioners are often overwhelmed by the number of clients needing help. Recovery offers a referral source that can benefit many families.

In summary, Dr Low's Recovery approach represents a valuable adjunct to counseling in general. It can aid the significant adults in a student's life and affect the behaviour of the student as we saw with Brad and his mother Dora. Bibliotherapy (using Low's Recovery Method), combined with telephone parent consultation, can, as in this case, help a child become less anxious and succeed in school.

### **References**

I am indebted to the authors of the following books for information used in this paper.

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