

**Supporting the Journey of Recovery in Mental Health: A Guide  
for support workers, family/whanau and friends.  
Cowan, Caril (2008) Wellington: Dunmore Publishing.**

*Reviewed by Gabriele Schäfer*

There are few texts that present applied knowledge and skills for supporting people who suffer from mental illness. This introductory textbook fills the gap for the mental health support workforce within the bicultural/multicultural and postcolonial society of Aotearoa/New Zealand and actively contributes to discussion about the knowledge base, scope of practice, skill-base and professional standards. Caril Cowan clearly explains what recovery in mental health means, borrowing from existing knowledge across the health professions of social work, nursing, occupational therapy and psychology. She also draws knowledge from consumer literature and relevant research in the social sciences. Her book is addressed to mental health support workers and family/whanau and friends but Cowan rightly acknowledges throughout the text that there is a big difference between paid support, being a career choice, and what she calls ‘natural support’ from family/whanau and friends. She stresses that mental health support workers have to be clear about their professional boundaries and let the consumers know from the beginning what their professional role encompasses.

An important topic that is covered in this book is recovery in mental health. Recovery in Cowan’s mind needs to be thoroughly grounded in an historical socio-political context. She defines recovery as “the process a person diagnosed with mental illness undergoes to make sense of their experiences and then learn how to make their life work for them” (p. 17). For an individual, recovery encompasses integration into the community, being an active participant in their treatment and utilising all the resources of family/whanau, the mental health services and society in general. Hence the role of the mental health support worker also needs to be developed within a particular historical context and society using an appropriate set of interpersonal/communication skills. With respect to interpersonal skills it would have been useful in this textbook to include conflict resolution skills such as recognising types of conflict, phases of conflict and effective conflict resolution skills because mental health

support workers as well as family/whanau and friends tend to experience numerous conflicts with the people who suffer from mental illness and need to know how to respond effectively. A brief history of the mental health services is presented as well as diagnostic systems and the role of medication. The sections on diagnostic systems and medication are very brief and students who are enrolled in the *National Certificate in Mental Health* or the *Bachelor in Health Science in Applied Mental Health* need to read supplementary texts to gain a more in-depth understanding about mental illness, the classification systems of the DSM IV and ICD and the role of medication. From my point of view a brief overview of different therapeutic approaches would have been helpful in a textbook for mental health support workers as well. Cowan describes the mental health services in New Zealand using case studies and also explains the relevant legislation which is applicable for both mental health support workers and family/friends. Following this she focuses on the disruptive times of episodes of mental illness and explores everyday actions that can be taken to maintain general wellbeing. A six-stage model is presented for developing insight into the earliest indications of the development of mental illness episodes that provides a good therapeutic tool for health professionals. At the end, guidelines for supporting people with mental illness within the diverse bicultural/multicultural society of Aotearoa/New Zealand are introduced. Cowan emphasises that it is important to understand how a number of social factors such as colonisation, immigration, refugee experiences and different sexual orientations contribute to the development of mental illness and to the recovery journey as well.

In summary, Cowan produced an easy to read introductory textbook that is interesting to a broader readership than mental health support workers. This book is grounded in the complex realities of a bicultural/multicultural and postcolonial society which contributes in many ways to the development of mental illness. It is a useful guide for everybody who has family/whanau members who are severely affected by persistent mental illness.